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The Salafist Road to Sahelistan and Military-Centric International Response

by

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Abstract

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Since the January 2012 combined Tuareg-Jihadist offensive and the March 2012 military coup, the international community had been elaborating a gradual and comprehensive response to the political, military and humanitarian aspects of the Malian crisis. In January 2013, however, France responded to the Jihadist attack against the frontline towns of Konna and Sévaré by launching offensive operations against the Salafist bases in Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. This unanticipated development has unfortunately disrupted the initial strategic plan, concept of operation, and projected timeline and skewed the action of the international community in the direction of a unilateral and military-centric response. Although uprooting the Jihadist footholds will inevitably require the use of force, military-centric action dominated by kinetic propensities is destined to prove counterproductive in the long term by overlooking political and societal dynamics that are fundamental to lasting stability in Mali.

The Salafist Road to Sahelistan and Military-Centric International Response

> Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. […] Always remember, however sure you are that you could easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance.
>
> –Winston Churchill[1]

Since the January 2012 combined Tuareg-Jihadist offensive and the March 2012 military coup, the international community had been elaborating a gradual and comprehensive response to the political, military and humanitarian aspects of the Malian crisis.[2] As per United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions 2071 and 2085,[3] an African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) was to deploy to Mali in early 2013 alongside a European Union (EU) Training Mission (EUTM Mali). AFISMA's initial mission was to assist in rebuilding the nation's armed forces and to support counteroffensive operations against the Jihadist northern strongholds.[4] AFISMA's mandate also included assisting the Malian authorities in consolidating state authority, maintaining security, protecting the population, and setting conditions necessary to the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the return of refugees and internally displaced persons.[5]

While the initial plan had imperfections – notably an extended timeline with military operations scheduled for no earlier than late 2013[6] – it provided for three critical provisions: a comprehensive strategy addressing all facets of the problem, a progressive and inclusive methodology intended to produce broad international support, and an unobtrusive role assigned to state actors external to the African region.[7]

In January 2013, however, France responded to the Jihadist attack against the frontline towns of Konna and Sévaré by launching offensive operations against the Salafist bases in Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal.[8] This unanticipated development has unfortunately disrupted the initial strategic plan, concept of operation, and projected timeline and skewed the action of the international community in the direction of a unilateral and military-centric response.

This Strategic Research Project (SRP) argues that by overreacting to a strategically inconsequential Jihadist thrust and shifting from the initial approach, the international community has traded a prudent, balanced, across-the-board, incremental and sustainable strategy for short-term tactical gains. While the benefits of these gains for the overall endeavour have questionable enduring value, the undermining impact to an inclusive and holistic approach to the Malian crisis is already apparent.

First, the precipitate start of offensive operations has short-circuited diplomatic efforts intended to bridge interest fissures and divergences among international stakeholders about the appropriate strategy. Those efforts were critical to strengthening the legitimacy and cohesiveness of the international community's response, to disarming the reservations of key regional actors such as Algeria and Mauritania, and to building a durable collective commitment.

Secondly, although uprooting the Jihadist footholds will inevitably require the use of force, a military-centric strategy dominated by kinetic activity is destined to prove counterproductive in the long term by overlooking political and societal dynamics that are fundamental to lasting stability in Mali. Most significantly, the political transition process - essential to restoring constitutional order - might be sidetracked, allowing the

antagonist calculations of Mali's 128 political parties to obstruct indefinitely the establishment of legitimate institutions. In the same logic, starting offensive operations prior to outlining a framework for negotiations about the political status of the North has created a void that encourages an opportunistic resurgence of Tuareg nationalism and inter-tribal clashes.

Additionally, the focus on kinetic operations has neglected preconditions essential to the consolidation of future military gains, in particular the reorganization of the Malian armed forces. With its operational duties effectively subcontracted to the French military, the Malian military in its current state has less incentive to restore its capabilities and much time to devote to factional infighting and to its political ambitions. AFISMA, also, whose units have been engaged hastily, will struggle to find its operational balance and overcome limitations inherent to its multinational composition.

Furthermore, the prominent French military presence is defeating the narrative that still seeks - despite blatant evidence to the contrary - to showcase the military campaign as an African-led enterprise. Despite the remarkable success of the current French-led offensive, these vulnerabilities risk providing the Sahelian Jihadists with effective lines of operation to deny the international community the rapid and decisive outcome it expects in Mali.

Critical Vulnerability # 1: A Myopic Focus on Short-Term Tactical Gains

The proliferation of Jihadist militants in northern Mali is not the starting point of the predicament, despite the impression its sudden rise in the attention of international media may give.[9] In fact, as usual, armed Jihad has merely festered on the enduring cause of instability in Mali: a failed nation-building process that has created a central government deprived of the legitimacy and authority necessary to maintain good order

over the entirety of its territory.[10] Neighboring Niger and Mauritania, whose stronger state and security apparatuses thwarted the threat, are clear evidence to the centrality of political factors in the Malian crisis.

Paradoxically, Mali had been showing signs of a maturing and consolidating democratic state with two consecutive peaceful transfers of power in 1992 and 2002. However, the toppling of Amadou Toumani Touré's presidency in March 2012 revealed that, even though celebrated as an exceptional achievement in the African context, that experience of formal democracy masked the poor resilience of the state.[11] Indeed, the resurgence of Tuareg nationalism, the Jihadist seizure of the north, and the institutional mess in Bamako are primarily challenges to the credibility and viability of the Malian polity. They are mutually feeding manifestations of an intrinsically political problem: a dysfunctional and contested Malian central authority unable to ensure its own security, not to mention the security of the whole nation.[12]

Consequently, posing the problem in terms of "restoring the territorial integrity of Mali" is conceptually restrictive and misleading. Arguably, Mali would even be better off without its northern regions, reduced to a territory of a size and heterogeneity it can manage. Thus, what needs addressing is not the territorial loss *per se*, but the *structural dysfunction* that led to that loss. Otherwise, handing the liberated regions back to the same weak state that failed to retain them in the first place would be a Sisyphean enterprise.

Furthermore, if security is "the true design and end of government" and, as such, its primary impulse for consolidation and maturation, redressing the territorial loss on behalf of the Malian state and military would be counterproductive, as it would eliminate

a major incentive for the state to reform itself.[13] Attempting to restore the territorial integrity of Mali without giving adequate precedence to rebuilding a functional central authority will most likely not yield meaningful and durable progress.

While the international community is focusing on military operations, the political transition in Mali is stalling, promising to annul future military gains and install chronic institutional instability.[14] Most importantly, the March 2012 putschists have retained significant ascendency over the Malian state. With the support of portions of the military and the control of key departments, such as Defense, Territorial Administration, Interior Security, and Equipment and Transportation, they still represent a major obstacle to institutional normalization.[15] After forcing the Transitional Prime Minister to resign in December 2012, they demonstrated their power again in January 2013 by nearly ousting the Transitional President Dioncounda Traoré, using hostile demonstrations fomented with the complicity of the Convergence of Malian Patriotic Organizations (COPAM).[16] Some information even suggests that a military coup was in preparation in January 2013 and that President Traoré's request for French military assistance actually sought to save the Transitional Government.[17] Consequently, by allying with a restive Malian military for the sake of offensive operations, the international community is implicitly perpetuating the *pronunciamento*, letting the former junta position itself to take credit for military gains in the north and accumulate political capital for its post-crisis ambitions.[18]

Tuareg nationalism and inter-tribal rivalries also are a non-military factor of crisis that unwarranted focus on kinetic action is already exacerbating. Although motivated initially by political and socioeconomic grievances, the unrest in northern Mali has taken

an inter-ethnic dimension.[19] Tuareg nationalists, mainly the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), are vying to increase their political and military influence by seizing territorial securities as the French offensive rolls back the Jihadists.[20] Determined to maintain its capabilities, the MNLA has refused to ally with the Malian military or AFISMA and to allow them into Kidal and the *Adrar des Ifoghas* region. Instead, the MNLA announced the standing up of three Tuareg combat brigades: *Ag Bahanga*, *Fihroun* and *Ag Al Bashir*.[21] Given their knowledge of the region, but mostly their capacity to spoil French stabilization plans, MNLA insurgents have imposed themselves as allies of the French military, a development that has infuriated rival Tuareg, Arab, Songhai and Fulani groups. It also has raised suspicions about French intentions not only in Bamako, but also in neighboring Niamey, which fears the extension of the turmoil to Nigerien Tuaregs.[22]

The Malian military also seeks to exploit the opportunity of the French military offensive to regain the terrain and self-esteem lost to the Tuareg insurgents in January 2012 in the battles for Kidal, Aguelhoc and Tessalit. Explicitly, as its Deputy Director for Public Affairs put it, the Malian military intends "to fight the MNLA as long as it is armed."[23] However, beyond MNLA insurgents, Malian soldiers perpetrated summary executions targeting ethnic Tuareg and Arabs, fanning a growing hostility that conflates them with the Jihadists.[24] Because of these exactions, thousands of Tuaregs and Arabs from Timbuktu and Gao have fled to the desert and neighboring countries after their houses and shops had been looted.[25]

Black-African auto-defense militia groups such as *Ganda Koy* (Masters of the Land) and *Ganda Iso* (Sons of the Land) are organizing also to counter rival “white”

tribes, increasing the risk of clashes and indiscriminate violence.[26] Recently, the leader of *Ganda Koy* – Djibril Diallo – expressed the crude agenda of his paramilitary organization: ""We consider all Tuaregs [as] MNLA."[27]

Because of the extreme ethnic polarization, inter-communal clashes are already occurring. For instance, the MNLA and the Arab Movement of the Azawad (AMA), a movement founded allegedly to protect the Arab community from Tuareg exactions, clashed recently near Tessalit.[28] Caught in the middle of Malian ethnic and regionalist enmities - and suspected to play a double game by all sides - France risks facing a resumption of the northern insurgency and inter-tribal confrontations that will further complicate the situation and contradict the notion that military action is stabilizing northern Mali and restoring state authority and territorial integrity.[29]

Another critical flaw of the current military-centric response to the Malian crisis is that it relies on a simplistic understanding of the radicalizing trend in the Sahel, viewing it exclusively as an excrescence of the Algerian Jihadist nebula. According to this superficial conception, the Sahelian Jihadist upheaval is an exogenous phenomenon that a direct military confrontation can uproot relatively easily. Actually, although the Salafist armed groups have been the most high profile of their manifestations the local dynamics of religious fundamentalism are more diverse and complex.[30]

Long before the present upsurge in Jihadist militancy, the region has been experiencing a steady propagation of radical ideas, although the temperance and syncretism of *Sufi* Islam have acted as a barrier against fundamentalism.[31] In reality, psychosocial mutations, socioeconomic disenchantment, and foreign radical influences

have eroded the monopolistic dominance of Sufism and paved the way for more orthodox interpretations of Islamic dogma.[32]

Historically, *Sufi* Islam rose to prominence in the region as a refuge against the acculturating and assimilating agenda of the French colonial system.[33] However, although still present in the mythicizing hagiographies of prominent local *Sufi* saints, this narrative has lost much of its relevance for post-independence generations of Sahelian Muslims.[34] Moreover, their perceived venality, clientelism, and collusion with political and economic elites have considerably discredited local *Sufi* brotherhoods (*turuq*).[35]

Several reformist movements, such as *Jamaatu Ibaadu Rahman* (Community of the Servants of the Merciful) in Senegal and *Tablighi Jamaat* (Propagators of the Faith) in Mali, have gained influence in the region by denouncing the “deviationism” and “materialist degeneration” of *Sufi marabouts*.[36] Although apolitical and dedicated to pacifist *daawa* (predication), these movements nevertheless propagated more literalist interpretations of Islamic canons, while their "highly restrictive orthopraxis" and hostility towards modernism operated as pre-radicalizing incubators for some of their hard-core adepts.[37] For instance, the French-Moroccan Zacarias Moussaoui, condemned in the United States for his implication in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, was a member of *Tablighi Jamaat*, along with the "American Taliban" John Walker Lindh, and an estimated 80% of the Salafists recruited in Europe.[38]

Wahhabi influences also irradiated the region through Islamic cultural centers, mosques, *madrassas,* and charities operated by organizations with close ties in the Persian Gulf, Libya, Yemen, and Pakistan. At the end of the 1990s Tuareg insurgency, in particular, Wahhabi foreign donors made up for the shortcomings of the Malian

government and shouldered much of the reconstruction effort, increasing their influence on marginalized local communities. Clearly, beyond the wellbeing of the populations, these "charities" primarily sought to counter an African “bastardisation of Islam."[39]

Sahelian students forced to study in foreign Muslim institutions – like *Al-Azhar* and *Ayn As-Shams* in Egypt, *Zeytouna* in Tunisia or *Omdurman* in Sudan – for lack of domestic Islamic universities also contributed to the propagation of fundamentalism. For example, the first emir of *Jamaatu Ibaadu* Rahman – Alioune Diouf – studied in Algeria in the 1950s.[40] Consequently, the most highly educated Muslim scholars in the region – whose intellectual prestige dwarfs the rudimentary education of the *Sufi marabouts* – tend to be those educated in rigorous Islamic schools of thought.

Additionally, while consecrating freedom of speech and association, and encouraging the multiplication of media outlets, the post-1991 democratization drive in Mali froze the public debate under a superficial "*consensualism*" that benefited the established elites and further marginalized the masses.[41] Thus, fundamental societal issues moved from the secular arena into the religious realm, giving increasing sway to charismatic Islamic leaders and organizations, such as the Malian Islamic High Council (MIHC), led by Wahhabi-leaning Mahmoud Dicko, and Chérif Ousmane Haidara’s *Ansar Eddine*.[42]

Indeed, radical vibrancy in Mali, as in the Sahel in general, is neither an exclusively exogenous nor a loosely ingrained phenomenon. It has penetrated the local communities as a sustained trend that seeks to "*Islamicize*" the society and the state and, in the most extremist flavors, to expunge Sufism and its practices considered as *shirk* (idolatrous) or *bida’a* (innovationist).[43] As manifested recently when the MIHC

forced President Amadou Toumani Touré to rescind a new family code advancing gender equality, a sustained push for de-secularization is shaping Malian society, a trend that creates an objective commonality of interests between Islamist organizations across the board, especially about the place of *Sharia* within the society and the state.[44]

Consequently, confronting the fundamentalist threat in Mali does not simply amount to driving back a horde of foreign extremists, since it can potentially lead to antagonizing native groups that aspire to a "more authentic" form of Islam. Indeed, many local *Songhai*, *Kel Ifoghas* Tuaregs, and *Tilemsi* and *Kunta* Arabs have espoused these aspirations and joined the Salafists, changing the ethnic makeup of the Jihadist armed groups and turning the "Sahelization" of the Jihad into enduring reality.[45]

Critical Vulnerability # 2:

Seams in the international approach and level of commitment

Despite the ambient “diplomatic correctness,” the international community lacks a consensus view on the strategic implications of the Malian crisis and the strategy that it should implement. Most significantly, the current international course relies by default on a French “unilateral” military leadership that, although convenient for short-term tactical purposes, undermines the longer-term development of broad international unity of action and lasting commitment. In addition, key actors neighboring Mali and critical to any durable progress - Algeria and Mauritania – have distanced themselves from the current military-centric course.[46] Even African intergovernmental organizations – the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – and African regional powerhouses – Nigeria and South Africa – have adopted a “deafening silence” since the beginning of the French offensive, visibly out of frustration.[47] These fault lines may not seem meaningful amidst present tactical

successes against the Jihadists. However, the durable stabilization of Mali, restoration of state authority and integrity, and longer-term neutralization of radical insurgencies in the western Sahel require a more multilateral and inclusive approach.

The weaknesses in the international community's cohesiveness towards the Malian crisis stem principally from the *compelling* and *unshared* nature of French strategic interests in the region and the resulting impulse for France to embark upon a solitary military enterprise in the Sahel.[48] As President Hollande put it: "Only France could decide and make this intervention."[49] Indeed, beyond responding to an isolated emergency – the Jihadist January 2013 attacks - the French military intervention is the manifestation of a deliberate and pragmatic strategy that, for the pursuit of broader objectives, assumed the risks and political implications of unilateral action.[50] In other terms, the operational urgency mutated into an "opportunity," allowing France to implement a strategy that pursues more enduring national interests.[51] French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian expressed explicitly the French deep motivations in November 2012: "In Mali, it is our own security that is at stake … because if we don't move a terrorist entity will take shape which could hit … France … [or] Europe."[52]

This explains why France assumed the risk of isolation from its natural North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU partners. This is also the reason why France's natural allies, who do not necessarily share its concerns with the same intensity and are consequently not ready to assume the same risks, agreed to provide only symbolic support to the campaign.[53] They may even have felt that France seized the opportunity of the current military offensive to try to pressure them into endorsing the military-centric international approach that it advocated since the beginning, but

which failed to overcome American and European reticence.[54] In any case, they resisted the pressure, maintained a policy of non-direct military intervention, and restated the necessity of seeking a comprehensive political solution.[55] This is the position, common to the United States and European Union nations, that German Foreign Minister - Guido Westerwelle - expressed:

> It was right that France responded to the request for help from the Malian government (but) the deployment of German combat troops is not up for debate. A lasting resolution to the Mali conflict can only occur through a political solution that includes a return to order in the whole of Mali, taking into account the justified concerns of the north. [56]

Indeed, France is the only Western nation to view the crisis in the Sahel as a direct and immediate threat to its natural security interests.[57] Among these interests, the fate of the French citizens detained by the Sahelian Jihadists is certainly paramount, from both humanitarian and domestic political perspectives.[58] From the standpoint of more enduring interests, protecting the nearly 150,000 French nationals living in West and North Africa and thwarting the extension of the threat into French territory certainly is also decisive.[59] Additionally, France has important economic interests in the broader region, especially the AREVA Company's uranium extraction activities at Arlit and Akokan in Niger.[60] With 78% of the national production of electricity generated by nuclear reactors, the security and stability of uranium supplies is critical to France's energy independence.[61] Moreover, in 2013, AREVA will begin to exploit the Nigerien Imouraren deposit, the second largest open-pit uranium mine in the world, making Niger the world's second largest uranium producer after Kazakhstan.[62] Protecting these facilities and preventing nuclear material from falling into malicious hands most certainly influenced direct intervention.[63]

Despite the support of the nations of its former "*pré-carré*," the French option for a unilateral approach drove a wedge into the cohesiveness of the international community's posture and disrupted the multilateral framework provided initially by the UNSC, the AU and ECOWAS.[64] It also compromised a further involvement of Western nations scared off by mission creep and unwilling to compromise democratic principles by allying with a "putschist" Malian military, MNLA insurgents once connected to the Jihadists, and a Chadian autocratic president eager to buy himself a new virginity.

Moreover, U.S. restraint from further involvement in the Malian crisis is a serious concern. The U.S. was playing an active role in developing a multilateral and comprehensive international approach. For instance, U.S. diplomacy was making critical effort in winning the cooperation of Algeria and pressuring Malian political actors into completing the transition process.[65] However, the ambivalence, unclear long-term objectives, and shortsighted construct of the French military intervention reinforced U.S. reservations to the point that American officials have stepped back from the issue.[66]

Furthermore, the crisis in the Sahel remains a remote threat to American national security interests and cannot compete for attention with more pressing concerns in the Middle East and Asia Pacific regions.[67] Additionally, transitioning from a decade of controversial and expensive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States and potential Western sponsors of direct intervention in Mali are inhibited by fears of domestic political backlash, especially after the ambivalent outcome of Western military intervention in Libya.[68] From the viewpoint of a U.S. President freshly reelected in part to fulfill his promise to put an end to America's costly wars and concentrate on "nation-building at home", direct military engagement in Mali is improbable.[69] Consequently, the

United States' military involvement in Mali has remained purposefully minimal in the form of logistic and intelligence support.

Algerian and Mauritanian obdurate resistance to military intervention is an additional indication of the dangerously weak inclusiveness of the international community's posture in Mali.[70] Algeria, which shares a 1,376-kilometer border with Mali, has rejected foreign military intervention in the Sahel despite intense international pressure, fearing a Libyan-type backlash that could annihilate its counterterrorism successes by pushing the Sahelian jihadists back into Algerian territory.[71]

Although the international community has recently viewed Algiers more positively for allowing French warplanes in its airspace, this gesture was intended more to serve as punishment for *Ansar Dine*, which embarrassed Algerian authorities by breaking away from the Ouagadougou negotiations, as opposed to representing an enduring shift in policy.[72] Actually, the Algerian strategic option on the issue stems from deep-rooted apprehensions that are unlikely to fade soon, such as the fear of external actors, especially France, challenging Algerian leadership ambitions in the Western Sahel.[73]

Moreover, Algiers is eager to protect its hydrocarbon-rich southern underbelly, even if it means contradicting the will of the international community. Concerned primarily with consolidating the survival of the regime, Algiers is profoundly reticent to fighting Jihadist armed groups beyond its borders, a decision that, according to most Algerian officials, would expose the country to the "Pakistani syndrome": Algeria, like Pakistan, would end up being the principal target of terrorist attacks.[74] Mokhtar Belmokhtar's *Mouwaqqiin Biddam* Brigade[75] attacked the In Amenas gas field and the Ain Chikh gas pipeline in retaliation for French air raids in January 2013, a step that the

Jihadists had never crossed, even in the height of the civil war, precisely to stir those fears and deter Algeria from realigning with the international community.[76]

With a 2,237-kilometer shared border with Mali, Mauritania has similar concerns about the potential ripple effects of a foreign-sponsored military intervention in the Sahel.[77] In addition, the two countries have had intense arguments about Mali's handling of the Jihadist armed groups in its territory, Nouakchott accusing Bamako of complaisance. In February 2010, they almost ceased diplomatic relations after Mali released four Jihadist detainees, including a Mauritanian citizen, in exchange for the French hostage Pierre Camatte.[78] Mauritania also fears that engaging in a foreign military intervention in Mali will inflame the latent radicalism within segments of the Mauritanian population and jeopardize fragile success achieved against the local AQIM branch, *Ansar Allah Al Morabitun Fi Bilad Chinguetti*.[79]

In sum, diverging interests and policy disagreements have created vulnerable seams in the international community's approach to the Malian crisis. France, in particular, has taken a disruptive position of international isolation predicated on a rapid military success against the Jihadists. These vulnerabilities may get even more apparent when looming entanglement and rising financial costs force France to seek a rapid exit out of the Malian quagmire, creating a leadership void that the international community will have to fill *ex abrupto*.[80]

Critical vulnerability # 3: International Ramifications and Risk of Expansion

Disconnecting the international community's action in Mali from a perceived paradigm of Western expeditionary interventions in Muslim nations – after Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – is essential in preventing the internationalization of the confrontation. Unfortunately, the ideological underpinnings of the crisis seem to receive little attention,

as is the risk for incensed Muslim communities to perceive the Western-led foreign military intervention in Mali as another Western aggression against Islam, adding traction to the Jihadists' self-depiction as defenders of the Islamic faith.

Similarly, neutralizing interactions with other radical hotspots on the continent, such as Boko Haram and As-Shabab insurgencies, respectively in Nigeria and Somalia, is strategically critical. As Amanda Dory, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary Of Defense for African Affairs, put it, there is a risk of "cross-fertilization and cross-pollination" between affiliated Jihadist movements "from Egypt to Libya to Somalia to Nigeria."[81] The unprecedented possibility of terrorist attacks in countries such as Senegal, Benin, or Togo, and the kidnapping of seven French tourists by Boko Haram in Northern Cameroon, partly in retaliation for the French military operations in Mali, is a clear indication of the reality of that risk.[82] Still, contrary to the official discourse and because of military-centric propensities, the international community is addressing the security crisis in northern Mali as if it were confined to that region.

Already, converging intelligence indicates a flow of foreign Jihadists into and out of northern Mali. This trend signals a dynamic of expansion in the span of the crisis that risks turning the local Islamist turbulence into a global magnet for Jihadist militants, augmenting the capabilities and operational reach of the armed groups. For instance, official reports on the terrorist attack against the In Amenas natural gas complex highlighted the presence of predominantly non-Algerians militants of Lebanese, Syrian, Tunisian, Mauritanian, Nigerien, French, and Canadian citizenship.[83] In November 2012, Malian security forces intercepted Ibrahima Aziz Ouattara, a Franco-Malian citizen who

was attempting to link up with Jihadists in Timbuktu in order to coordinate the arrival of a dozen young radicals from France.[84]

In August 2012, Nigerien security services arrested in Niamey French-Congolese citizen Cedric Lobo Ngoyi Bungenda, who was also preparing the infiltration of French militants into northern Mali. Lobo's interrogation allowed the French police to apprehend four of his accomplices who frequented a radical mosque in L'Haÿ-les-Roses, in the southeast of Paris.[85] These arrests tend to confirm French intelligence officials' concern that young European Jihadists seek increasingly to infiltrate the Sahel or Syria, rather than Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the withdrawal of the United States-led coalition will reduce the opportunities for martyrdom at the hands of the West.[86] These European Jihadists are important assets for the Sahelian Salafists since their potential ability to return to their countries of citizenship can serve to execute terrorist attacks in Europe.

Similarly, networks allowing West African Jihadists to infiltrate northern Mali are developing even more rapidly. In December 2012, Mauritanian security services arrested British citizen Ahmed Chahine at Mbiket Lahwach, on his way to the Jihadist camps in northern Mali.[87] In Senegal, since the beginning of the French offensive, security services have caught several Jihadists in the proximity of the borders with Mali and Mauritania, mostly Malian Tuaregs and Nigerian citizens, but also one Uzbek citizen and one Latvian citizen. In January 2013, the Senegalese police arrested Boubacar Dianko, a Senegalese citizen with close ties to the emir of the consultative council and spokesman of the Movement for *Tawhid* and Jihad in West Africa (MTJWA) Abdoul Walid Sahraoui, while attempting to enter Mali.[88]

Beyond the case of Mali, the Salafist proliferation in the Sahel region reflects the growing prominence of the African continent in the global Jihadist agenda.[89] Africa offers the Jihadists an attractive combination of large Muslim populations, often in dire living conditions, and weak states with insufficient security, porous borders, and ungoverned areas.[90]

The continent also fits perfectly in Al Qaeda's post-Bin Laden plan to adopt a more regionally distributed strategy. Under the leadership of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, more open to formal affiliation with regional groups than Bin Laden, "Al Qaeda central" has multiplied these alliances, trying to exploit the Jihadist momentum in regions such as the Sahel, while offering a less coherent target to counterterrorism efforts and releasing the pressure on its rear bases in Pakistan.[91] The return of "Al Qaeda central" senior African leaders back into the region is also likely to increase the continent's importance in the organization's plans.[92]

In addition, Jihadist organizations see the Arab Spring's toppling of authoritarian regimes in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, and disorganization of security services that formerly stifled their ambitions as a formidable window of opportunity (*hadath ha'il*). Condemning the legalism of Islamist political parties – the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Libya and Ennahda in Tunisia – *Takfiri*[93] Jihadists of *Ansar Al Sharia* (Defenders of Sharia) in Libya or *Al-Tawhid wal Jihad* (Oneness and Jihad) and *Takfir wal-Hijra* (Excommunication and Exodus) in Egypt are striving to steer the Arab Spring into a radical Salafist direction.[94]

Therefore, the security crisis in northern Mali is far from isolated. Rather, it sits in an arc of radical turmoil that stretches from Mauritania to Yemen and Somalia via

Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Niger, Nigeria, Libya, Sudan, and Egypt. In that vast region already destabilized by failing nation-building processes, incessant internal strife and socioeconomic stress, the Jihadists expect to recover from setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan and regain the initiative by tapping into a potentially unlimited reservoir of Muslim supporters.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Mali is certainly not the first time that public officials have viewed complex crises in military terms only, forgetting, or affecting to forget, fundamental political, economic, social, and cultural aspects. "Mechanistic tendencies" and the magnification of isolated favorable parameters – often military – have repeatedly lured strategic decision-makers into excessive overconfidence.[95] In 1979, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev made the same miscalculation, dismissing Chairman of the Council of Ministers Aleksey Kosygin's admonishments against venturing lightly into the muddle of Afghan tribal and political infighting.[96] In 2002, United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld assured the American people that "the use of force in Iraq [...] would last five days, or five weeks, or five months, but [that] it certainly [was] not going to last any longer than that."[97] A sectarian conflict, a terrorist campaign and over 4,000 dead American service members over eight years of war proved him tragically wrong.[98]

In the case of Mali also, an excessive focus on military aspects will lead to the same disillusionment. Indeed, the current military campaign forced the Jihadists out of Malian northern cities and inflicted significant attrition upon their fighting capabilities. However, like President George W. Bush's May 2003 proclamation of "Mission accomplished" on the deck of *USS Abraham Lincoln*, President Hollande's triumphalist visit to the Malian frontline was a premature declaration of victory. [99] In both cases, the

end of the so-called major combat operations does not necessarily equate to conclusive success. In Mali, suicide bombings, commando raids into liberated cities and continuous Jihadist resistance in the Ifoghas Mountains are showing the resilience of the hydra.

There is no ideal course of action in a situation of chaos and political meltdown such as the Malian crisis. However, as with comparable cases throughout Africa, the roots of the problem – the collapse of an artificial nation-state edifice inherited from the former colonial master – are notoriously unresponsive to short-term military-centric solutions. Decisive progress will come instead at an "evolutionary pace" and will require "strategic patience" and circumspection; any approach that does not match the absorption and processing capacities of the region will be invasive and disruptive in the long term.[100]

Therefore, it is essential to eliminate the vulnerabilities associated with the international community's current military-centric course and to revert to the initial comprehensive and long-term focused approach. To that effect, the African Union and ECOWAS must assume their legitimate role in providing political guidance and operational command and control within a UNSC validated construct. This is the only strategy capable of maintaining lasting and broad international leadership and avoiding the pitfalls of an isolated French military enterprise.

Similarly, AFISMA should have the latitude to play its legitimate role as the military arm of the international community in Mali and cease to be a surrogate force for the French military. To that end, the elaboration and conduct of military plans and authority over the northern area of operations should fall under the responsibility of AFISMA. Accordingly, all African forces in theater, including the Chadian contingent

whose independence from AFISMA and "free electron" status undermine cohesion and unity of action, should fall under the command authority of AFISMA. This construct does obviously not prevent France and other Western allies from providing the operational assistance they deem suitable, whether logistic, intelligence or in the form of movement or fire support or the constitution of a theater level quick reaction force.

Applied in Somalia, this organizational model yielded remarkable success against the As-Shabab insurgency while setting conditions conducive to a return to constitutional normalcy, the reorganization of the Somali security services and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. With the logistic and training support of the United States principally, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) "performed better than anyone would have dreamed," thanks to a broad legitimacy, strong unity of action, a realistic timeframe and a comprehensive strategy focused on consolidating gains incrementally.[101] Together with proving that African regional forces are capable of complex peace enforcement missions, AMISOM also showed that they are less disruptive for the long-term stability of their areas of operations.[102]

Most importantly, the restoration of constitutional order should receive priority over military considerations. Specifically, credible elections must take place as soon as practicable to reinstate legitimate Malian political authorities. However, the electoral process, despite France's pressure to hold elections in July 2013, must take the time necessary to ensure a credible vote, and should not jump the gun to provide an exit card to the French military.[103]

Accordingly, the international community must dissuade and prevent the former junta from interfering in the political process. To that end, the UNSC must demonstrate

its readiness to refer pertinent violations to competent international jurisdictions. In conjunction, AFISMA should receive the mandate to protect Malian institutions and transitional authorities.

Additionally, political processes designed to address the status of the northern regions and the Tuareg discontent must be part of the overall strategy. Given the objective shortcomings of the Malian state, a broad political compromise granting a measure of autonomy to the regions seems to be a realistic solution. In doing so, the international community must be cautious not to over-legitimize the MNLA and embolden it as an *alternative* to the Malian state.

The Malian security forces, essential for an exit strategy, should receive robust assistance in organization, training, and equipment. Bolstered aerial capacities, in particular, should give them a tactical advantage and allow them to face their operational duties in the northern desert. Moreover, the Malian political authorities should be encouraged to replace the discredited military leadership and facilitate the rise of a new generation of commanders.

These measures will allow the international community to avoid falling into the morass of a protracted and expanding "*terrorsurgency*," interethnic clashes, and a humanitarian disaster, ultimately giving reality to the looming Sahelistan. However, excessive consideration for the *sovereignty* of the Malian state is a sure path to stagnation and stalemate. The international community must acknowledge the failure of the Malian state and its central role in the development of the crisis and assume its legitimate authority to implement the strategy that it deems the most fitting for the durable security and wellbeing of the Malian people.

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