

TOWARD AN EXTERNAL INTERVENTION IN NORTHERN MALI

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The deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in Northern Mali has been raised dramatically during the general debate of the 67th session of the United Nations' General Assembly. French President François Hollande requested an emergency conference of the Security Council and called for a military intervention to retake the region from Tuareg rebels and jihadi fighters. Malian Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra also stressed the urgency "to end the suffering of the people of Mali" and to "prevent a similar situation elsewhere in Sahel". Highlighting growing awareness of the importance of this issue, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Philip H. Gordon stated on October 9 that Washington would support a French military intervention in Mali. It is worth mentioning that the first move of the United States was to require a political normalization in Bamako before considering any military option.

As we have already pointed out in previous ESISC's briefings and news reports, the prospect for a military intervention in Mali under the direction of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has quickly been called into question. Despite France's show of support, numerous doubts remain over the political, logistical and financial feasibility of this operation. To understand the magnitude of the task, one has to recall that Mali is plunged into the deepest crisis of its history. After the fall of Gaddafi's regime in Libya, hundreds of fighters of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad have indeed swept into the country, causing the fall of President Amadou Toumani Touré and a huge political turmoil in Bamako. Later, these rebel fighters allied themselves with the Jihadi organizations Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mojwa). Nowadays these groups control a territory larger than France, which they can use as a rear-base to launch terrorist attacks in neighboring countries.

New drone war in sight in Africa?

There are an increasing number of reports that France and the United States are already using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles to carry out surveillance missions or airstrikes against terrorist targets in Northern Mali. Since March, Algerian newspapers published many articles over these alleged aerial operations over the zones of Tilemsi, Gao, Kidal, Aguelhoc, Tessalit, Djebok, Gossi, Gourma or Timbuktu. According to these reports, AQIM convoys have already been targeted by missile strikes that caused several casualties. Arab newspapers also reported that U.S. and French Special Forces are preparing operations against terrorist camps in Mali, despite the refusal of Algeria to let them use its territory. At the same time, both Mojwa and Ansar Dine terrorists issued statements on Jihadi web forums, claiming they had shot down

American and French drones with surface-to-air missiles acquired in post-revolutionary Libya.

Although such information was never confirmed officially by the French or the U.S. authorities, some military sources acknowledged that surveillance missions have indeed been carried out from bases in Libya, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. Last week, the chief of the U.S. Africa command, Army General Carter F. Ham, made a visit to Algeria and Morocco, stating that there “are no plans for U.S. direct military intervention in Northern Mali”. The visit is however indicative by itself of the increasing US’s military-diplomatic activism. The Washington Post later revealed that a secret meeting had been held in the White House, to consider the opportunity to step up counterterrorism efforts and to launch unilateral drone strikes based on the Pakistani, Yemeni or Somali models.

Algerian policy in Mali

As one can see, France and the United States are deeply concerned about the creation of a bastion of jihadi terrorism in north-western Africa. The de facto partition of Mali and the Islamist takeover in the North have also become a major destabilization factor for the southern part of neighboring Algeria. The terrorist groups that control the area have threatened to carry out attacks to obtain the release of Jihadi fighters detained in Algerian prisons. On September 2, the Mojwa said Algerian Vice-consul in Gao, Tahar Touati, had been executed. To recall, he had been kidnapped from the Algerian consulate in the city along with 7 other diplomats on April 5. It should also be noted that several attacks were carried out recently inside the Algerian territory, including June’s suicide bombings against security venues in Tamanrasset and Ouargla.

These attacks indicate the determination of the terrorist organization to fight against Algeria, which is the home country of many of its fighters. Interestingly, although Algiers has announced “securitization efforts” along the border, it has continued to advocate a negotiated settlement in Mali. The country is indeed firmly opposed to any military intervention that could endanger the security of its own territory and eventually undermine its position as the main regional leader. In this context, it may be thought that the information leaked in Algerian media about French and U.S. intentions are aimed at frustrating international efforts. Finally, one has to note that the Algerian policy towards Sahel has always been marked by opacity due to internal divisions inside its own apparatus.

Risky but inevitable intervention

With or without the Algerian support, the international community will have to address the situation to prevent Jihadi terrorism from spreading across western Africa. In this context, the French international broadcaster “Radio France Internationale” (RFI) revealed on October 6 that supporters of ousted Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo had met with Ansar Dine members in June, near the Mauritanian/Senegalese border. Citing a United Nations’ report that has not been made public, RFI pointed out that both groups have interest to further destabilize the region. The Jihadi might indeed be seeking for new allies to avoid an intervention from ECOWAS country, while the pro-Gbagbo camp has interest to discredit an organization which is under the chairmanship of Ivorian president Alassane Ouattara for the year 2012. One should remain very prudent when assessing these allegations, which nonetheless reflect the fragility of region shaken by successive political crisis over the past years.

If it succeeds to set up a peace keeping force despite the many existing diplomatic hurdles, the ECOWAS will have demonstrated its ability to act as a credible international actor. Given the extreme confusion that is reigning both in Bamako and in North Mali, such operation will need the U.S. and French military assistance to be effective on the ground, including through drone strikes. It will be important to keep in mind that the opening of a new front in the

region will not be without consequences for western countries in the aftermath of the Arab spring, both in term of diplomatic and security impact. Regardless of these risks, a military intervention becomes more imperative every day as the long-term existence of a Jihadi State in Sahel is unacceptable for the stability of the entire region.

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