

FALL OF NORTHERN CITIES OPENS CHALLENGING NEW PHASE IN MALIAN CONFLICT

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The French-led military offensive in northern Mali has gained significant momentum in recent days as the cities of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal fell without much opposition. Waves of air strikes have driven terrorists out of those cities, allowing French and Malian troops to take Gao on Saturday, Timbuktu on Monday and Kidal on Tuesday night.

The fall of those strategic and symbolic cities of northern Mali most likely marks the end of the French offensive. Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian indeed described it as a “**turning-point**” in the intervention. French President François Hollande said on Monday that “we are winning in Mali” and French media have reported that he will visit the Malian capital of Bamako and Timbuktu over the weekend. Nevertheless, **as the first – and easiest – phase of the conflict draws to a close, major challenges remain.**

It is worth pointing out that the ease with which French troops managed to seize Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal does not mean threats have disappeared. **Islamist fighters have obviously decided to avoid directly engaging French troops, thus allowing the French-led offensive to proceed quite quickly.** But the **Islamist fighters of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) have most likely switched to an insurgency strategy in areas that best suit them.** The air strikes carried out by the French military have indeed dispersed the terrorists in the desert. **Some are believed to have retreated to the mountain area north of Kidal** as highlighted by the French air strikes conducted in the Aghelhok region, about 100km north of Kidal, on Thursday.

While the Malian desert favoured France’s fast-paced offensive, those mountain areas, which are well-known by the terrorists, will be a much trickier theatre. It is not surprising that Ansar Dine leader Iyad Ag Ghaly and AQIM’s Abu Zeid have reportedly moved to those areas. **It is also believed that some of the Islamist fighters have fled to neighbouring countries, taking advantage of the region’s porous borders.** On that issue, the level of cooperation between regional governments – most notably Algeria – will be crucial as the rivalry and lack of cooperation between regional powers has allowed the terrorist threat to spread throughout the Sahel region.

With the prospect of enduring threats in northern Mali and in neighbouring countries, it remains unclear how France's role will evolve. **French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said French troops will be leaving Mali "quickly" as the French government looks eager to hand off control of the region to Malian and African troops** to focus on its training role. As the ability of Malian and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) troops to hold northern Mali and hunt down the remaining terrorists is highly questionable, the prospect of sending UN peacekeeping troops has been raised. The issue is to be discussed by the UN Security Council and is backed by Paris. "This development is extremely positive and I want this initiative to be carried through," Mr. Le Drian said, adding that France would "obviously play its role." Still, **it remains unclear what will happen to the terrorists who have gone into hiding in the mountains north of Kidal. Despite the strikes launched on Thursday, it is doubtful the French government, which is gearing up to proclaim "mission accomplished" over the weekend, will be willing to deepen its involvement and go after the remaining Islamist fighters.**

Another major issue that could have serious stability ramifications is the issue of Mali's reconciliation. On Wednesday, the French Foreign Minister urged the Malian government to "engage without further delay in discussions with legitimate representatives of northern populations and non-terrorist armed groups that recognize the integrity of Mali." **At the centre of the country's recent problems is the issue of Tuareg separatism,** which created the conditions for the Islamist takeover in the north. **Although the Malian government has said a national reconciliation commission was in the works, those efforts are expected to be hampered by the reports of exaction carried out by Malian soldiers against Arab or light-skinned northern residents.** Moreover, the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) re-surfaced in Kidal, saying it was willing to work with France but that it refused the return of the Malian army to the city. **This highlights the hurdles that the reconciliation process will have to address and underscores the risks of heightened ethnic tensions as the country still lacks a legitimate government.**

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