

INTERNATIONAL DISPUTES ERODING PROSPECT FOR MILITARY INTERVENTION IN NORTHERN MALI

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On Tuesday, December 4, emissaries from various belligerents involved in the Mali conflict met in Ouagadougou at the initiative of President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, who is mandated by the Economic Community of African States (ECOWAS), to find a solution to the crisis. The National Union Government of Bamako, the Tuareg rebels of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Islamist Ansar Dine agreed on “the need to create a framework for dialogue” for a “cessation of hostilities”. According to the statement issued after the meeting, the MNLA abandoned claims of independence in exchange for guarantees on a “broad autonomy” for the North. For its part, Ansar Dine committed itself to keep its distance from the jihadist terrorists related to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The document stresses the “rejection” of terrorism and respect for the territorial integrity of Mali. At present, the main obstacle to an agreement remains the application of Sharia law in areas that fall under the control of the Islamists.

The situation on the ground is much more complex, however, and the prospect for a solution remains distant. Accepted in principle by the pressures of ECOWAS, the autonomy envisaged for Azawad will be extremely difficult to define, all the more so since there may be some doubt as to the legitimacy and capacity of the Malian authorities to negotiate a transition agreement with the Tuareg rebels. More important still, no agreement could be credible as long as the jihadist terrorists of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and the Katibates (“brigades”) of the AQIM will continue to threaten the Sahel from their strongholds in northern Mali. It should be noted that even before the closing session of the meeting of Ouagadougou, MUJAO announced that it would retaliate against Algeria and Mauritania if a “coalition of infidels” was formed to combat it.

Pending international intervention

Many African voices have called for the establishment of a rapid response mission to put an end to the crisis in Mali. Visiting Paris on Tuesday, December 4, the Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara called again for the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution authorizing the use of force in the first quarter of next year. All experts agree, however, on the difficulties in organizing and funding such an intervention. Romano Prodi, Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the UN to the Sahel, said on

November 20 that no military action could take place until September 2013 due to political and logistical constraints. We already wrote last October (see ESISC briefing: Toward an external intervention in Northern Mali - 10/10/2012) that to mobilize and train 3300 men represents a disproportionate task for ECOWAS. It would also be impossible for the Malian army to regain control of the North without the tangible support of Western powers.

At the same time, the Algerian terrorist Abdelmalek Droukdel, head of AQIM, has threatened to order attacks against the economic interests of France and the neighbouring states of Mali in case of a “declaration of war”. According to him, Paris aims to exploit the Malian crisis in order to “divide the country” and plunder its wealth through multinational corporations. In a video posted on websites associated with the jihadist nebula, he also threatened to execute the seven French hostages currently in the hands of the terrorist organization in the Sahel. These attempts at intimidation were relayed by the other historic leaders of the AQIM in Mali, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who created a new group: “Al-Mouwaqqiaouna Bi ddimaa” (ك ت د بة "ب الدماء الموقعون" - Those who sign with their blood). These statements were made a few days after the abduction of a new French hostage, Rodriguez Leal Alberto. Abducted on 20 November in Diema, an area previously considered safe near the Senegalese border, he is held by the MUJAO.

The path to an exit from the crisis through Algiers

Direct intervention by France and the United States will be very risky, even though both countries have pledged repeatedly to prevent terrorism from being established in the Sahel. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon himself expressed doubts about the chances of success of such an initiative. The report submitted on November 26 by the services of the Security Council advises to exercise great caution not to “ruin any chance of a negotiated political solution to this crisis.” The commander of U.S. forces in Africa (AFRICOM), General Carter Ham, also stressed the importance of a negotiated solution and warned against the dangers of “premature” military action. Finally, note that after an interview at the Elysee Palace on Wednesday, December 5, Chadian President Idriss Deby denounced the “total confusion” which prevailed on this issue because of the delays of the Malians, the ECOWAS and the UN.

The uncertainty weighs more than ever on the ability of Mali to restore its territorial integrity with the support of its neighbours and the international community. In this context, it may be necessary to wait for the official visit of François Hollande to Algiers on December 19 to see the outlines of a solution. Algeria, which has assumed the role of mediator in the conflict, has indeed expressed its opposition to Western interference in the Sahel. In addition, Algiers got the participation of Ansar Dine in three-way negotiations in Ouagadougou. The capacity of Algeria and France to reach common ground will be critical before the Security Council's vote on a new resolution on December 20. The game of influence which engages the two countries to defend their strategic interests may nevertheless undermine the efforts of all parties involved in the search for a resolution of the crisis, at the risk of the spread of instability in Northern Mali to the region as a whole.