

## **UPDATE ON OPERATION “SERVAL”**

*By André Burstin  
ESISC Research Associate*

On the sixth day of Operation Serval, the French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian announced that ground troops were marching towards the town of Diabali, which on Sunday fell into the hands of Islamist fighters of Ansar Dine. Chief of the Defence Staff Admiral Edouard Guillaud, for his part, said that French soldiers would come into "direct combat" with the terrorists in the coming hours. Later in the day, "a security source" quoted by AFP reported the first clashes involving French soldiers around Diabali. Currently, 1,700 troops are deployed in Mali, including infantry companies responsible for ensuring the safety of 6,000 French nationals who live in the country, especially in Bamako. In total, the French military is expected to reach 2,500 men.

In the early days of the operation, hundreds of air strikes were carried out in areas controlled by the Islamists. Positions and command posts of Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) located near Gao have been bombarded by fighters based in Chad. Combat helicopters based in Burkina Faso have also helped block the progression of Islamist columns towards the Bambara land, which lays at the boundary between northern and southern Mali. It was during one of these raids that a French soldier was killed on Sunday in the sector of Konna, the epicenter of the first combats. Note that uncertainty remains about the situation of the city, whose recovery was announced last weekend by the Malian authorities and denied by Jean-Yves Le Drian.

### **Diplomatic context of the operation**

By ordering to conduct air strikes in northern Mali on January 11<sup>th</sup>, François Hollande has put an end to months of wait for the international community regarding the expansion of jihadist terrorism in the Sahel. Recall that the French president had already raised the urgency of intervention support to the Malian authorities in the UN General Assembly in September 2012. Since then, the stalemate in negotiations under the aegis of President Blaise Compaoré in Ouagadougou, the logistical difficulties associated with the establishment of an African intervention Force and the reluctance of Algeria has delayed any intervention. Recall that in November, the representative of the UN Secretary General for the Sahel, Romano Prodi, had felt that no military operation could take place in Mali before autumn 2013.

Last week, the Islamist push to the South and the fall of the city of Kona will have played the role of catalyst and led France to assume its own responsibilities as a regional military power. Launching Operation Serval, France has responded to the call of the Interim President of Mali, Traore Dioncounda, whose voice was lost for months in the meanders of the United Nations and the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS). France has also received the unanimous support of the UN Security Council, which held an emergency meeting on Monday night. Finally, note the ambiguous role of Algeria, whose press has denounced it as a colonial-style intervention while President Abdelaziz Bouteflika allowed French aircraft to fly over its territory by French aircraft. Note that Morocco has also authorized French forces to flight over its territory.

### **Increased terrorist risk**

Since the start of military operations, the French authorities have adjusted the antiterrorism plan Vigipirate from "red" to "dark red". As pointed out by the anti-terrorist judge Mard Trévidic in an interview with the daily newspaper *Le Parisien*, the military offensive in France is a prime target for groups linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). According to him, one should not expect a large scale on the short term, but more along the line of actions by isolated individuals like Mohammed Merah, who have already demonstrated their dangerousness in the past. The magistrate is also concerned with calls from Mali to French citizens who would be willing to join the Jihad. Note also the coincidence of the start of Operation Serval with the failure of the mission to liberate the French hostage held in Somalia, which will help steer the attention of the global jihadist nebula in the direction of France.

For now, the most alarming terrorist risk thus relates to French interests abroad, mainly in the Maghreb and the Sahel. On January 12, a spokesman for Ansar Dine warned that Operation Serval would have consequences for French nationals in the Muslim world. Yesterday, an official of the AQIM had already declared that the French military intervention would directly endanger the lives of hostages. On Wednesday, a terrorist cell linked to the brigade Khaled Aboul Abbas of Mokhtar Belmokhtar put its threats into action by removing at least two French nationals and a Japanese national from a British Petroleum site in southern Algeria. Recall that in December, the terrorist leader had created a new group: Al-Mouwaqqiaouna bi ddimaa (دماء ال ب عون موق ال" بة ي ت ك) - Those who sign with their blood), and threatened to order attacks against French interests and the neighbouring states of Mali in case of a "declaration of war".

### **Short-term outlook**

As was seen, military operations entered a new phase with the intervention of ground troops in combat zones. However, François Hollande took care to point out that France did not intend to remain in Mali and that they wanted to go as fast as possible to pass the relay to the men of the ECOWAS, which should deploy the first contingents from January 18th. French troops could also count on the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, which has voiced its support for the French operation on January 14<sup>th</sup>.

Fierce resistance waged by Islamists and their ability to disperse over hostile terrain, as well as the increased risk of terrorist operations in the coming weeks, however, do

provide a long-term commitment. The outcome of Operation Serval - dispersion of jihadist cells and restoration of the territorial integrity of Mali, or freeze the situation at the border between Mali - remains uncertain despite short-term military capabilities implemented by the French army.

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