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STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOLLOWING THE CRISIS IN MALI

Jacques Neriah, expert in counter-terrorism. Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

AFP PHOTO /POOL PASCAL GUYOT

A child holds a “Locals welcome French soldiers” in Bourem, northern Mali, on February 17, 2013.

Most analysts have stated that the crisis in Mali was the indirect consequence of the disintegration of the Libyan state following Gaddafi's death. In fact, some even advanced the thesis that it was the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy's contribution to the destabilization of the Sahel because of his personal implication in the war against Gaddafi's regime. However, although NATO's military intervention in Libya took place at the start of the process in Mali, still the events on the ground clearly indicate other reasons for the disintegration of the Malian state:

The crisis in Mali is the result of the quest for self-determination by the Tuareg people at the expense of a weak central power in Bamako

The crisis in Mali can be traced back to the long-standing insurgency that has been waged by the Tuareg people. The Tuaregs have complained for years about the discriminatory policies adopted by the central government in Bamako, which ruled the country from the south. Thus, when Mali's Tuareg nomads launched their rebellion in January 2012, many in Africa and elsewhere thought it would be just the latest in a long line of desert uprisings, to be swiftly terminated with offers of cash and jobs. The Tuaregs are a minority of perhaps 1 million of Mali's 15 million people, and they constitute about a third of the population of northern Mali. They are a Berber people who have traditionally lived in countries touching the Sahara Desert, including Mali, Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Libya, and have resisted central authority since colonial times.

Mali is no stranger to rebellions. This is the fourth led by Tuareg nomads since the independence in 1960. The last ended only in 2008. However, unlike past rebellions, the 2012's Tuareg offensive occurred after the return of Tuareg fighters to Mali after the fall of their historical patron, Colonel Muammar

Gaddafi, in neighbouring Libya. The "return" was in fact a deportation undertaken by the Arab militias against all black residents of Libya, of whom the Tuaregs were the majority. Most probably their rebellion would not have taken place at this time in history, had Gaddafi remained in power. Gaddafi's Malian fighters returned to Mali, bringing with them battle experience and equipped with heavy and sophisticated weapons looted from Gaddafi's arsenals. Furthermore, the situation in Mali itself played into the hands of the Tuaregs. Inspired by the South-Sudanese precedent, and taking advantage of the weakness of the central government and of a poorly equipped army, the Tuaregs organized a structure called the MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad), with which they launched their offensive in January 2012 and subsequently won town after town in the northern part of the country.

Beginning last year, the central government in Mali had already lost control of two-thirds of its northern territory, which was taken over by a coalition of forces that included indigenous Tuareg forces, Tuareg fighters expelled from Libya by the new ruling militias, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb units (AQIM, in Arabic: Tanzim al-Qaeda fi Bilad Al-Maghreb al-Islami), and other fundamentalist organizations–splinter organizations of Al-Qaeda–such as Ansar Eddine (Defenders of Faith). As has been the case in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, the Tuaregs' struggle for an independent homeland was hijacked by better organized and armed Islamists from Mali and abroad, creating a safe haven for militants in the Sahara –a West African Afghanistan.

The crisis in Mali is the result of Al-Qaeda's global policy to expand and combat western influence

Western intelligence agencies have been following events in Mali since, like other sub-Saharan countries, it started facing growing attacks from al-Qaeda's North African branch: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Islamists are involved

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in a multi-million-dollar ransom industry fuelled by drug-trafficking and kidnapping Westerners. AQIM is certainly the most important and militant jihadist organization in North Africa. In fact, AQIM is basically an Algerian movement, since most of its members are Algerians. AQIM's beginnings can be traced back to the early 1990s when it was known as the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé) which fought the regime in one of the bloodiest conflicts in the history of terrorism: almost 150,000 people died during the struggle in Algeria. The GIA changed into the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat; in Arabic: Al-Jama'ah al-Salafiyya lil-Da'wa wal-Qital) to become in 2006 a full part of global al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri himself announced the merger and the change of name in January 2007. AQIM is very active in the Sahel region where it keeps several training camps in which locals and foreigners are trained and prepared for their missions in North Africa and other places around the globe. Typical of this organization is the fact that it encompasses almost every nationality in the African region and also volunteers from Europe.

Abd el-Malik Droukdel, alias Abu Mossaab Abd el-Woudoud (born in 1970), is the leader of AQIM. While coordinated with global al-Qaeda, Droukdel has enough room to manoeuvre in his sphere of influence. Droukdel has succeeded to infiltrate remote countries such as Nigeria (through the training of Boko Haram combatants) and Somalia (via al-Shabab). His fighters were deeply involved in the Libyan conflict fighting against Gaddafi, as they are now in Syria and Iraq. However, it seems that Droukdel cannot accept criticism or competition to his leadership, a phenomenon that led to divisions inside his organization and the formation of other terrorist jihadist cells, such as the

MOJWA and Katibat al-Mulathamin, and its subunit Katibat al-Moaki'oun bil-Dam, which made their first appearance during the hostage ordeal in Algeria in In Amenas.

AQIM has been designated by the U.S. State Department and the European Union as a terrorist organization. Inter alia, AQIM is heavily involved in smuggling and drug trafficking. In recent years it has also focused on kidnapping for ransom –a "business" that has produced several million euros per year. Northern Mali has long been a rear base for drug traffickers, with al-Qaeda militants and other Islamist combatants sharing ground with the local Tuaregs. The drama that unfolded in neighbouring Algeria with the assault on the gas facility at In Amenas, following the French military intervention in Mali, illustrates clearly the threat posed by fundamentalists in the Sahel region and their potential damage to Western and international interests. More than anything else, the French military intervention, together with the ensuing hostage crisis, has allowed a rare glimpse into the fundamentalist structures operating in the area in their open war against the Algerian regime and others such as Mali, Nigeria and Chad. They include: AQIM, Ansar Eddine, MNLA, MOJWA (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa), Katibat al-Mulathamin (Masked Men Battalion), and Katibat al-Mouaki'oun bil-Dam (Those Who Sign with Blood Battalion).

Ansar Eddine's leader is Iyad Ag Ghali who, according to leaked U.S. diplomatic cables, is "northern Mali's undisputed power-broker." In two decades, Ag Ghali has led two previous Tuareg rebellions, and served briefly as Mali's Consul General in Saudi Arabia where he adopted the most extreme Salafi form of Islam, before being expelled by the Saudi authorities. Once back home he acted as an intermediary between hostage-paying European governments and kidnappers belonging to AQIM. While some wonder whether Ag Ghali, the whiskey-drinking fundamentalist, is motivated more by religion or by personal ambition, at least he has taken on the appearance of a fundamentalist. Gone is the large moustache he used to wear. On a video released by Ansar Ed-

dine, he has a full, graying beard. Colleagues say he became more religiously active in the 1990s when Tabligh Jamaat, a fundamentalist but nonviolent Islamic movement from Pakistan and India, started preaching in northern Mali. Tabligh Jamaat, founded early in the last century, is an offshoot of the Deobandi school of Islam, which is very hard-line. Most of the Taliban leadership is Deobandi. After Ag Ghali was assigned in 2007 to Mali's consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the Saudis became concerned about the amount of time he spent on his satellite phone and his ties to Tabligh Jamaat. They considered his activities incompatible with his status as a diplomat. He had been appointed to Saudi Arabia after he helped negotiate a peace accord that ended a brief Tuareg rebellion. "Some Tuareg rebels are irked at what they view as Ag Ghali's self-centered decision to abandon northern Mali during a time of crisis, leaving his Tuareg rebel colleagues in the lurch," a leaked U.S. Embassy cable noted in 2008.

Today, the doubts about Ag Ghali's motivations are resurfacing. His family is part of a group of Tuaregs who have traditionally ruled the region around the town of Kidal, and he has been active in the rebellions there for years. Other leaked U.S. diplomatic cables describe Ag Ghali as a master manipulator, especially when there is a chance to make money. "Ag Ghali is so adept at playing all sides of the Tuareg conflict to maximize his personal gain," notes a cable from October 2008 released by WikiLeaks. "Like the proverbial bad penny, Ag Ghali turns up whenever a cash transaction between a foreign government and Kidal Tuaregs appears forthcoming." Ag Ghali's age isn't clear. He was born in Abeibara in northern Mali in the late 1950s. In the 1970s, like many other young Tuareg men, he left to join Gaddafi's Islamic Legion in Libya. He was sent to fight against Chad in the 1980s, and fought in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. By the early 1990s, Ag Ghali returned to Mali to take part in a Tuareg rebellion in which he was a senior commander, and then helped negotiate a peace deal with the government.

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The leaked cables show that Ag Ghali spoke with staff at the U.S. Embassy in Bamako several times about events in Mali between April 2006 and January 2010. "Soft-spoken and reserved, Ag Ghali showed nothing of the cold-blooded warrior persona created by the Malian press", according to a May 2007 cable written after one such meeting. Diplomats in Mali said Ag Ghali formed Ansar Eddine in 2012 after being rebuffed in separate efforts to head both the MNLA and his Ifoghas tribe. Diplomats also say that his links with al-Qaeda are through a cousin who is a local commander. Yet if imposing Shari'a has won Ag Ghali little popularity, it has been crucial in drawing him closer to AQIM, which he now needed for its firepower and the cash it had accumulated after years operating in the area.

Moreover, Ansar Eddine itself is no longer a single entity. On January 24, 2013, Alghabasse Ag Intalla, former chief of the political wing of the MNLA before joining Ansar Eddine, announced that he was creating his own movement, MIA (in French: Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad), while splitting from Ansar Eddine and expressing a willingness to negotiate with the Malian government and the French about a compromise in northern Mali that would satisfy the national ambitions of the Tuaregs. Intalla is not just a figurehead; his father Intalla Ag Attaher used to be the chief of the most powerful Tuareg tribe in Mali, the Ifoghas.

MOJWA (Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqya) first appeared in December 2011 when it split officially from AQIM. The main reason behind the split was the uneasiness with the fact that AQIM was dominated by Algerian-born activists. MOJWA's leader is Mauritanian-born Hamada Ould Khairou, who,

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like other jihadists, carries on his résumé a brief sojourn in Afghanistan and other places where Islamists clash with secular or "heretic" regimes. Khairou's emphasis is on action in West Africa (unlike al-Qaeda whose turf is mainly in North Africa), while stressing the fact that the members of his group are followers of Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban. However, MOJWA prefers to emphasize other West African figures such as Sheikhou Amadou, Othman Dan Fordio and El-Hajj Omar Tal. Among its key members are the Algerian Ahmed el-Talmasi, the Malian Sultan Ould Badi, and the chief of the military wing, Omar Ould Hamaha. MOJWA fighters have been active in hostage kidnapping, drug trafficking, and illicit weapons trade.

However, their first massive appearance was in Mali where they fought alongside the MNLA, AQIM, and Ansar Eddine, hijacking the Tuareg revolt to their advantage. MOJWA has controlled some cities in northern Mali, the most important of which is Gao, and now is confronting there the French expeditionary force in Mali.

The hostage drama in Algeria provided the opportunity to expose yet another splinter organization that separated itself from AQIM in late October 2012. Katibat al-Mulathamin was founded by Algerian-born Mokhtar BelMokhtar, alias Khaled Abou el-Abbas, known, inter alia, as "the one-eyed sheikh" (Al-A'war) or "Mister Marlboro" as an illustration of his main activities: smuggling, drug trafficking, and hostage-taking in the Sahel area. Mokhtar was first spotted in Gao in late 2012, which led to the assessment that his fighters had joined the battle against the central regime in Mali. Mokhtar has

been present in West Africa for more than 23 years and has successfully enlisted Mauritanians, Malians, and jihadists from Niger in his forces. According to some sources, Mokhtar is in fact a creation of the Algerian secret service, the aim of which was to break up AQIM into smaller groups easier to control. Some even said he answered to the Algerian DRS (Department of Research and Security), the successor of the notorious Algerian SM (Securite Militaire). Mokhtar founded the Katibat al-Mulathamin (Masked Men Battalion) in late December 2012.

A second structure commanded by Mokhtar is the Katibat al-Mouaqi'oun bil-Dam (Those Who Sign with Blood Battalion). It is not clear whether these are two different units or one unit with two names, or if al-Mulathamin was replaced by al-Mouaqi'oun bil-Dam. Those two units appear to have been responsible for the incident in In Amenas in mid-January 2013. The assault on the gas facility was carried out by one of his most daring commanders, Abd el-Rahman al-Nigeri (as his name shows, an Arab fighter from neighbouring Niger), known also as Abu Dajjanah, with about 40 fighters originally coming from northern Mali. Al-Nigeri, together with three other top commanders (Abu al-Bara el-Jazairi and Abdullah Ould Hmida, known as Al-Zarqawi al-Mauritani, and Mohammed Al-Amin Bouchanab, known also as Tahar Abou Aicha), were killed while fighting the Algerian special forces. From the report of the Algerian prime minister in the aftermath of the attack, we learn that the assault team of this jihadist organization included two Canadians, three Algerians, eleven Tunisians, two from Niger, Egyptians, Malians, Mauritanians, and one French citizen. Since the beginning of the events in southern Algeria, the media has mentioned the existence of additional jihadist groups. These include the Abdullah Azzam cell, the Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi cell, the Abu Leith el-Libi cell, the Martyrs cell, the Osama bin Laden brigade (affiliated to MOJWA), and Ansar el-Shari'ah, reportedly headed by Omar Ould Hamaha (the red-bearded man), which is also part of MOJWA.

The French military intervention: goals and consequences

It took barely a month for the French military to win back the whole of Mali. Never before had a modern war cost so little and generated so little casualties with almost no military confrontation between the French and the Islamists. The Islamist state North of Bamako crumbled like a sand castle facing the waves, in no time and with no resistance. The military operation launched by France against the Islamists in Mali on January 12, 2013, had a specific goal: to stop the rampant and proliferating fundamentalist destabilization effort led by al-Qaeda in the Sahel region, whose virulent anti-Western approach is aimed at replacing existing regimes with Islamic autocracies ruled solely by the Shari'a (Islamic law). Mali's fall would have directly threatened neighbouring Niger, the sixth largest producer of uranium ore in the world. Given that France depends on nuclear reactors for approximately 75 per cent of its electricity production and that most of its uranium comes from Niger, the French interest in preventing Mali's fall and the jihadist offensive's subsequent spill-over the into Niger is understandable.

Thus, the action in Mali was meant first and foremost to prevent a repetition of the Afghanistan syndrome, where the Taliban took over the country, in order to strike a blow to the terrorist organizations that had found a safe haven in the immensity of the Sahara Desert. These organizations have used this region in order to organize, train, and initiate terror attacks against local and foreign interests, not only in this particular area but also as a base for eventual terrorist actions in neighbouring problematic countries (such as Nigeria), and in European countries with a significant Muslim presence.

Military intervention, however, was a last resort choice accepted by all countries involved in the process. The common unwritten agreement was that such an intervention would occur, if at all, not earlier than September 2013, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2085. However, events on the ground

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precipitated the military option: the French move was driven by intelligence about an imminent offensive prepared by the Islamic forces aimed to complete their conquest of the remainder of Mali and establish an Islamic sultanate in Africa by turning Mali into the first Islamic fundamentalist state in the Sahel region.

In fact, the renewed Islamic military offensive was already underway and Islamic combatants had already swept into two critical towns 150 kilometres north of the capital, Bamako, when the French government decided to act. The states surrounding Mali understood that there was a region-wide Islamist threat, which explains why they supported France's military intervention. This includes the backing of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), led by Nigeria. Moreover, Algeria let French aircraft fly through its airspace in order to engage the jihadists and halt their offensive on the ground in Mali.

However, the rapidly unfolding events since the beginning of the French operation are playing into the hands of the MNLA. The MNLA has already declared itself ready to come to terms with the French on a power-sharing agreement with the central regime in Bamako. Most probably, the French will do their utmost in order to concretize such a pledge, since they know they will not stay forever in the remote areas of Mali. Only the Tuaregs can be their natural allies and provide them an umbrella to withdraw to when the time comes. Moreover, the French will experience no difficulty in convincing the ruling Captain Sanogo to accept such an arrangement which is, after all, a guarantee of the consolidation of his regime and the integrity of Mali.

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What are the lessons to be drawn from the Malian crisis?

From the military point of view, the events in Mali have proven what has been common knowledge for all armies involved in fighting guerrilla forces: The guerrilla forces will do their utmost not to engage in battles frontally with better equipped and organized armed troops. Indeed, in the Malian case, the Islamists (in this case impersonating the guerrillas) chose not to confront the French troops and their allies openly. Rather, they opted to retreat to their refuge in the deep mountainous areas of Northern Mali and to engage in guerrilla warfare at the earliest: the first contact was in In Amenas, followed by suicide bombers in Gao, attacks at the police station carried out by combatants coming with boats on the Niger river, with huge caches of explosives discovered in the same city of Gao. The Islamists tactics have reached a clear result: the population is in panic, the roads are not safe and even if liberated in the main cities, the Malians feel under siege. What is more important is the fact that the events will definitely delay the French troops withdrawal or at least will compel the French to keep a sizeable strike force or intervention force to keep the pressure on the Islamists and keep the initiative in their hands.

The In Amenas drama has indicated potential targets for the attacks of the Islamists. The latter have already initiated another attack against a yet another gas installation in Algeria (repelled by the Algerian Air Force), and attacked a convoy of troops on their way from Nigeria to Mali (killing several officers and soldiers). The European expatriates are definitely a target (the latest event in Nigeria was the abduction of seven foreign workers) as well as other facilities.

The fact that the French Authorities arrested a Malian cell in Paris would also indicate that the Islamists will try to hit at the heart of France in areas that would create a surprise for the law-keeping forces in the country. With the human infrastructure they have in Europe, U.S., South America and West Africa, the choice of possible targets by the Islamists presents a huge challenge for all intelligence services involved in homeland security.

The crisis in Mali has underlined once more that the Islamists have created an "International Legion" composed of combatants coming from Islamic countries as well as Muslims enrolled by the Jihadists in Europe and America. Those foreigners are to be found almost in every conflict in which Islamists are engaged: Algeria, Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria, etc. On the other hand, except for intelligence sharing and logistical support provided by the US, the French fought the battle on their own. Without Algeria authorizing the French Air Force to use its airspace, it would have taken weeks for the French to organize an alternative and strike in Mali. Even the African forces, supposed to join the French military effort, have not all come to Mali. The Chadians were the first to answer the call, and their contingent is the biggest after the French. The Nigerians took their time to arrive, while other ECOWAS members are still in the process of sending troops. If the anti-Islamist forces do not join forces in a universal approach to fight terrorism, then it will prove almost impossible to surmount the challenge of this danger. Without a deeply woven relationship between the parties concerned and the readiness to employ force in order to prevail, Islamic terrorism will always surprise its rivals and show that it is vibrant and kicking and beyond reach.

The French are trying to lure the UN to replace their forces on the ground with Peace-keeping forces. By doing so the French want to stress the international legitimacy of their intervention and allow them to withdraw "with honour". On the other hand, the UN peace-keeping forces are, by their very definition, peace-keeping and not war-fighting units. Without a sustainable strike force be-

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hind the UN, Mali will slide very rapidly into a situation where its towns could become targets for suicide attacks (Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria), while its main roads could remain cut because of the Islamists targeting these communication facilities.

Since Islamic terrorism represents a threat around the globe, it would be wise if the big Powers could put aside their differences and forget their problematic past (US and Russia in particular) and create an international intervention force to deal with terrorist threats diplomatically and, certainly, militarily too. The battle against piracy in the horn of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea is a good example of such cooperation.