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BEHIND MALI'S CONFLICT – MYTHS, REALITIES & UNKNOWNNS

This article presents selected issues about a military operation in Mali. On 11th January 2013, France launched Operation Serval, a military offensive in Mali. The operation is code-named after the Serval, a medium sized African wild-cat. Since the beginning of operation, French president Francois Hollande has maintained that his country's military intervention has no other goal "than the fight against terrorism"².

Although the response to the crisis in Mali has revealed the shortcomings of the multi-lateral security architecture in the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas), the African Union (AU) and the UN, the first phase of Opération Serval in Mali is assessed as having achieved its aims in the first ten days of deployment.

It succeeded in securing Bamako, stopping the terrorist advance, striking terrorist rear bases, and setting the conditions for the arrival of African troops. They have retaken terrorist-held urban areas and pushed deep into the rural strongholds. Unsurprisingly, given the training, equipment and capabilities of the French forces, they did so rapidly and efficiently.

It's too soon to declare Operation Serval a success, and there are already concerns about its eventual end, but the French-led military intervention in Mali has at least brought the country back from the brink of disaster, and opened up a space in which Malians can finally begin to chart a way forward for their nation.

Keywords: resources, interest, intervention, goal, global, terrorism, military training, economy.

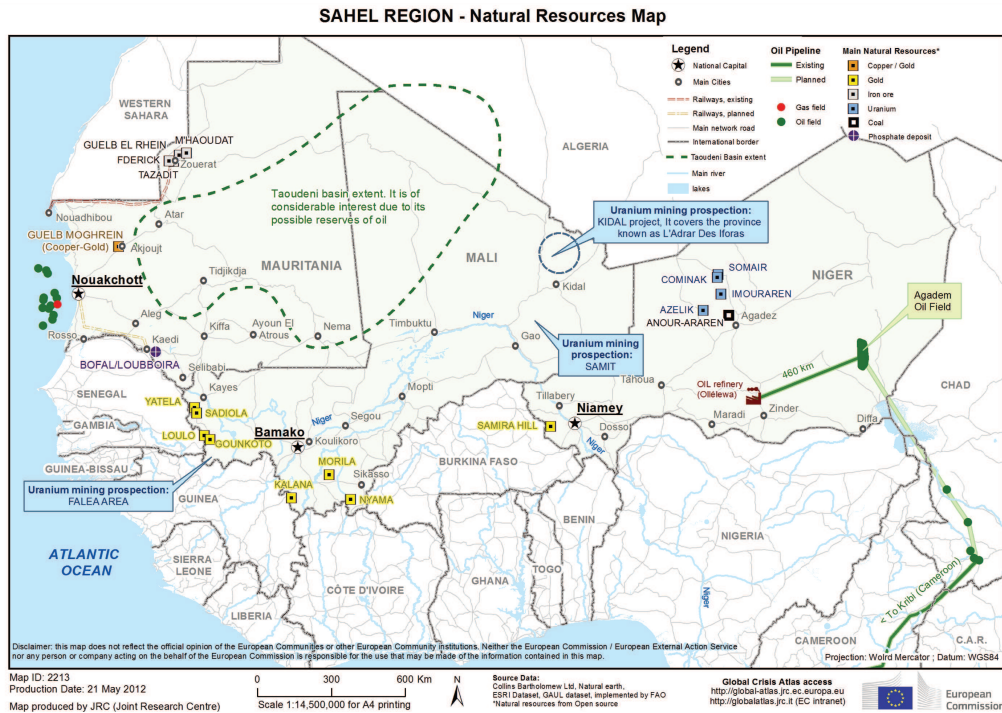
1. INTRODUCTION

This document is divided into three parts: At the beginning we will look what the most discussed French motives of Mali's intervention are. In the second part we will take into consideration neighboring countries and "global" point of view. And in the last one we will try to answer if a military deployment is the best response to a terrorist threat or if engaging in a war with terrorist actors can be counterproductive.

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² French President Francois Hollande on the French intervention in Mali, 2013.

2. THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF INTEREST IN MALI



Source: <http://fr.sott.net/article/17565-Areva-Niger-liberation-des-otages-sous-fond-de-revision-des-contrats-et-d-implantation-militaire-US-Africom> (access: 22.10.14)

Many sources say that the main reason why France, and Western countries are more broadly getting involved in Mali is that these major world powers covet the country's mineral resources. Mali's subsoil has been reported to contain abundant precious metals, oil and gas.

As far as the oil and gas are concerned, talk of Mali's "oil wealth" is premature: while Mali has potential reserves, it has zero proven reserves, and despite its government allocating 700,000 square kilometers for drilling since 2005, no wells have been drilled yet.

No major multinational energy companies have even bought drilling rights in Mali: the only companies who have such are Italy's ENI, Algeria's SONATRACH, Canada's Selier Energy, and a few other minor players with high risk tolerance. Even before the present conflict began a year ago, the Malian Sahara's remoteness and chronic insecurity made it a no-go zone for most investors.

Military intervention will not change that for the better. As for uranium in Mali, the only current mining operation is in Falea, close to the country's southwestern border with Guinea, carried out by the Canadian company Rockland.

This operation has had its own social and environmental problems, but it's nowhere near the conflict zone. Despite rumors of uranium in northern Mali, no evidence has been made public, so we cannot take it as a given that the area is "uranium rich".

Mali is among Africa's top gold producers, exporting between 36 and 60 metric tons annually over the last decade; gold is a key source of revenue for the Malian government. Mining operations are carried out in southern and western Mali by a handful of multinational companies (Randgold, AngloGold Ashanti, and Iamgold among others)³.

Given what we don't know about what lies beneath Malian soil, we can't rule out the possibility that natural resources are a factor behind foreign intervention. But starting a war is hardly necessary to get cheap access to Mali's gold or other minerals. Successive Malian governments, aware that they lack the capital and human resources to develop these deposits themselves, have cut very generous deals with mining companies and imposed minimal regulations on their activities.

2.1. Military training program

According to the Huffington Post "A primary reason for the defeat of Malian government forces at the hands of northern rebels last year was the defection to the rebels of several key Malian officers, who had been trained by the Americans as unintended consequence of the US military's ill-advised training program in the Sahel region"⁴. This would make sense if most of the US-trained officers in Mali's armed forces had defected to the rebels. But that's not the case: US-sponsored training was provided to a broad cross-section of officers and NCOs in the Malian military, of which the defectors (most of them Tuareg) made up a minority.

US-trained personnel fought on both sides of the conflict: at best the effects of their training were cancelled out, at worst they were negligible. The problem with the US military's training program wasn't that it benefited the wrong people, it's that it didn't work. Following exercises in 2009, even one of the Malian army's most elite units got poor evaluations despite lengthy collaboration with US trainers. Whatever "advantage" such collaboration may have provided, it was the last thing the Tuareg — experienced desert fighters — needed to defeat Malian government forces.

2.2. Does there exist any colonial master?

By sending troops and jets to Mali, is France merely reasserting its bygone role as the country's colonial master? Yes, says the World Federation of Trade Unions, which claims that "France continues to use the military bases it maintains in Africa in order to strengthen its role in the inter-imperialist competition and to serve the interests of its monopoly groups who are plundering the wealth-producing resources (gold, uranium etc.)."⁵

³ B. Whiehouse. *Bridges from Bamako*, 2013. <http://bridgesfrombamako.com/life-in-a-budding-West-African-metropolis> [22.10.2014].

⁴ B. Lando, *Mali – A Double Tale of Unintended Consequences*. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barry-lando/mali-double-tale-of-> Huffington Post, 2013.

⁵ *World Federation of Trade Unions*. 2013. <https://www.google.pl/search=World+Federation+of+Trade+Unions.+2013> [22.10.2014].

One Russian analyst argues that Operation Serval represents an attempt to “recolonize Africa.”⁶ Despite Malians’ warm reception for the French, similar interpretations continue to appear in the Malian press⁷.

It would be difficult to prove or disprove allegations of neocolonial or imperialist motivations in French foreign policy. Surely a great many French citizens and leaders harbor paternalistic sentiments toward their former African colonies, and surely there are economic interests at stake. But we do know that for over a year, the French government (under Presidents Sarkozy and Hollande) was extremely reluctant to intervene in Mali’s conflict, preferring instead to lend logistic and financial support to a West African regional operation.

2.3. Location between the African north and African south

All of a sudden the word “strategic” keeps cropping up with reference to Mali. “Mali is strategically located between the Arab African north and the Black African south. This largely Muslim country borders seven other countries. This makes Mali of interest to the U.S., which seeks to counter the growing Chinese economic presence in Africa”⁸.

A process of reverse reasoning appears to be at work here: If a conflict involving Western military forces is occurring somewhere that somewhere must, by definition, be “strategic.” But let’s be honest: in and of itself, Mali has no strategic value. It is the recent successes of armed Islamist groups on its soil that have made Mali matter to the rest of the world.

2.4. What about religions?

Proponents of the “clash of civilizations” thesis (a group that includes both neo-conservatives and radical jihadists, believe it or not) see Mali as the new front line in the war between Islam and the West. But at least 9 out of 10 Malians are Muslim, they are grateful for the French intervention, and they want no part of the intolerant, totalitarian project reserved for them by the coalition of Islamist groups now controlling Mali’s north. At its core, the conflict in Mali is not between Muslims and non-Muslims; it’s between Muslims with different visions of Islam, and religion is by no means the most important issue at stake.

One of the reasons the French government was so hesitant to get involved, and now insists that it’s fighting “terrorists, not Islamists” (sparking accusations in the French media of “political correctness”), is that it doesn’t want to play into the hands of those who portray what’s happening in Mali as “Islam vs. the West”⁹.

⁶ A. Mezayev, *Military Intervention in Mali: Special Operation to Recolonize Africa*. Strategic Culture Foundation, [https://www.google.pl/search+Mezayev/Military+Intervention+in+MaliSpecial+Operation+Recolonize+Africa.+Strategic+Culture+Foundation%2C+2013.\[24.10.2014\]](https://www.google.pl/search+Mezayev/Military+Intervention+in+MaliSpecial+Operation+Recolonize+Africa.+Strategic+Culture+Foundation%2C+2013.[24.10.2014]).

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ https://www.haverford.edu/generated/profiles/swing_resume.pdf[24.10.2014].

⁹ I. Rioufol, *Mali: pourquoi Hollande n’ose parler de “terrorisme islamiste”*. [https://glorieusefrance.fr/ivan-rioufol-mali-pourquoi-hollande-nose-parler-de-terrorisme-islamiste.\[24.10.2014\]](https://glorieusefrance.fr/ivan-rioufol-mali-pourquoi-hollande-nose-parler-de-terrorisme-islamiste.[24.10.2014]).

Moreover, how accurate is it to call the forces fighting against the French “Malian rebels” or to describe the conflict as a “civil war”—the command structures of AQIM and MOJWA in particular are dominated by Algerians and Mauriticians?¹⁰

Malians widely perceive these groups as foreign invaders, motivated by racism and greed as well as a perverted, even ignorant view of their faith. We cannot say that the war in Mali is primarily about natural resources, Western meddling, or religion.

We can say, however, that it is a direct consequence of state failure, which as I have argued elsewhere came about largely due to factors internal to Mali.

3. DEPLOYMENT OF MILITARY CONTINGENT TO THE MALI IS SUPPORTED BY THE UN AND THE EU

Overall, analysts agreed and said that Hollande's deployment of a 4,000-strong contingent to the former French colony, supported by the UN and the EU, was primarily to prevent the creation of a jihadist haven that could have destabilized the whole of West Africa.

Paris was also seeking to protect the thousands of French expatriates in Mali's southern regions who would have been left at the mercy of Islamist groups already holding a number of French citizens hostage.

3.1. Many economic and energetic aims

France has a strong economic presence in West Africa, particularly in Mali's neighbors of Niger and Chad. About 75 per cent of France's electric power is generated by nuclear plants that are in large part fuelled by uranium extracted from mining sites in Niger. French energy giant Arvea operates two uranium mines in Niger – the world's fifth largest uranium producer – at Arlit and Imouraren. Both sites are in Niger's northwestern desert area that is separated from Mali's region of Kidal – one of the first to fall under Islamist control in 2012¹¹.

Chad is another country that would have potentially suffered from a jihadist takeover in Mali, because is a mayor oil producer and hosts one of the biggest French military bases in Africa.

French colossus Total is among a number of companies that have acquired exploration licenses in the Taoudeni Basin, an immense oilfield that sprawls over 1,000 km (600 miles) from Mauritania across Mali and into Algeria. Much of Algeria's southern oilfields are probably connected underground with oil wells in Mali so if oil is discovered in northern Mali, in Algerian thinking this is going to reduce its own reserves. According to some analysts, Algeria has benefited from instability in Mali. Many of its domestic Islamists converged on Mali instead of wreaking havoc on Algerian soil and at the same time prevented Bamako from becoming a major oil producer¹².

¹⁰ T. Walkom, *The Star*, Canada, www.nationalnewswatch.com/author/twalkom/page/6/[24.10. 2014].¹¹ S. Lhomme, *Guerre au Mali*. www.rtb.be/info/dossier/intervention-au-mali[24.10.2014].

¹¹ S. Lhomme, *Guerre au Mali*. www.rtb.be/info/dossier/intervention-au-mali[24.10.2014].

¹² O. Bello, *South African Institute of International Affairs*, 2013. www.eldis.org/.../spotlight-series-south-african-institute-of-international-affairs. [24.10.2014].

Although Mali's main trading partners are Asian countries such as China and South Korea, the former colony continues to be the site of significant French economic investment.

France has a significant head start in terms of assembly plants in the country and French energy giants like Total control many of the downstream oil distribution networks in the country. The major energy players, the key petrol distributors, are overwhelmingly French.

If Mali is destabilized, and with it many other West African French-speaking countries where France has major economic interests, it would have negative consequences on France's overall economic wellbeing¹³.

For the time being, even though most of the states in Northern Africa have been historically within French sphere of influence, it is also predicted that the US will emerge as a dominant actor in this region in the forthcoming period.¹⁴ It is also evident that strong regional actors such as China, India and Brazil will try to get involved in the region as far as they can, due to the rich natural resources of the region. In this context, Mali comes into prominence among various states of the region, because it serves as an intersection among Africa's critical regions of Maghreb, Sahel, Sahara and the Gulf of Guinea.

4. THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT FOR THE LIBERATION

The French appear to have planned their intervention, right from the day when the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) launched a secessionist rebellion against the Malian government.

In April 2012, after capturing much of Mali's north the separatists MNLA called off their military advance as they had achieved their objective: creating a new state of Azawad. In June 2012, the MNLA which is a secular movement made up of former Libyan Tuareg militias, was confronted by two Islamic leaning Jihadists namely Ansar Dine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA). The two groups, which are allied to the Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), forced MNLA out of the key towns that make up Northern Mali. These Islamists are not separatists. Instead, they want a unitary Malian state under Sharia law.

By early January 2013, the Islamists were steadily advancing towards Bamako and had captured the towns of Mopti, Konna and Diabaly which are approximately 450km from Bamako. It is this Islamic advance which forced all parties involved, especially a demoralized Malian military, to agree to a French-led military solution.

In executing the Malian offensive, the French appear to have decided it is best to use resources from Chad's Operation Epervier and another French military rendezvous dubbed, Operation Unicorn in Ivory Coast. This is in terms of troops, intelligence and even arms.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ *Turkish Analyst Journal*. 2013. www.eldis.org/.../spotlight-series-south-african-institute-of-international-affairs[24.10.2014].

4.1. Campaign against terrorism

Along with the authorization of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) on April 25, the UN Security Council authorized French troops to continue their military campaign in northern Mali, in order to counter the threat of international terrorism emanating from the region.¹⁵

This is the latest indication that governments and multinational organizations such as NATO and the UN continue to believe a military presence can counter international terrorist threats. The so-called “war model” response to terrorism is familiar to global audiences, most starkly used by US President George W. Bush in his war against al-Qaeda, and is reinforced by terrorists who frequently characterize themselves as warriors and soldiers for their cause, engaged in a war against their targets.

By deploying troops in the face of a terrorist threat, governments are responding to a public desire for action against terrorist actors. Political leaders appear decisive and able to regain the upper hand, often in the aftermath of, or threat of, an attack. However, the disadvantages of responding with force are many and well documented, and the action can often hinder broader counterterrorism initiatives.¹⁶ Indigenous populations can feel alienated, invaded, and colonized, and civilian casualties which accompany military engagements can have a radicalizing effect on populations, causing them to sympathize and collude with terrorist groups.

From a media perspective, images of foreign troops deploying to areas of assessed terrorist activities feeds terrorist propaganda of crusades. Armed forces can also quickly lose the support of the international community or allies if their actions are perceived to be heavy handed and overzealous, as Israel has experienced with its troop presence in Gaza. Images of well-equipped, heavily armed military forces against poorly equipped and lightly protected terrorist actors can have a powerful impact, no matter how unrepresentative of the overall conflict. Terrorist organizations often thrive in the role of oppressed underdog, and pitting the technological might of a superpower force against farmers and ragtag militias wielding antique AK47s can be a public relations nightmare for countries attempting to combat terrorism.

In a 2008 study of 648 terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006, S.G. Jones and M. C. Libicki found that “military force has rarely been effective in defeating this enemy. This assessment is borne not just out of the US experience, but in global attempts to use military campaigns to counter terrorism, notably Russia’s campaign against Chechnya; India’s response in Kashmir; the UK’s deployment in Northern Ireland; and coalition force campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. A troop presence can heighten a terrorist threat, the fear of which terrorists can work to maximize.

However, the shortcomings of military action are often because the military is misemployed. Properly employed military troops can, in the short term, deny a terrorist group or individual the space to operate. In the first phase of operational deployment in 2001, the US military operation in Afghanistan was successful in denying al-Qaeda freedom of movement by ousting the regime that supported them. Military action has been most suc-

¹⁵ UN News. www.eldis.org/.../topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/k/.../index.html [24.10.2014].

¹⁶ J. H. Norwitz, *Combating Terrorism: With a Helmet or a Badge?*, www/dspace.swem.wm.edu/bistr_eam/.../MW_FinalDraftArchives050108.pdf.txt002. [24.10.2014].

cessful when the missions have been short, clearly defined and largely standalone, usually in response to a crisis or emergency.

Preventing standalone missions from becoming extended campaigns is not straightforward, and once a mission has been launched, events often unfold in unexpected ways. As far as possible, however, it is imperative to have a clear mission with objectives that are attainable by the use of armed forces and a defined exit strategy. The temptation to overreach or extend the mission once engaged is strong (Iraq example).

Short, sharp military operations have been instrumental in damaging terrorist group leaderships, interdicting supply lines, capturing operatives, and obtaining intelligence leading to the discovery and disruption of terrorist attacks, and these activities have weakened terrorist organizations enough to bring about negotiation and ceasefires¹⁷. Military operations can provide the security framework within which diplomatic and social development can occur in order to address the root causes of each terrorist group. The use of military force, it would appear, can win a battle but not a war against terrorism.

As the tactic of terrorism continues to be used by groups and individuals, counterterrorism strategies must incorporate all of the tools available. Military action will not address the root causes of terrorism in Mali or its entrenched networks and organized crime. The region is facing a multifaceted crisis of which terrorism is both a symptom and cause, and military intervention is ill equipped to address many of these challenges. However, a limited-term, clearly defined military deployment with a distinct exit strategy could create the space for political, social, and economic instability to be addressed; help restore territorial integrity; and deny terrorist actors freedom of movement. It will not remove terrorism from the country, but that should not be its mission.

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¹⁷ F. Blyth, *Global Observatory*, www/sydney.edu.au/medicine/people/academia/profiles/fiona.blyth.php. [24.10.2014].

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KONFLIKT W MALI – MITY, REALIA I NIEWIADOME

W artykule przedstawiono wybrane zagadnienia dotyczące operacji wojskowej w Mali. W dniu 11 stycznia 2013 roku Francja rozpoczęła Operację Serwal, ofensywę wojskową w Mali. Operacja o kryptonimie Serwal pochodzi od nazwy średniej wielkości dzikiego kota afrykańskiego. Od początku działalności, Francois Hollande prezydent Francji utrzymywał, że interwencja wojskowa jego kraju nie miała innego celu jak tylko "walki z terroryzmem". Mimo, że reakcja na kryzys w Mali ujawniła niedociągnięcia systemu bezpieczeństwa we Wspólnocie Gospodarczej Państw Afryki Zachodniej (ECOWAS), Unii Afrykańskiej (UA) i ONZ, to pierwsza faza Operacji Serwal w Mali jest oceniana jako ta, która osiągnęła swoje cele w ciągu pierwszych dziesięciu dni od rozpoczęcia.

Udało się zabezpieczyć Bamako, stolicę Mali, zatrzymując natarcie terrorystyczne i uderzając w terrorystyczne bazy oraz zapewniono warunki do przybycia wojsk afrykańskich. Wojsko odzyskało obszary miejskie, które były w rękach terrorystów. Zważywszy na szkolenie, wyposażenie i możliwości sił francuskich, operacja poszła szybko i sprawnie.

Jest zbyt wcześnie, aby zadeklarować, czy Operacja Serwal odniosła sukces, ale francuska interwencja wojskowa doprowadziła do sytuacji, gdzie w Mali otworzyła się przestrzeń, w której Malijczycy mogą w końcu zacząć wytyczać drogę dla swojego narodu.

Słowa kluczowe: zasobów, zainteresowanie, interwencja, cel, globalny terroryzm, szkolenie wojskowe, gospodarka.

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