

ANALYSIS

The French plan for Mali

Friday 8 February 2013, by [WHITEHOUSE David](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2013).

France’s military intervention in Mali was supposed to be about repelling “terrorists”—but it was really about advancing imperialist interests, reports David Whitehouse.

IN BARELY four weeks, French armed forces, with nominal support from Mali’s dilapidated army, have wrested control of all of the country’s northern towns from Islamist militias. The real support for the offensive—in the form of logistics and surveillance—came from the United States, Britain, Germany and Canada.

The largely Arab Islamist militias took over the North’s sparsely populated desert areas last spring after pushing aside ethnic Tuareg fighters. The Tuareg uprising, the fifth in the past 50 years, was a response to long-term discrimination and economic marginalization by Mali’s government, which is based in the Southern city of Bamako.

Three weeks into the assault that began earlier this year, French President François Hollande flew to the fabled city of Timbuktu for a photo-op. He basked in the gratitude of residents who were just emerging from under the Islamists’ harsh rule. France is Mali’s former colonial master.

The promptness of Hollande’s visit was, no doubt, the result of a calculation that northern Malians would be most friendly to the French occupation in its first days. “I want the French to stay here for even 20 to 50 years,” one Timbuktu resident told the *Wall Street Journal* [1].

Many Afghans said similar things as the U.S. forces sent the Taliban into retreat in 2001. Such sentiments tend to fade when the local residents have had some time to see their new occupiers up close.

The *Journal* also reported that most of Timbuktu’s Arab residents, a “once-sizable” minority, “fled in the days before Malian troops and French troops chased the rebels away,” fearing reprisals from other residents and Malian troops. A French human rights group accused Malian forces of dozens of summary executions in the drive toward Timbuktu [2].

The turn to persecution of Arabs is reminder of how sharp Mali’s many ethnic divisions—often conceived in racial terms—can become in times of civil conflict. The racism of Mali’s army is one of the Tuareg’s major grievances.

The Islamists are not defeated, of course, but they are beating a rapid retreat. Some are still fighting significant battles outside a few of northern Mali’s towns. The point of these fights, however, may just be to cover their flight to entrenched positions that they have prepared in the northeastern mountains along Mali’s border with Algeria.

- - - - -

AFTER THE offensive's initial sweep, the big question is what comes next. The answer depends on why the French intervened in the first place, and what they see as a favorable outcome.

Right now, France's original justification for going to war—that radical Islamists were on the verge of driving to Mali's capital, Bamako—seems especially dubious.

According to most estimates, the militias numbered about 2,000 fighters. If they chose to drive toward Bamako, they would have needed to defend a 300-mile line of supply through hostile territory and then seize control of a city of 1.8 million. An operation like that would virtually guarantee the annihilation of their forces.

The remarkable speed of the French advance also testifies to the Islamists' weakness. They may be well-armed and well funded—through kidnapping for ransom, drug smuggling and direct contributions from supporters in the Persian Gulf—but they don't have much of an indigenous base in Mali. If they take refuge in a new "Tora Bora" (the Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan), as some commentators call it, the Islamists will find it difficult to dole out their funds to lure new recruits in northern Mali, where money can buy the loyalty of penniless young men.

Left-wing journalist Patrick Cockburn offered an alternative view of France's objectives. "Tuareg nationalist insurgency, not radical Islam, is at the heart of the crisis in Mali," he wrote on CounterPunch.org [3]:

"Algeria, Libya, Niger and Burkina Faso all have impoverished and restive Tuareg minorities. Their governments pretend their main concern is the threat of Islamic fundamentalism because this presses the right buttons in Washington, London, Paris and Moscow. But the recent history of the region shows that their real concern is Tuareg separatism. The threat is all the more serious for them because, poor though the Tuareg may be, they are often living on top of great reserves of oil, gas, uranium and valuable minerals."

Canadian socialist Roger Annis put it succinctly [4]: "In the minds of the imperialists, national rights get in the way of exploiting the vast reserves of gold, uranium and other prized resources they covet."

In the terms used by the Obama administration, the territories where the Tuareg live are "ungoverned spaces" where Islamic radicals can find "safe haven." Of course, these spaces are not directly governed by existing national states—and never have been—but they are governed by local Tuareg, often backed up with state patronage.

This history helps explain why the Tuareg are armed. The Tuareg elite is always armed, because they run the place. They acquired better arms in late 2011 because of the breakup of Libya's army, in which many Tuareg had served during the reign of dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi, whose regime often resorted to pitting different populations against each other in order to rule. Better arms and the loss of military pay gave these men additional incentive to join an uprising, beyond the usual list of Tuareg grievances.

Given the decentralized nature of political power in the region, it may seem odd that French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian declared France's war aim to be "the total re-conquest of Mali." [5] Mali was never "totally conquered" in the first place. As the imperialists see it, that's the problem.

If the French can establish some accommodation with representatives of Mali's Tuareg minority—perhaps through a combination of bribery and military intimidation—they might hope to "stabilize" the region while opening it to Western exploitation.

MANY OBSTACLES stand in the way of that scenario, but France's offensive has already had a dramatic impact on the balance of political forces in northern Mali.

Before the French assault began on January 11, three Islamist forces controlled the North's population centers. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formed originally as a force opposed to the Algerian regime, is the local franchise of the international al-Qaeda network. The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which draws its members from several regional states, is an offshoot of AQIM.

The only Islamist force that is predominantly Tuareg was Ansar Dine, led by Iyad ag Ghaly.

Ansar Dine initially allied itself with the secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) when the Tuareg uprising began in the winter of 2011-12. Last spring, however, ag Ghaly used his connections with other, better-armed Islamist groups to push the MNLA out of its stronghold in Gao—a strategic town in the northeast on the Niger River.

For about six months, ag Ghaly tried to position himself as the pivotal figure in the struggle. He possessed credentials as the commander of an indigenous force—someone to be bargained with—who might be induced to break from his Islamist allies with enough Western money and promises of future political influence.

The French offensive overturned this balance of forces. The Islamists of AQIM and MUJAO were outgunned and lacked the support of the local population, so they could not remain as a significant guerrilla force in or around the towns. As the other Islamists fled, ag Ghaly immediately lost his political leverage, and his group split under the pressure of the French advance [6]. The splinter group took refuge in the northeastern town of Kidal, where the MNLA is now based.

The new group's leader, the heir to Kidal's traditional ruler, made a declaration that seemed crafted to head off an attack by French forces: "We are neither AQIM or MUJAO. We are a group of people from the north of Mali who have a set of grievances that date back at least 50 years."

For a few days, it seemed that French and Malian troops might try to take Kidal by force. The MNLA had already declared its acceptance of French intervention, but warned that its fighters would resist the takeover of Kidal if Malian forces were involved.

As of this writing, troops from Chad had joined the French to occupy the area surrounding Kidal—while engaging in fights with AQIM and MUJAO outside of town.

Chadian forces, which number 2,000, may become more important to France's plans than the 3,500 soldiers pledged by countries closer to Mali, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS troops, led by 900 from Nigeria, are untested, but Chad's troops—trained and armed by France—are experienced in combat against desert insurgents.

If the current circumstances hold for a while, the French may get their opportunity to strike a deal with Tuareg forces that promises them some degree of autonomy and a greater share in Mali's wealth—as long as Western corporations are guaranteed their own share.

Turning Tuareg armed forces into allies would suit imperial interests far better than going to war against them. Unlike AQIM and MUJAO, Tuareg forces are capable of forcing the West into a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign that would span territory in at least four countries—where they could count on support from local Tuareg populations.

The French are in a position to dictate terms of a settlement to Bamako, since the war has destabilized the Malian state and shattered its army. In fact, the Malian state may be the weakest link in France's plan. The army is despised in the North and internally splintered. An army captain, Amadou Haya Sanogo, overthrew the government last spring, and later replaced his own first choice as president.

With a military campaign under French command, matched by an enlarged troop presence in Bamako, France is the country's effective state authority. Sanogo was sidelined by France's intervention, and French troops are now garrisoned near his barracks [7].

- - - - -

FRANÇOIS HOLLANDE says that France will draw down its military presence in March as ECOWAS troops filter in, but there's no good reason to believe him. At the beginning of the year, Hollande said that French soldiers wouldn't get involved at all. When the French assault began, officials said that French combat troops would expand to 2,500. There are currently 4,000 in the country.

We can expect Mali to be under French rule at least until a new government is elected. France and the UN originally insisted on new elections in April, but because of current conditions, that date has been set back to July. The uncertainties of war could set the date back even further, especially since a legitimate election would require that northern Malians be allowed to vote.

Even after elections, ECOWAS troops are unlikely to be effective as a centralized force, and the Malian state won't suddenly become organized or respected. As *Le Monde* put it, France is in Mali "for the long haul," whatever its politicians say.

France has major backing from other Western powers, including crucial surveillance by U.S. drones based throughout North Africa. But France has put itself out front in Mali, even more than it did during Western intervention against Libya's Qaddafi. Hollande, like Nicolas Sarkozy before him, is positioning France as West Africa's "indispensable power," the one that can arbitrate disputes and determine political outcomes.

France has already played kingmaker in Mali's neighbor, Côte D'Ivoire—another former French colony. French troops based in the country intervened with force repeatedly through the last decade, culminating in 2011 with French action to assure the accession of a new president.

Even if France reaches some stable accommodation with Tuareg leaders in Mali—which is far from certain, considering all of the forces that are still in motion—it isn't clear that Western powers would be the main beneficiaries.

The West's main rival for control of the region's resources is China, which already has many corporate connections to Mali and its neighbors [8]. Aside from building railroads and other infrastructure in the region, China operates the biggest uranium mine in Niger, even though France is the country's main military partner.

Inside Mali, China has multiple projects in the works and has recently signed agreements for about \$100 million in grants and loans. The largest portion is earmarked for a dam of the Niger River in Tuareg territory near Gao [9], which would provide hydro-power and irrigation to the parched area. French troops could end up supplying security for the dam while China reaps the profits.

The situation illustrates, in a nutshell, a major quandary of the Western imperial powers. The West's military might is overwhelming, especially compared to China's. Military force and military aid can thus ensure major Western influence over weaker states. China, however, is the world's fastest-

rising economic power, and it stands poised to exploit many of the opportunities that Western guns open up.

David Whitehouse

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/02/07/the-french-plan-for-mali>

Footnotes

[1] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323701904578279340765694554.html>

[2] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324039504578261700021838738.html>

[3] <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/01/21/the-mali-trap/> Available on ESSF (article 27766), [The Tuareg Insurgency and the Mali Trap](#).

[4] <http://www.rogerannis.com/a-time-of-revenge-in-northern-mali-in-wake-of-french-invasion/> Available on ESSF (article 27802), [“A time of revenge” in northern Mali in wake of French invasion](#).

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/26/world/africa/us-weighing-how-much-help-to-give-frances-military-operation-in-mali.html?_r=0

[6] <http://hadalzone.blogspot.fr/search?q=ansar+dine+split>

[7] http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/c2f0d986-6f98-11e2-b906-00144feab49a,Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Fc2f0d986-6f98-11e2-b906-00144feab49a.html&_i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fsocialistworker.org%2F2013%2F02%2F07%2Fthe-french-plan-for-mali

[8] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barry-lando/china-business-africa_b_2468659.html

[9] <http://www.thechinatimes.com/online/2011/09/1325.html>