

Why the EU should support France in the Sahel

by Rem Korteweg



“Now what?” asked US General Carter Ham after he heard about the French assault in Mali. Europeans are asking the same question. Jihadist rebels in Mali have forced the hand of France and Europe. A regional spillover is becoming more likely. Europe should step in to avoid this scenario, yet engagement in the Sahel is fraught with problems.

Why should Europe get involved? Since the jihadist takeover of northern Mali, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated. A virulent brand of sharia is enforced including mutilation and other human rights violations; some 150,000 Malians have fled south and an equal number have migrated to impoverished neighbouring countries. A food crisis is pending.

The Western Sahel has not registered high on the list of priorities in European capitals. The primary concern for Europe however, is the presence of a terrorist safe haven in northern Mali – an area the size of the Benelux, Germany and Poland combined. Continuing turmoil, or even a collapse of the regime in Bamako, raises the spectre of violent instability stretching across the Sahel, potentially enabling jihadists in Mali and groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria or even Al-Shabaab in distant Somalia to join forces.

The recent terrorist attacks in Algeria have demonstrated the risk of spillover. Borders are porous in the Western Sahel and some of Mali's neighbours – particularly Mauritania and Niger

– are equally weak, poor and susceptible to Islamist insurgencies.

The Western Sahel is a thoroughfare for illegal migration, cocaine-trafficking and other forms of organised crime that harm European interests. Jihadists and criminal networks have coalesced and are able to operate freely across the region. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and others have made a living kidnapping and smuggling goods and people. In addition to the recent kidnappings at the Algerian gas plant, 14 European and Algerian nationals remain in the hands of jihadists.

Furthermore, the jihadist takeover of northern Mali cannot be disconnected from the recent Arab revolutions, particularly in Libya. NATO's reluctance to put boots on the ground in Libya allowed the proliferation of arms when the regime collapsed. Some of these are now in the hands of the jihadist groups and AQIM. A regional approach is therefore necessary.

President Hollande has been right to take a lead in the intervention. French nationals in

the capital Bamako need to be defended or evacuated. The proximity of French-owned uranium mines in Niger means Paris also has strategic economic interests in the region. Then there is the broader issue of demonstrating political leadership in Francophone Africa, which France still considers its strategic backyard.

The French ministry of defence says that it aims to eliminate the armed jihadist groups in Mali, yet this may not be realistic. Rather than confront the French forces directly, the jihadists are likely to retreat into the cities, initiate a guerrilla campaign or wait out the French presence. A protracted French ground assault to capture northern Malian towns like Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal is unlikely. Instead the French will aim to push back the rebel groups from the south and weaken their military capabilities. The exit strategy is to keep the jihadists down until the UN-sanctioned African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), undertaken by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), can take over.

For now, other EU states and the United States remain at arm's length. The UK, Germany, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Canada have offered support, mostly logistics. The United States has committed logistics, surveillance and reconnaissance, but will 'lead from behind' as it did during the Libya campaign. After years of operating in Afghanistan, with defence austerity biting and increasing concern over places like Syria and Iran, most Europeans and the US are reluctant to become involved in such a complex region. However, the longer it takes for AFISMA to take over, the more pressure France will exert on its European allies, especially the UK, to join the mission.

Preparations for AFISMA have been troubled. Concerns with the mission's planning, insufficient troop numbers and weather conditions have delayed its deployment. The French are now pushing for a faster pace. The plan calls for a force of 5,500 West African troops, with Nigeria, Senegal and Burkina Faso providing the lion's share. Yet lack of preparation remains a serious concern, and it is unclear whether forces from coastal, predominantly Christian, West Africa possess the military and cultural skills to operate in the desert environment of Muslim Sahel. The contribution by Chad – not an ECOWAS state, but experienced in conducting military operations in the Sahel – is welcome. Meanwhile Algeria, the region's powerbroker, is reluctant to support international intervention.

AFISMA's objective will be to support the Malian armed forces to retake control of the country. However, the government in Bamako is weak

and lacks clear leadership. While President Traoré is the interim head of state, real power resides with Captain Amadou Sanogo, an army captain who led a coup d'état in 2012. The military is a hotchpotch of several thousand troops of questionable loyalty. Military resources are so stretched that as the army gives chase to one rebel group, the resulting vacuum can be exploited by another. While the French intervention will arrest the jihadists' march towards Bamako, it may be weeks or months before the Malian military can rout them. In support of this objective the EU has decided to provide some 200 troops (separate from the French commitment) to train the ailing Malian military and a similar number to protect the trainers. Europe should prepare for a long-term commitment.

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Aside from training, the EU's priority should be to develop a political strategy to avoid the instability in Mali spilling over to fragile neighbours like Mauritania and Niger. Just as Europe is supporting political transitions in North Africa, it should commit resources to prevent the Western Sahel from descending into chaos. In March 2011, the EU adopted a strategy for security in the Western Sahel. The document details a sensible approach to support development, strengthen the rule of law and facilitate diplomacy. In line with this strategy the EU now runs a very small civilian mission in Niger (EUCAP-SAHEL) focused on fighting crime, corruption and terrorism. However, the strategy must be urgently updated to reflect the deterioration of the security situation.

A robust security dimension is missing: one in which Europe works with regional partners and institutions to build a comprehensive counter-terrorism capability with the aim to secure Mali and strengthen Niger and Mauritania. This calls for military, intelligence, justice, economic and development instruments to be joined up. France, along with EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, should cajole European states to contribute. They should also ask the US for reconnaissance, surveillance and targeting capabilities, including special forces, to help sustain the current mission. In the meantime, managing the Sahel's instability will become a European burden.

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