

How to Bring Peace to Mali and Avoid War

By

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French President François Hollande's visit to Algeria, scheduled for 19-20 December, is unlikely to be an easy mission. High on his agenda will be the situation in Mali, where armed Islamist groups seized control of the north of the country after a military coup last March in the capital Bamako. France has been pressing for an international force to oust the Islamists, but Algeria, the major regional power which borders on Mali to its south, is firmly against any such intervention. While it defends the principle of the integrity of Mali, it believes the crisis is an internal problem which should be settled by negotiation, not by force.

The dispute between France and Algeria is likely to be sharpened by the news last Monday that Cheick Modibo Diarra, Mali's prime minister – a passionate advocate of international intervention against the Islamists – was arrested as he was about to board a plane for Paris. The order for his arrest came from Captain Amadou Sanogo, leader of the coup last March, who is fervently opposed to foreign military intervention.

Northern Mali – an arid area the size of France – is the home of nomadic Touareg tribes who for decades have struggled to win autonomy, if not full independence, from Bamako. The military coup last March gave them their chance. But they had barely seized the main northern towns from a demoralised Malian army when they in turn were defeated and ousted by armed Islamists, who set about imposing on the local population a harsh version of Sharia law. Their exactions -- stoning for infidelity, amputations for theft, as well as the destruction of ancient World Heritage shrines – have aroused much anxiety in world capitals.

The fear is that these extremist Islamist movements -- AQMI (*al-Qaida au Maghreb Islamic*), MUJAO (*Movement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*) and Ansar al-Din – could turn the vast area of northern Mali into a regional base for international terrorism and trafficking in narcotics, threatening the security of neighbouring states, and posing a danger to Mali's neighbours, to Europe and even to the United States. Some evoke the spectre of another 'Afghanistan'.

On 12 October, France persuaded the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution in favour of an intervention to oust the Islamists. A month later, West African leaders at an emergency summit in Abuja discussed the military means and strategy which such an intervention would require. ECOWAS, the 15-nation West African organisation, was reported to be ready to contribute a force of 3,300 men. France and other European states were said to be preparing to train several Malian battalions which, with Intelligence from the United States, logistics from France and stiffening by ECOWAS forces would recapture Timbuktu and Gao from the Islamists and then stabilise the area to prevent the Islamists' return. Military operations were expected to begin in January 2013 before the heavy spring rains of March-April. War seemed imminent.

The last few weeks, however, have seen a change of mood. The task has come to seem daunting. The sheer size of Northern Mali's desert terrain; the weakness of local West African armies not trained for combat abroad and often preoccupied with security problems at home (such as the Boko Haram rebellion in Nigeria); the impressive military arsenal of the Islamists, much of it seized from Libya after Muammar al-Qadhafi's overthrow; the months it would take to bring the Malian army up to scratch; the widespread and widely-shared fear of being sucked into an interminable conflict, all these have tamed the ardour of those who pressed for military action.

A real damper has come from Algeria – the only country in the region with a powerful army and a capable intelligence service. The Algerian Minister of Interior and the Algerian army chief of staff have both come out firmly against intervention. Algeria's Foreign Minister, Mourad Medelci, has been canvassing support for a political solution to the crisis, winning the backing of Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu; of Mauritania's head of state, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz; and of the former Italian premier Roman Prodi,

now the UN special envoy to the Sahel ('My mission,' Prodi declared, 'is to do everything possible for peace and to avoid war.')

In an article on November 23, the Algerian daily, *Al Watan*, mocked France for pressing for military intervention in northern Mali, saying that it was behaving like a bull in a china shop.

Algeria's doubts about the wisdom of making war on the Islamists in Mali spring from its own bitter experience of civil war in the 1990s, which is said to have claimed up to 200,000 lives. Abdelmalek Droukdel, the present head of AQMI, is none other than a former Islamist who fought the Algerian army for several years. Anxious to avoid any possibility of a renewed Islamist uprising in its exposed southern region, Algeria's policy is to press for negotiations with all those in northern Mali who reject terrorism and international drug trafficking.

The assassination of the U.S. ambassador in Benghazi last September has focussed American attention on the Islamist threat to North Africa and the Sahel. American drones are no doubt already monitoring the area. Yet some of the most sensible remarks about the situation in Mali have come from General Carter Ham, head of AFRICOM, the command HQ of American forces in Africa. In an interview with *Le Monde* on 17 November, he declared that a purely military approach to the situation in northern Mali was doomed to fail. It was necessary, he said, to place the possibility of military action within a wider strategy. The first requirement was a political negotiation together with humanitarian assistance. The borders of Mali's neighbours, such as Algeria, had to be made secure. The world should prepare for military intervention but it was by no means inevitable.

Instead, he proposed that the Bamako government respond to the political aspirations of the Touareg and of other groups in northern Mali. 'If the population in the north came to believe that the government would give due attention to its demands, it might then act in such a way as to make AQMI leave the region -- perhaps even without resorting to force,' he declared.

The Sahel has been neglected by the international community for far too long. It is a poor part of the world made poorer by drought, violence and the

corruption of local elites. Rather than military intervention, Mali needs political reconciliation underpinned and promoted by massive development aid, sustained over several years. This may be the only way to persuade young men, desperate for a better life, to leave the Islamist groups and give up hostage-taking and drug smuggling which have so far have been their only way to make a living.

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