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Mali's Crisis, Obama's Opportunity

[G. Pascal Zachary](#) Apr 10 2012, 3:07 PM ET

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The West African country has been divided by northern rebels with ties to an al-Qaeda offshoot. Is this a moment for the U.S. to step up?



Malian soldiers walk in a rally in the capital. *Reuters*

The violence began in the West African country of Mali when junior officers overthrew Amadou Toumani Toure, the elected president. The coup leaders, once in power, said that Toure had to go because he had failed to effectively respond to the rebellion of the Tuareg peoples, who dominate the country's vast but sparsely populated northern region. In response, Tuareg fighters, some of whom had served as part of Qaddafi's private army in his waning months as Libya's dictator, seized provincial towns in the north, including Timbuktu, the center of Mali's legendary ancient civilization. On Friday, the Tuaregs declared an independent state, which they call Azawad.

The world is struggling to find the right response. France, the former colonial master, insisted it would not take unilateral military action to prevent the partition between Mali's north and south. Meanwhile, the coup leaders forced President Toure to "officially" resign, claiming that they would transition the country back to electoral democracy under the leadership of the parliamentary speaker (who had fled to neighboring Burkina Faso).

Mali is mainly desert. In the long period of French rule, stretching from before World War I into the 1960s, Mali was an integral part of a West African zone that included both the ports of Dakar and Abijan. In addition to supplying food and resources to the Francophone cities on the western coast, Mali also supplied labor. Even today, many Malians seek work not only in Dakar and Abijan but in France. Remittances have long kept Malian living standards, if not buoyant, than basic.

As an independent nation, Mali has endured structural disadvantages, not the least of which has been lack of direct access to large cities and ocean transport. The interior Saharan region -- with its now rising security risks and its sheer vastness -- must be supported by a nation with a rather small population (about 14 million people) and a miniscule national budget. In colonial times, French West Africa could essentially subsidize the costs of maintaining Niger, northern Burkina, and the far north of Mali. No longer.

Self-reliance for Mali has largely been a fool's game as a result. With one of lowest percentages of arable land of any country in the world, Mali has long been among the poorest places on the planet. But that's changing, and Mali is becoming more important in the world.

Mali is a second-tier producer of gold and one of a group of West African countries who together export significant amount of cotton. Both gold and cotton are trading at historic highs. In February, two exploration companies, one Canadian and the other Algerian, signed an agreement to begin prospecting for oil in northern Mali.

It's also a geographic bridge between Muslim North Africa and the more Christian sub-Saharan. In recent years, Mali has quietly been [enlisted](#) in U.S. efforts to undermine Islamic fundamentalists who seem, rather unexpectedly, to have formed an alliance with the Tuareg.

In the vast deserts of the Sahara, the Tuareg long have resisted rule from Bamako, where the ruling political elite maintain deeper and more durable ties with Paris, the old master, than they do with the Tuareg. In the 1990s, a series of settlements appeared to resolve the long-running, low-level violence between the Tuareg and the Malian army. The war officially ended in 1996, but the underlying conflict apparently did not. Perhaps because of the blowback from the overthrow of Qaddafi, the terms of Tuareg political aspirations have altered.

France, which gave up its official colonial status but kept much of the influence, could help end the conflict. If it were willing to commit troops, it could semi-permanently partitioning the country in the same manner of Ivory Coast, where the intervention of French troops froze a political stalemate between Muslim north and Christian south. In Mali, virtually everyone is Muslim, so the cleavages divide along ethnic and geographic lines. Southern Mali, running along the Savannah rim of the West African interior, is vastly different from the empty arid northeastern part of the country, which mostly borders the North African countries of Algeria and Mauritania.

This wide swathe of the Sahara, it just so happens, plays a growing role in the Pentagon's African military strategy, which is increasingly preoccupied with the al-Qaeda shoot-off that operates there under the name al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The Pentagon's "trans-Sahara" exercises aim to constrain, if not eradicate, the violent fundamentalist groupings there. It was as part of a Pentagon trans-Saharan initiative that Mali's coup leader, Amadou Sanogo, a captain in the army, previously participated in several U.S.-funded training exercises, according to the Pentagon's Africa Command.

Perhaps because of the complexities of the Malian predicament -- and the growing reach of the Pentagon into Saharan affairs -- the French foreign minister, Alain Juppé, last week carefully explained that while the French might help with logistics or training, "there is no question of putting French soldiers on Malian soil." Juppé suggested that, with six French hostages currently held by the Tuareg- AQIM, "we are clearly a target."

Juppe added, "It appears that this extreme Islamist-Jihadist faction is taking the upper hand among the different Tuareg factions."

With the French bowing out and the U.S. taking a bigger lead in West African security issues, is this America's fight? Not directly, of course, but that's not how the U.S. does it anymore. In combating al Shabab in Somalia, the Obama administration crafted what at first seemed like a fanciful alliance out of Kenyan, Ugandan, Ethiopian, and African Union forces. Might the same strategy work in Mali?

For President Obama, the Mali crisis comes after a long string of complex emergencies in Africa, from the legal separation of north and south Sudan, to U.S. participation in the overthrow of Libya's government, to the effort to pacify Somalia, to the effort to capture or kill Joseph Kony. An independent northeastern Mali, landlocked between Algiers and Mauritania to the North and Niger and Burkina to the South, could create a relatively safe haven for violent extremists. That's no small risk for Obama's African security strategy, which already has enough challenges and struggling states to worry about without adding this new one.

Obama could use a boost to his Africa efforts, the legacy of which has been more military than humanitarian, more about security than development. Predecessor George W. Bush orchestrated a global response to HIV/AIDs and vastly expanded the availability of anti-retroviral drugs. Obama, by contrast, has emphasized African self-reliance, inviting entrepreneurs and technocrats to the White House, celebrating African talent, calling for mutual benefit -- as opposed to charity -- as the basis for U.S.-sub Saharan relations. . Obama has resisted using force in previous African crises, namely Ivory Coast and Sudan, patiently working towards political settlements that have (so far) broken his way.

Mali could well break Obama's carefully cultivated mold on African affairs. If the U.S. did decide to get involved in stemming the conflict, it would likely have to rely on African Union soldiers, who often fight effectively but tend to get off to slow starts. The Sahara represents an enormously difficult logistical and tactical challenge for the African Union, even if the AU did accept the rationale of intervening directly in Mali.

Obama, in the end, may find a proxy war in Mali impossible to stage. The terrain of northeast Mali bears eerie similarities to that of Iraq and Yemen. U.S. drones, supported by conventional forces, could gradually reduce the Tuareg fighters' hold on the region, as well as that of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. For a President bent on forging new methods of war-fighting -- more high-tech solutions and fewer (or even zero) boots on the ground -- the heart of the Sahara desert could provide a test-bed for the latest in high-tech war.

Mali's partition, and the question of who will lead its breakaway northern state, matters a great deal on its own. But, with France stepping back in the region and the U.S. stepping up, it could also be a turning point in the relationship between sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world.

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Guy Lankester • 11 months ago

Some interesting perspectives. Big question is what have the US army been doing in Mali for these past few years? They arrived before there was a problem, since 2009 the problem of Al Qaeda has grown without anyone doing anything about it. The US are supposedly there to train in 'counter terrorism' but they seem to have forgotten to teach the Malians that they need ammunition and to know have had no restricting effect on Al Qaeda, so why are they there? They can't even tell when the country is about to implode in a coup or a rebellion, both of which caught all the "intelligence" agencies out. Now the US is letting its ally Algeria call the shots. Algeria directs the islamist groups. isn't it strange that the islamists and the international world are on the same side in this - they don't want an independent Azawad. The Tuareg have rebelled partly because of the insecurity in their midst with Al Qaeda. Now Al Qaeda is entering the game in Timbuktu and the world is singing their song. Al Qaeda in the Sahara is essentially a foil for the drugs trade and the keeps the corrupt status quo in place. The international world wants to return the Tuareg to this position. . It is time the view from America started questioning the US role in all this. For more check my blog: www.fromhere2timbuktu.co.uk

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Abdoulaye Niang • 11 months ago

In a paper on Crise Sociale et le Mali: Une opportunité à saisir... I argued that a Sahara Security Co-Entreprise could be established with 40 percent of security resources from African Union/ECOWAS, 30 percent from the strategic partner AFRICOM and 30 percent from a pool including European Union, China, Russia, India,... The Co-enterprise will be under the command of ECOWAS.

The base should be in Tessalit and the main mission is to fight transnational criminality: drug trafficking, kidnapping, AQMI, Ansar Eddine. I believe the Administration of Obama should take advantage of the Crisis in Mali to "clean the Sahara Regions and eliminate the negative influence of France.

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Olman2012 • 11 months ago

For heavens sake, leave the Tuareg ppl alone. Finally they have an opportunity to have their own country.

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Julian Sul → Olman2012 • 11 months ago

Sir, henceforth, please avoid making silly comments such as that one. Mali belongs to the Malians, all Malians I dare say and not simply to one ethnic group who makes only 10% of the population. The Tuareg have no right. no legitimacy to do what they

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