

Will France's Bombing of Mali Lead to a New Thirty Years War?

by Lawrence K. Freeman

Jan. 15—France's military bombardment of northern Mali on Jan. 11, with Gazelle helicopter gunships, Mirage jets, and over 500 troops on the ground—ostensibly in response to pleas by the Mali government to help halt the movement of jihadists towards the nation's capital, Bamako—has abruptly changed the dynamic, not just in Mali, but in the whole West Africa, Sahel-Sahara region.

With no long-range strategy, ambiguous short-term goals, and the open-ended nature of this military intervention, the real motives for France's heavy-handed assault are in doubt, since the former colonial power still controls the economies of the Francophone countries through the Franc CDF currency. More significantly, the dangerous consequences of France's action, supported by the United States and Great Britain, are that, rather than terminating or even containing the problem in northern Mali, they will instead spread and intensify the conflict beyond what most people can imagine: creating continuous war, chaos, and destruction that could last for decades, and kill millions through disease, starvation, and internecine strife.

While France is taking the lead, the other two Western nations that made up the trio that overthrew the government of Libya and assassinated its President, Muammar Qaddafi, are fully engaged.

As was the case in the Libya "regime change" campaign, the U.S. is committed to providing the French with intelligence; surveillance, and logistical support, and most likely, armed drones; help in transporting additional French troops; and aerial refueling of French jets. Even before Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced Jan. 14 that "We have promised them [France] that we will work with them to cooperate with them and to provide whatever assistance we can to try to help them in this effort," military experts believed that the U.S.'s AFRICOM provided assistance for France's initial military deployment, although the U.S.

is "legally" prohibited from directly aiding the Mali government.

Britain provided RAF transport planes to ferry French troops into Mali. The London *Daily Telegraph* of Jan. 14 reported that British Prime Minister David Cameron told the French, "We'll help you; we'll work with you, and we'll share all intelligence we have with you, and try to help you with what you are doing." The *Telegraph* added that the British are considering contributing troops to EU training missions.

France intends to have 2,500 troops on the ground in this, its third incursion into an African nation in two years (Ivory Coast and Libya in 2011). France will not be able to depart quickly from this adventure. After five days of air strikes, the jihadist extremists have not been stopped—which is not surprising, since all qualified military experts know that air power alone will not defeat this well-armed force, which knows how to survive in the desert. Yet, if France launches a ground war attack, that could well be the tripwire for a wider, more deadly conflict, in which the jihadist extremists will use the foreign invasion as a rallying cry for a global holy war.

After France's action, instead of preparing for a properly led and trained ECOWAS (Economic Community Of West African States) deployment of 3,300 soldiers to intervene in Mali later this year, several African countries—including Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal—have or will shortly send several hundred troops into Mali. But no one is confident that these forces have the training, skills, or equipment necessary to win ground battles in the northern Mali desert.

Libyan Adventure Created This Crisis

Mali, a former French colony, has suffered a century of severe droughts, and decades of conflicts with the Tuareg nomads who reside in the deserts of Libya, Algeria, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The Tuaregs consider

northern Mali a sacred place. While it is beyond the scope of this article to review the history of the Tuareg people in Mali, the French are culpable for carrying out the British colonial policy of manipulating “geographical-ethnic” differences between the peoples of northern and southern Mali.

However, the dramatic turn of events that precipitated the current lethal crisis was, first of all, the illegal murder of Libyan President Qaddafi on Oct. 20, 2011—with the complicity of U.S., French, and British heads of state. According to *Time* magazine correspondent Vivienne Walt: “Within hours after Gaddafi’s death, many ethnic Tuareg fighters from northern Mali who fought alongside Libyan forces as mercenaries re-treated across the Sahara carrying as much weaponry as they could stuff into their pick-up trucks,” from “over a thousand arms depots.”

With these weapons and supplies, the Tuaregs began their rebellion in northern Mali in January 2012. After the military coup in Bamako in March, the North was completely taken over by a coalition of sorts that included what we have come to call the al-Qaeda of the Maghreb-AQIM, many of whom were also battle-tested, i.e., trained by fighting the war in Libya. As Ross Douthat correctly highlighted in a *New York Times* op-ed (July 7, 2012), “Libya’s Unintended Consequences”: “If the interventionists want to claim credit for saving lives in Benghazi, they need to acknowledge that their choices may have ended up costing lives in Timbuktu. If they want to point to the immediate consequences of the Libyan war as vindication for a ‘responsibility to protect’ doctrine, they need to acknowledge the second order consequences for people who will never have the benefits of our protection.”

Hypocrisy in War

The truth of the matter is actually far worse than generally acknowledged. It is documented beyond doubt that President Obama’s active collusion with al-Qaeda forces in Libya to eliminate the Qaddafi regime facilitated the assassination of four Americans in Benghazi, including Amb. Chris Stevens. And, Obama is now allied with same al-Qaeda and related fighters in Syria to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad, which is bringing the world to the very edge of nuclear war with Russia and China.

The Salafist and Wahhabite extremists, who are the backbone of the jihadist extremists that have taken over

northern Mali, are deployed and funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with full knowledge and acceptance by the British royals and their front man, Tony Blair, who is advising Obama. Ask yourself this: How is it that the targeted enemy of France, the U.S., and the U.K. in Mali—the AQIM et al.—is linked to same networks that were “allied” with the West for regime change in Libya, and now in Syria?

No Military Solution

There is no military solution per se to this type of conflict. The number of “kills,” either from Obama’s drones or from the bombs dropped by French jets, will not win this war, much less the hearts and minds of the people. The utter failure of Obama’s counter-terrorist training program in Mali over the last four years, at a cost of \$500-600 million—in which soldiers who had been trained by U.S. forces broke ranks, deserted, and went over to the other side with their training and equipment, leading to the March mutiny/coup in Bamako—should serve notice of the need for a complete transformation in our military’s strategic thinking.

Every serious strategic thinker, who truly cares about the fate of Africa, knows that it is the lack of physical-economic progress (as opposed to making fast money) that is the underlying cause for the weakness of African governments, not only in the Sahel, the Sahara, and West Africa, but across the whole continent. Alienated, unemployed youth, and adults, who become the ready recruits for the jihadist extremists, are the direct result of the lack of economic growth.

Africa has plenty of water, but is bereft of the infrastructure to develop its resources and transport water to arid regions, such as the development of the Niger River’s internal delta in Mali. Desertification and food shortages can be reversed with water management/infrastructure, and by outlawing the free-trade dictates of the World Trade Organization, that prevent nations from growing food to feed their populations, and claiming that subsidizing the agriculture sector will harm the financial markets, as if that were even pertinent.

There is no lack of plans for great regional and continental infrastructure projects that would transform African nations and turn them into gardens of development. It is precisely this optimistic intent to create a better future that should form the underlying thinking for a strategic policy of Africa, to replace the ugly, senseless brutality of war.