

French Success in Mali May Herald “War of the Shadows”

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It is not exactly blitzkrieg in the desert, but French commanders can be well pleased with the way their operation in Mali has played out so far.

Pressed to intervene when the Malian army was at the point of collapse, French air power and special forces have helped to stabilize the situation on the ground, while French troops have secured vital staging areas to enable African troops to begin to deploy.

Retaining the initiative, the French have pushed northwards and have now secured the three main towns of northern Mali – Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal.

Securing population centres and destroying the militant Islamists’ main logistical bases means the first phase of the conflict is now over.

The French drive northwards, spear-headed by lightly armoured formations (a French army spokesman says even parachutists are being used), is something that the militant groups could not really counter.

Confronted by well-equipped ground units and air power, they sought to preserve as much of their forces as they can, hoping that they can “disappear” into the vastness of northern Mali’s empty spaces – an area larger than metropolitan France.

France clearly intends to do as much damage to these groups as possible before handing over routine security duties to Mali and its African allies, who have pledged a sizeable force.

But it will take considerable assistance from outside with logistics, communications and intelligence to enable these troops to do anything more than simply garrison towns.

Regional Upheaval:

This then is the war you can see. But there is potentially another war that as yet has really not been joined. This could be a “war of the shadows” – bomb-attacks, raids, assassinations.

Islamist forces have simply melted away in the face of the French advance. But one concern is that they may take refuge in mountainous and inaccessible areas near to the country’s porous borders, seeking to mount hit and run attacks to challenge the Malian authorities’ control.

It will be some time before life in northern Mali returns to normal. Fighting such a war would require very different skills and equipment, with the onus very much on intelligence gathering and the ability to strike fleeting targets rapidly. Such a war could be more akin to the way the US military has used drones in Yemen and Pakistan.

And that is a form of warfare for which France alone does not have the necessary capabilities.

There is also another set of difficulties for the French which relate to the internal situation in Mali. The country has a variety of political problems – the Tuareg uprising in the north, for a start, which opened the way for the Islamist seizure of a significant part of the country. This is now being rolled back, but some accommodation with the Tuareg to address their concerns may be the key to any lasting settlement in Mali.

Mali's Main Islamist Militants:

Ansar Dine – homegrown movement with a number of Tuareg fighters who returned from Libya after fighting alongside Muammar Gaddafi's troops.

Islamic Movement for Azawad – an offshoot of Ansar Dine which says it rejects terrorism and wants dialogue.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – al-Qaeda's North African wing, with roots in Algeria.

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) – an AQIM splinter group whose aim is to spread jihad to the whole of West Africa.

Signed-in-Blood Battalion – an AQIM offshoot committed to a global jihad and responsible for Algerian gas facility siege.

Mali Crisis Key Players:

It is also easy to forget that prior to this conflict the interim civilian government in Mali was struggling to find its feet after a military coup. Finding a governing formula by which legitimate civilian authorities in the capital, Bamako, can extend their remit throughout the country will be no easy task, and will not be helped by reports of reprisals against Tuareg civilians by Malian troops.

Beyond Mali itself there are wider regional problems – instability in the Sahel more generally; a heady mix of poverty and drought, feeding the Islamist embers; all compounded by the ready supply of weaponry that has come from Libyan arsenals in the wake of the downfall of Col Muammar Gaddafi's regime.

It is noteworthy that the Algerian government was highly skeptical of the Western intervention to topple Gaddafi, fearful of the regional consequences of his demise – fears that appear to have been borne out. In the campaign against Islamist extremism, this region has been very much the forgotten front.

In the wake of the Malian upheaval and the recent hostage crisis in neighbouring Algeria – where militants seized a gas plant, killing at least 37 foreign workers – it is no longer forgotten. France chose to intervene in Mali and it may come to see its coat caught in the mangle of the region's wider upheavals. A counter-insurgency campaign in the vast

spaces of northern Mali could well require a French military role for some time. France got into Mali at short-notice. Getting out may be quite another matter.