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OPERATION SERVAL

A swift intervention with a small footprint in Mali

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In January 2012, Tuareg separatists from the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), backed by Salafi-jihadi groups al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine, attacked government outposts in northern Mali, kicking off a separatist insurgency. By early April, the coalition of separatist and jihadi fighters had forced the retreat of the Malian military, captured the towns of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu (the major population centers in northern Mali), and imposed a harsh form of *Sharia* (Islamic law). Although the rebel offensive was predictable, not enough was done to prevent it.

While the international community dithered, the rebels gained strength in the north. In early January 2013, perhaps as a preemptive strike before an effective international force could be mustered, Tuareg rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghali¹ sent a column of fighters south toward the capital, Bamako. To the credit of French President Francois Hollande, the French immediately sought and gained permission from the government in Bamako to launch Operation Serval on January 11, 2013.

The U.S.-French intervention in Mali in 2013 is notable for its fast, measured, and efficient approach. About 4,000 French troops—supported by U.S. intelligence, aerial refueling, and strategic lift for heavy combat forces—saved the capital city of Bamako from collapse and effectively quelled a jihadi-backed separatist uprising.² Intent on keeping a small footprint and avoiding the impression of a European occupational force, Operation Serval succeeded on both counts. The integration of a pursuant United Nations peace-keeping force (largely composed of African nations) in the major cities along the Niger River and a European Union training mission to rebuild the Malian Army—along with continued U.S.-French operations in northern Mali—effectively contained the threat of AQIM remnants in Mali and throughout North Africa.

This chapter discusses the causes of the crisis in Mali in 2012–2013. It then details the multiple phases of the French operation to halt the jihadi advance, reclaim control of northern Mali for the central government in Bamako, and weaken the jihadi threat in the country. U.S. support to the French, augmented by important roles played by the United Nations and the European Union, provides a model of allied and multilateral cooperation.

The 2012 crisis: collapse of the government and the early international response

Mali has long been a fragile state weakened by a recurring separatist problem in the north and Islamist infiltration from Algeria. The alliance of convenience between Tuareg nationalists and Salafi-jihadi groups led to a separatist offensive in 2012 and the collapse of the Malian military and government.³

On January 17, 2012, Tuareg separatists from the MNLA, opportunistically backed by AQIM and Ansar Dine, attacked a government outpost in Ménaka, a town in the Gao region in eastern Mali, forcing the military to retreat.⁴ The rebels pursued their offensive against government bases in Tessalit and Aguelhok near the Algerian border, where the military—which did not receive adequate logistical support and ammunition from the central government—lost 50 soldiers.⁵ Fighting intensified and spread south to Anderamboukane, near the Niger border, and Léré, south of Timbuktu. By March 11, Tessalit fell, followed by Aguelhok.⁶ On March 30, Kidal fell, Gao fell the following day, and Timbuktu a day later.⁷

On April 6, the MNLA declared independence for Azawad—the name they gave to the territory they claimed in the northern half of Mali—and proclaimed a unilateral cease-fire.⁸ In less than three months, a small force of about 2,000–6,500 militants belonging to disparate groups with divergent goals took over half of Mali.⁹

The reigniting of the Tuareg rebellion and the rapid collapse of the Malian military caused consternation in Bamako, Paris, and Washington, not least of which because the Malian Army had received extensive counterterrorism training from the United States. They had failed to perform under pressure. The sudden defeat of the army also ignited popular and army discontent in Bamako. Wives of soldiers slaughtered in Aguelhok stormed the presidential palace, and troops became restive.¹⁰

On March 22, the unrest culminated in a coup against the sitting president, Amadou Toumani Touré, led by Malian Army Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo.¹¹ In his inaugural speech, Sanogo denounced the lack of resources, leadership ineptitude, and political corruption. Sanogo also promised a government of national unity and a return to democracy as soon as possible. The coup drew widespread condemnation from the United States, France, the European Union, the African Union, and the United Nations, leading to the cessation of all U.S. assistance programs.¹² The coup did not, however, slow or stop the rebels' advance; army units fled, leaving tons of American-provided weapons, ammunition, and equipment to the enemy.

Meanwhile, the jihadi factions turned on the MNLA. Through combat operations, intimidation, and subordination, the jihadi factions managed to marginalize the more secular fighters and wrest control of Azawad—the rebel-claimed portion of Mali. By the summer of 2012, three Salafi-jihadi factions controlled the major northern cities: AQIM controlled Timbuktu and its region, Ansar Dine controlled Kidal, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) controlled Gao.¹³

The jihadi factions imposed a brutal version of *Sharia*, contrary to the recommendation of AQIM's leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel. Droukdel had recommended imposing *Sharia* gradually to keep the population's support or at least complacency.¹⁴ He also feared that the quick implementation of a harsh version of *Sharia* would provoke the international community into intervening.¹⁵

Several factors led to the crisis in 2012, beginning with Mali's ongoing struggle with Tuareg nationalism. The Tuaregs—a large Berber ethnic confederation who inhabit the Saharan regions of North Africa—are a small minority within Mali, but they are well organized politically.¹⁶ The nomadic pastoralist Tuaregs live in the north and have been in recurring conflict with Bamako since Mali gained independence from France in 1960.¹⁷ Bamako's agricultural policies—such as land privatization and irrigation—diverge from the Tuaregs' nomadic traditions, leading to conflicts over land usage.¹⁸

The central government failed to properly expand services, economic opportunities, and investment in the north.¹⁹ As Bamako agreed to greater autonomy, the government felt even less incentive to provide services, creating resentment among the local population. Investment plans designed to jumpstart economic development in the north never fully materialized.

The Libyan Civil War in 2011 boosted the Tuaregs' prospects across North Africa. Many Tuareg nationalists who had fled Mali for Libya after several failed revolts dating back to the 1960s returned to Mali as Muammar Gaddafi's Libyan regime collapsed.²⁰ Battle hardened and well armed with weapons and ammunition, they saw an opportunity to take revenge on Bamako. "With our new arms and equipment,

we have a military capability that is superior to the Malian Army,” said a spokesman for the Tuaregs in Paris in December 2011.²¹

Compounding the threat, Algerian Salafi-jihadi fighters had found refuge in the sparsely populated regions of northern Mali in the aftermath of the Algerian Civil War that ran from 1991–2002. Lacking the resources to remove these fighters from Malian territory, President Touré’s government entered into a tacit “pact of non-aggression” with the jihadis because it considered the jihadi threat less of a risk than Tuareg nationalism.²²

With this mindset, Touré agreed to the 2006 Algiers Accord to put an end to the third Tuareg rebellion. By the terms of the accord, the Malian Army was to drastically reduce its presence in northern Mali out of respect for Tuareg local rule. This, in effect, allowed AQIM greater freedom of movement. In 2009, when Touré decided to reestablish control over the north, the operation failed. Touré reverted to his stance that jihadis did not pose a serious threat to Mali, stating, “These threats are not born in Mali, and they do not target Malians. These people are not even from Mali.”²³

As both camps strengthened, they also moved closer. AQIM pushed its members to marry into the most prominent Tuareg tribes to co-opt their loyalty, protection, and support.²⁴ Meanwhile, Iyad ag Ghali, a long-time secular-leaning leader of the Tuareg movement, came back from his mission at the Malian Consulate in Jeddah converted to extremist Wahhabist orthodoxy.²⁵ After losing his bid for the direction of the MNLA, he founded Ansar Dine in accordance with his newfound religious beliefs and reestablished ties to his purported relative Abd al-Karim at-Targui, leader of a small AQIM *katiba* (military brigade).²⁶ Such ties helped these disparate groups push the Malian military out of northern Mali but were not enough to build a lasting coalition.

The international community proved unable to assist Mali’s government in developing a coherent and decisive response. The French government was eager to respond but wary that unilateral action would be perceived as neo-colonialist and backfire. The French told their American counterparts they wanted to keep an “African face” on the mission as much as possible but were hoping for a United Nations-assessed peacekeeping operation that was not forthcoming. It thus settled on a lead-from-behind-strategy by supporting a poorly supported African-led military response.²⁷

Algeria refused to support any form of international intervention, as it viewed the region as within its sphere of influence.²⁸ By far the most capable army in the region, the Algerians also refused to take any significant military action against the rebels. The Algerian government thought it could control Iyad Ag Ghali and split Ansar Dine from the rest of the jihadi factions.²⁹ Algeria launched unilateral diplomatic talks for that purpose, which achieved little to nothing. Meanwhile, the new Malian government, under the leadership of Sanogo, did not think a foreign intervention was warranted, as it suspected an intervention would eventually lead to his ouster.³⁰

The United States government, led by its ambassador in Bamako and its African Affairs Bureau of the State Department in Washington, blocked U.S. contact with any part of the army while coup leader Sanogo was still the “power behind the throne,” even as the AQIM threat steadily increased in the north.³¹ The ineffectiveness of the African Union mission allowed AQIM to strengthen its forces.

Michael A. Sheehan, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, traveled to the region in the spring of 2012 and met with the U.S. ambassador in Mali in an attempt to get U.S. advisors back into the country to prepare trusted army units (such as the loyalist Red Berets) to combat the coming AQIM threat. The ambassador and the State Department made it clear that it was not possible under the current political conditions. The priority was to move forward with new elections and install a legitimate government before reengaging with the military.³²

Frustrated in Mali, Sheehan had more success in Niger. In discussion with Ambassador Bisa Williams about the growing AQIM threat, Sheehan used a map of North Africa to describe how Niger was at the center of a gathering storm and would be an ideal location for U.S. intelligence aircraft. Williams agreed

and told Sheehan that the Nigerien prime minister was very concerned about AQIM and Boko Haram forces in and around Mali and might be amenable to supporting U.S. efforts.³³

A meeting was arranged the next day, and the prime minister agreed. None of the discussion had been pre-approved by Washington or by lower-level officials in the government of Niger; the idea was raised by the senior diplomat in Niger and immediately accepted by the prime minister. It is unlikely that the government bureaucracies of either nation, if given the chance to provide input on the concept, would have approved the idea so rapidly. Within months, the United States deployed surveillance aircraft to Niamey International Airport. These drones would be instrumental in providing the French with invaluable intelligence from the start.³⁴

In July 2012, while addressing a security conference at the Aspen Institute in Colorado, Sheehan stated that “we cannot allow al-Qaida to sit in ungoverned places,” arguing that the United States needed to accelerate its efforts to support the government in Mali as well as its army.³⁵ No decisions were forthcoming in Washington, however, and the State Department position prevailed, resulting in the continued isolation of the Malian Army.

In December 2012, as the crisis grew, Sheehan traveled with Deputy Secretary of State William Burns to Algeria. The Algerian government made it clear that it was unwilling to move, either unilaterally or as part of a regional force, outside of its borders—notwithstanding that many of the rebel groups leaders were Algerian.³⁶

Yet the U.S. government doubted the capabilities of an African-led force. To unmistakably convey her point, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice reportedly called the French plan “crap.”³⁷ To be fair to the French, they were quite aware of the weaknesses of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali but were unable to get a United Nations peacekeeping operation approved by the Security Council as the United States objected on budgetary concerns.

In addition to U.S. budget concerns, the United Nations secretary general also expressed his apprehension about a potential counterterrorism mission that might be more than the United Nations could handle. The African Union and Economic Community of West African States remained concerned about the deteriorating situation and continued to agitate for an international response to the crisis while they put together an ill-equipped and poorly trained International Support Mission that was clearly not up to the task.

It took nine months for the United Nations to adopt Resolution 2085, authorizing the African-led International Support Mission to Mali under United Nations Chapter 7 on December 20, 2012.³⁸ This operation was not a United Nations-assessed operation, however, which meant it would not guarantee funding and support to the ground forces. The force, supported by voluntary contributions, was a model doomed to fail and never became a significant factor.

In April 2013, after the complete collapse of the Malian Army, the United Nations established the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali. The United Nations force deployment allowed the French to focus their U.S.-supported effort in the sparsely populated north while maintaining an “African face” to the mission in the more populated south.

Operation Serval

After the United Nations authorized the International Support Mission to Mali in December 2012, Ansar Dine sought to preempt the foreign intervention. It broke off diplomatic talks with the Algerian government and sent a column of fighters toward Sévaré, near Mopti, a town located near the border of southern Mali and the self-declared Azawad state and on the only major road connecting the two.³⁹

French intelligence identified dissent among the rebel groups concerning the wisdom of moving south. Ghali favored the move, but Droukdel preferred to consolidate gains in the north.⁴⁰ The French also knew that the jihadis were massing forces but were unsure of the rebels’ intent. The rebel force was not

large enough to hold a city the size of Bamako. They could, however, try to terrorize the city and foment instability. Interim President Dioncounda Traoré, to whom coup leader Sanogo officially ceded power in April 2012, worried the jihadis would activate supporters inside the city. Moreover, if jihadis entered the city, a counterattack would become much more complex, and the fragile United Nations consensus might collapse.

On January 11, 2013, after a formal request from President Traoré, French President Hollande ordered French troops into action.⁴¹ Hollande laid out the following military objectives: “Stop the jihadi advance, assist the government of Mali in retaking the country, destroy the terrorists, seek and secure the hostages.”⁴² At the time, AQIM and MUJAO held seven French civilians hostage, a situation that could have easily turned into a political liability had the terrorist groups decided to release videos of the hostages or their executions.⁴³

The sudden change of plans forced the military to recalibrate the requisite force at the last moment under the first Joint Tactical Task Group.⁴⁴ French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called his American counterpart, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, on January 12, asking for logistics and intelligence support.⁴⁵ Panetta immediately agreed to the request, and the Joint Staff swung into action to provide the support. The support was critical to success, especially with the deployment of C-17 aircraft capable of moving heavy tracked vehicles into the theater. In addition, U.S. aerial refueling of French Mirage jets over the battlefield was instrumental to the success of French air attacks against AQIM targets.⁴⁶

The U.S. reconnaissance aircraft (MQ-1 and MQ-9 drones) stationed in Niamey, Niger—a relatively short distance to the battlefield in Mali—were instrumental in providing immediate intelligence on AQIM positions to the French.⁴⁷ A joint intelligence fusion center of French and U.S. intelligence personnel was quickly established and began working seamlessly to provide even more detailed intelligence reports as the battle ensued.

Operation Serval consisted of four phases: 1) halt the jihadi advance, 2) reclaim territory for the central government in Bamako, 3) pursue the militants into their mountain strongholds, and 4) begin the process of political reconciliation and stabilization (see Figure 22.1 for associated movements).

Phase 1: halting the jihadi advance

Phase 1 began within hours of the presidential announcement to stop the jihadi advance and disrupt their logistical tail. French special forces from the 4th Special Forces Helicopter Regiment stationed in Burkina Faso struck jihadi columns moving from Konna to Sévaré (near Mopti), halting their advance.⁴⁹ The Gazelle attack helicopters that flew directly to the battle zone from their bases in Burkina Faso were the most effective in stopping the column.⁵⁰ One French aviator was killed in the initial assault after his helicopter crashed.⁵¹ But the combination of attack helicopters and French ground forces stopped the column of jihadi fighters dead in their tracks.

As French troops arrived in Sévaré, they discovered that the Malian Army had fled, dropping its weapons and equipment into the hands of AQIM (similar to what the Iraqi Army would do in the face of the Islamic State a year later). Within 24 hours, airstrikes commenced against militant training camps and weapons and ammunition depots in the north. Mirage 2000D jets stationed in N'Djamena, Chad—later joined by Rafales flying from Saint-Dizier airbase in France—conducted the strikes.⁵²

Meanwhile, pre-positioned French conventional forces arrived in Bamako to protect French and European citizens and prepare for the arrival of reinforcements from France. Within a week, French and Malian troops took positions in Markala, Mopti, Diabaly, and Douentza to prevent the jihadis from marching south again.

Operation Serval benefited from intelligence assets pre-positioned in Mali. France's General Directorate for External Security had gathered significant intelligence on French hostages, the armed groups, their leaders, and their logistical support networks. This intelligence was shared with the Directorate of

Figure 22.1 Phases of French operations in Mali, 2013.⁴⁸

Source: This map comes from “French Operations in Mali: A Look Back,” which is republished with the permission of Stratfor Worldview, a leading global geopolitical intelligence and advisory firm.

Military Intelligence at the outset of the operation and was instrumental in generating the list of targets to strike or seize.⁵³

Operation Serval also benefited from France’s pre-positioned forces in the region. France’s Special Forces Command had troops in the Sahel as part of a multinational counterterrorism effort called Operation Sabre. These units deployed to Sévaré on January 11.⁵⁴ Additionally, pre-positioned forces in Gabon, Djibouti, and Senegal, along with forces deployed in several long-term operations in Chad, Ivory Coast, and the Central African Republic, facilitated the rapid deployment of conventional forces into theater.

These bases, in close proximity to ports or airports, formed essential logistical hubs, receiving reinforcements or projecting forces and equipment forward. The strategic reserve—which can project 2,300 men from pre-identified units at a distance of 3,000 kilometers within seven days⁵⁵—was mobilized to complement the pre-positioned forces. France successfully mobilized both army and navy elements of the strategic reserve.

Strategic and refueling capacity deficits were expected, well known, and caused by repeated delays in acquisition programs. Between January 10 and February 11, 2013, 362 flights carried 10,000 tons of freight in theater.⁵⁶ Some 75% of these flights were contracted out to civilian transporters.⁵⁷ British, Canadian, Swedish, Hungarian, and American allies flew most of the remaining 25%.

The situation was similarly dire in terms of in-flight refueling capacity. France had an aging fleet of refuelers that could not meet mission requirements, so allies again filled the gaps. By January 27, after some

procedural delays, the U.S. military provided three air tankers. In the end, Americans, Spaniards, Germans, and British provided 30% of the refueling missions.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, with outside assistance, the force ramped up quickly. By January 18, 1,800 French troops had arrived.⁵⁹ By early February, that number exceeded 5,000.⁶⁰ The U.S. assisted by bringing in another contingent from Chad. Unlike many peacekeeping contingents, the Chadian unit came prepared to fight alongside its French allies and would soon find itself in the largest engagement of the intervention.

In light of the rapid progress, President Hollande decided to press the military advantage and ordered the troops to push north as quickly as possible to “not let [the jihadis] believe that the front line was becoming a border.”⁶¹ Jihadi groups posted statements on the internet exhorting their supporters to carry out attacks against France and their interests around the world. This was a source of concern in Paris, as such attacks could have dampened the French public’s enthusiasm for the operation.

Phase 2: reclaiming territory

Phase 2 began on January 24. Conventional troops and French special forces crossed the Niger bend to retake control of the north and liberate the major cities. There were inherent risks in moving quickly. Concerns included the nationalist or Islamist sympathies of many northern inhabitants; the threat of improvised explosive devices, as intelligence indicated that an Algerian explosives expert had traveled to Mali; the threat of man-portable air defense systems; and the sheer size of the region that had to be cleared of militants, which meant operating across long distances with logistical lines extending over 1,500 kilometers.

Phase 2 became a war of speed and rapid engagements over long distances in punishing heat in a type of military expeditionary mobility not widely practiced by the French military in decades. Troops were often out of communications for up to 10 hours a day. They carried only one day’s supply of fuel, water, and food. This put significant strains on logistics.⁶²

That terrain made logistical support extremely challenging. The size of the force (over 5,000 by February), the distance between the theater command post and the advanced units (up to 1,800 kilometers), the extreme climate, the poor conditions of the roads, and the lack of local resources made it particularly challenging to provide 4,500 daily rations, 45,000 liters of water, 10 tons of ammunition, 30,000 liters of gas, and 200,000 liters of kerosene.⁶³

In Mali, logistics constrained maneuver. Several operations had to be canceled, rescheduled, or modified to accommodate the logistical requirements. This could have led to serious setbacks had the jihadis chosen to slow down the French advance by attacking the logistical lines.

The French planned to retake Timbuktu and Gao with a combination of airborne assault followed by armored units. But this plan was modified out of fear that airborne elements would be too vulnerable once they landed in the absence of other friendly forces on the ground. Instead, French special operators first seized key installations (airfields), and then conventional troops and paratroopers moved in.

For the most part, as the French advanced, the jihadis chose to disperse rather than put up a serious fight. Yet the speed at which the enemy abandoned the terrain came as a surprise. By January 28, French forces successfully controlled both Timbuktu and Gao.⁶⁴ Overall, the situation was deemed secure enough for President Hollande to meet with President Traoré in Mali on February 2, where thousands cheerfully showed their gratitude to the French head of state.⁶⁵

In Gao, however, resistance persisted as MUJAO regrouped and launched hit-and-run and suicide bombing attacks against French and Malian troops. MUJAO’s resistance forced the French to maintain a larger footprint in the region than it preferred (more than 1,700 French troops) to conduct clearing operations in the villages and towns stretching all the way to Menaka (300 kilometers west of Gao). By mid-April, French and Malian forces had killed some 200 jihadis in the Gao region and seized 75 tons of equipment, and the frequency of attacks receded.⁶⁶

The expanse of the operational area stretched French intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, requiring more allied support. The French deployed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, including Mirage F1, Rafale, Atlantique-2, special forces, and Harfang drones.⁶⁷ They also leveraged the Hélios and Pléiade surveillance satellites and pooling arrangements with German and Italian satellites.⁶⁸ Yet this still proved inadequate, so France turned to its American and British allies. Starting January 11, the United States provided drone flights operating out of nearby Niamey airport, which allowed for long “dwell time” over the area of operations; the drones also provided precision intelligence on enemy locations.⁶⁹

In addition, France lacked the requisite level of satellite mobile connections to allow satisfactory communications between forward units and rear headquarters. The French first compensated for this deficit by buying commercial Thuraya and Inmarsat satellite phones before moving the VAB VENUS system—a wheeled satellite communication vehicle—from Afghanistan to Mali.⁷⁰ Overall, the system suffered from limited bandwidth, so the Americans provided critical support once again.

As operations subsided in Gao and Timbuktu, French forces continued to press north. At the end of January, French Army special forces took over the airstrip in Kidal, allowing the paratroopers to land safely. They relieved the French special forces and secured the city.

On February 6, a similar scenario played out in Tessalit. French special forces secured the airfield before handing it over to paratroopers reinforced by an armored company diverted from Gao and Chadian reinforcements from Kidal.⁷¹ By early February, the French had the fourth task group paratroopers, the third task group of (aging) AMX-10RCs light reconnaissance vehicles equipped with a 105-mm cannon, 155-mm howitzer cannons mounted on a truck, a logistical sub-group, a medical unit, and a command post ready to move into the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains.⁷²

Phase 3: the battle of the Ifoghas

Phase 3 lasted from mid-February to the end of March and was designed to clear AQIM’s defensive positions in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountain range. The Adrar is the cradle of the separatist movement in Mali. It is from the town of Kidal, on the southern side of the range, that many separatist insurrections began. As the mountain range straddles Mali and Algeria, it is also where Algerian Islamist fighters took refuge at the end of that country’s civil war, regrouped, and later pledged allegiance to al-Qaida. For a decade, AQIM had used the Ifoghas to entrench itself into the social fabric (by marrying into Tuareg tribes), to run various smuggling operations (drugs, weapons, hostages), and to stockpile weapons and ammunition.⁷³

Unlike earlier phases, the French and Chadian forces faced small groups of hardened combatants dispersed over large swaths of inhospitable territory but well organized and hunkered in defensive positions. While conventional forces systematically cleared AQIM’s hideouts, French special forces searched for the remaining French hostages and hunted down key terrorist leaders. By this time, AQIM had regrouped from the initial French assault and, led by its southern *amir* Abu Zeid, began to fight back.

As the French sought to enter the Ametetai Valley (which runs east-west through the northern side of the Ifoghas), a violent firefight erupted, forcing the French to withdraw.⁷⁴ Intelligence had correctly identified the logistical depots but failed to clearly identify AQIM’s presence and intent. The French set up close watch on the valley, brought in hundreds of reinforcements, and expanded the logistical support first by air-bridge and then by a time-consuming road trek.

On February 22, the French began clearing the valley from the west, with Chadian forces moving in from the east. An intense firefight ensued in which 26 Chadians were killed.⁷⁵ It was the first deadly combat on any significant scale of the war and the bloodiest day of the intervention. The French and Chadian troops forced the jihadis into the center of the valley, where French paratroopers subsequently killed many of them.⁷⁶

For the following month, French and Chadian troops continued combing through the Ifoghas valley, encountering fierce resistance. The tenacity and fanaticism of AQIM's foot soldiers surprised French officers, which French officials attributed to the widespread use of a drug called ketamine, an anesthetic reducing fear.⁷⁷ By official French accounts, the operation killed close to 400 jihadis,⁷⁸ including the local *amir*, Abu Zeid. Chadian troops thought they had killed key AQIM operative Mokhtar Belmokhtar during the battle, but that assessment proved to be premature.⁷⁹

Entering the Ifoghas and the Kidal region posed political challenges at the strategic and operational levels. The question was how local populations—who had long supported Tuareg nationalism, tolerated jihadi groups, and intermarried with their members—would react to the presence of French troops and the return of Malian central authority. In that uncertain context, would troops be welcomed, tolerated, or harassed?

France's primary objective was to destroy the jihadi groups and prevent the establishment of a safe haven in northern Mali. The secondary objective was restoring Malian government sovereignty over the entire territory to prevent northern Mali from becoming a terrorist safe haven again. In support of that objective, promoting national reconciliation was a means to that end.

France had decided to officially remain neutral in the conflict between the nationalist MNLA and the government of Mali. On the ground, France forbade troops at the operational and tactical levels from entering into any local negotiations with the nationalists. But at the onset of the operation, the MNLA pledged allegiance to France, hoping to gain an ally in their negotiations with Bamako.⁸⁰ It worked, as France pressed for including the armed secular-leaning groups in the reconciliation process.

In addition, France pressured the Malian government not to send its forces north immediately so as not to provoke those with separatist sympathies.⁸¹ Bamako only reluctantly accepted, which placed the responsibility for the crisis on the Tuareg political leadership. These political decisions facilitated the reconquest of the north by neutralizing potentially hostile actors.

Yet considering the fluid relations between nationalists and jihadis, tactical incidents could easily have occurred, potentially with negative consequences. Moreover, in Kidal, which remained under the control of the MNLA, the security situation remained uncertain and the political situation tense. The arrival of Malian troops led to clashes with the MNLA in the fall of 2013.⁸² Jihadi groups continued to interfere.

Phase 4: stabilization and political reconciliation

Phase 4 started in early May, as residual combat operations continued, notably in the region of Gao. Stabilization operations were designed to secure the liberated areas. International partners helped to alleviate the burden on French forces and allowed France to focus on building a regional force to combat violent Islamists and jihadis throughout the Sahel.

The French government undertook Operation Serval unilaterally (albeit with limited support from a handful of allies), in stark contrast with recent operations under the banner of the European Union or NATO. Yet Paris always intended to transition to a multilateral framework led by African peacekeeping forces for legitimacy reasons (a former colonial power intervening in its former colony would see its legitimacy erode quickly) and for operational reasons (the French committed up to 5,300 troops to Operation Serval and needed relief).⁸³

The first pillar was to restore the constitutional order by holding elections. Although Traoré's interim government had functioned, the French believed that it lacked the legitimacy required to enter into fruitful negotiations with the separatists.⁸⁴ In addition, without an elected government, U.S. support for stabilization would be limited.

In July and August 2013, Mali held presidential elections. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita won in a landslide. In November, legislative elections commenced peacefully, handing Keita's party another landslide victory.

African troops from the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, backed by forces from Operation Serval, were in charge of securing the elections.⁸⁵

The second pillar of the stabilization program was to rebuild the Malian forces into a large and tactically proficient enough force to hold the north to avoid a repeat of the 2012 debacle. By 2013, the Malian military was in complete disarray, “badly trained, badly paid, and under-equipped” according to General Lecointre, chief of the European Union training mission.⁸⁶ The European Union led a dual-track mission of tactical counterterrorism training for eight unified, self-supported battalions (focused on reconnaissance, area control, and operations for eliminating isolated pockets of resistance) and capacity building at the ministerial level to ensure that the force had effective administrative support.

The European Union mission was extended in 2014 and again in 2016. Under the third mandate, the European Union training mission in Mali trained, advised, and educated the Malian military to contribute to the restoration of their military capacity and enable them to conduct military operations aimed at restoring Malian territorial integrity, protecting the population, and reducing the threat posed by terrorist groups. As part of the third mandate, the mission area was extended toward the Niger River loop, including the municipalities of Gao and Timbuktu. Kidal, the most restive region, remained outside of the purview of the mission.

The third pillar sought to ensure that an African-led force would be able to take over from the French-led operation to maintain a long-term presence to keep the jihadi threat in check. The Economic Community of West African States had been a useful mediator during 2012, but its military arm was predictably ineffectual. Its troops began deploying to Mali in the first months of 2013 and grew to about 6,000 soldiers, but they largely stayed away from the fighting. The exception was the previously mentioned Chadian forces.

In April 2013, the United States supported United Nations Resolution 2100, creating a United Nations peacekeeping force. The International Support Mission troops transitioned to a United Nations command on July 1 under their new “blue helmets” and began to deploy to the major cities in Mali in the second half of 2013. Eventually, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali mission would grow to over 11,000 troops, but it took longer than the French had anticipated.⁸⁷ In early November 2013, there were still 3,000 French soldiers in Mali, much more than they preferred—but compared to similar U.S.-led interventions, this was a much smaller force.⁸⁸

The fourth pillar was to facilitate the reconciliation process between the Tuaregs and the government in Bamako. In mid-June, the government and the separatists signed the Ouagadougou Political Accords, an interim agreement calling for an immediate cease-fire, cantonment of rebel forces, the return of government authority in the north (with an exception for Kidal), national elections, and reconciliation talks.⁸⁹ The cease-fire became effective immediately. The reconciliation process proved arduous, however, and faltered repeatedly, with Tuaregs and Malian forces clashing regularly in late 2013.

In spring 2014, the Tuaregs launched a successful offensive against government troops and expelled them from Kidal, Menaka, Andéramboukane, and Anéfis.⁹⁰ Renewed diplomatic efforts by the Algerian government helped broker a new peace agreement, the Algiers Accord, in June 2015. Implementation, however, has been uneven. As a result, residual violence both at the hands of nationalist Tuaregs and jihadis regularly resurfaces, although not on the scale seen in 2012 or with the same dramatic consequences for government control.

Conclusion

The separatist and jihadi attack into southern Mali was foreseeable, but little was done to thwart the offensive until it was launched in January 2013. The Malian Army fled without their weapons during the 2012 offensive, which led to jihadi control of the north. A coup in March 2012 then left the government without any U.S. support until the French intervention. Efforts to establish a United Nations peacekeeping

operation floundered amid U.S. budget concerns. The French wanted to ensure that any assistance they provided would not be perceived as neo-colonial, and it was not until the AQIM-affiliated militants pushed south in January 2013 that they decided to intervene. Maintaining political legitimacy at the strategic and tactical levels, as well as domestically, became a top French priority that shaped operations. It was also a key factor in the French success.

The French response to the crisis of January 2013 was exemplary and demonstrated how effective a relatively small but swift intervention can be. Operation Serval achieved its primary objectives: it halted the jihadi advance, assisted the government of Mali in reclaiming control over the country, killed terrorists, and secured hostages—all with a relatively small footprint. Within a few months of the intervention, the operation denied a jihadi safe haven in the north, reversed their alliance with the separatist Tuaregs, curtailed their links to the social fabric of the Ifoghas tribes, and secured the Malian capital.

While degraded, the threat of AQIM has not been eliminated. U.S. and French Special Operations Forces continue to work together in the region, training local forces and targeting the radical jihadi groups in the remote regions across North Africa. As recently as October 30, 2020, a French airstrike killed more than 50 AQIM fighters.⁹¹ The United Nations peacekeeping force, numbering more than 13,000 troops in 2020,⁹² continues to patrol the major cities, occasionally facing attacks and suffering casualties at the hands of resilient jihadis in the region.

Moreover, despite international support, the Malian Army capitalized on popular discontent surrounding elections widely believed to be fraudulent, the resurgent Islamist insurgency, corruption, and economic disruption to overthrow the government in August 2020.⁹³ It marked Mali's fourth coup since independence in 1960. Nonetheless, AQIM and other jihadi militants have failed to return to the level of control they achieved in 2012.

Notes

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