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French intervention in Mali: strategic alliances, long-term regional presence?

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ABSTRACT
The March 2012 coup in Mali opened the door to expanded territorial occupation in northern Mali by Tuareg separatists and subsequently armed Islamist extremists. French forces intervened at the behest of the interim government in Mali. This article examines how various actors frame the conflict to their advantage. While the Malian government and France are allies, the position of various Tuareg actors shift over time as they strategize and weigh the value of allegiance with the French. Local extremist organizations are labeled as terrorists and are targeted as enemies. This article argues that the conflict has been decontextualized and framed within the ‘war on terror’. France’s decision to intervene and to expand their regional military presence, rather than exit, is legitimized by the framing of their intervention as integral to counterterrorism efforts.

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Introduction

How is it that the French troops who occupied Mali for centuries as barbaric colonizers have come back 50 years later to be greeted as liberators?

Boubacar Boris Diop

On 11 January 2013, the French responded immediately to a request for military intervention by the Malian transitional government led by Interim President Dioncounda Traoré. Insurgents had successfully overtaken the town of Konna, breaching the recognized boundary between northern and southern Mali and putting them just steps away from a critical airfield in Sevaré and the town of Mopti. Should rebels have succeeded in taking the airbase, it was argued that the capital, Bamako, would soon follow and with that a ‘terrorist state’ would be
established where the secular Republic of Mali once stood. French intelligence services claimed that terrorists had infiltrated the capital. French policymakers felt that “black flags were at the doors of Bamako” and the Islamist groups and the military were willing to set up a new Republic of Mali where drug trafficking and religious extremism could flourish. Regional allies mobilized quickly. It was the overwhelming judgment by local, regional, and international forces that immediate military intervention was needed. The non-state actors that had led the insurgency sparked concerns about the possibility of links to global jihadi movements and therefore warranted an immediate response to prevent Mali falling into the hands of ‘terrorists’.

Mali gathered in the capital to celebrate the arrival of the French military. They welcomed the soldiers and greeted them while waving the French tricolor in the streets. French flags were selling out in Bamako. Boubacar Diop rightly wonders how it is that French troops who once symbolized colonial oppression could be embraced, seemingly overnight, as liberators. The answer is that persistent state weakness in postcolonial Mali resulted in the government’s inability to protect its own territory and to respond to the concerns, both legitimate and perceived, of the Tuareg minority since independence from France in 1960. The Malian state had failed the people of Mali, not simply the Tuareg, and the French were invited to intervene to preserve the Republic of Mali.

This article explores the multiple interventions in Mali and the strategic alliances formed from the launching of the French Operation Serval in January 2013 to the subsequent French Operation Barkhane. As allegiances are broken and built anew, the shifting terrain necessarily complicates withdrawal of French and United Nations’ troops. Operation Serval opened the gates to a greater French presence in the Sahel and Operation Barkhane, launched on 1 August 2014, expanded the French military throughout the region. Whereas Operation Serval was short-term, Barkhane is not. I argue that by framing the threat as a terrorist threat, France, along with regional and international partners, justified intervention and subsequently the establishment of multiple military bases across the Sahel. The United Nations’ Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is charged with the maintenance of security throughout Mali, while France has officially expanded its mission to counterterrorist activities across the Sahel. France is further militarizing the region and working with friendly political leaders as allies in the ‘war on terror’. This article does not question the real security threat posed to the Malian state by insurgent advances on Konna. Nor does it question the terrible impact of the implementation of a brutal version of sharia on many in northern Mali. Rather, it argues that the crisis has been decontextualized and the use of the term ‘terrorist’ is a strategy often used by multiple actors for their own strategic benefit. The intervention did prevent the further collapse of the Malian state and bring an end to sharia as it was being implemented in the north. However, France and the United States
have been combating terrorism in the region for two decades, with questionable success. As Michael Shurkin writes:

militarization of the fight against radicalism may further obscure for France and the United States alike the non-military aspects of the problem, everything that encourages radicalism and keeps the state of the Sahel fragile. Serval demonstrates the problem amply: The French military has been focusing in on the specific terrorist threats and other security assistance efforts while refusing to involve itself in Mali's other problems. Barkhane promises more of the same.5

To be sure, a variety of French and US government entities support other development needs but militarization has taken precedence. The intermingling of political, economic, and social issues with radicalism is lost in the fray. Sadly, despite French intervention, attacks have occurred in Mali in areas that had previously not experienced such violence.

This article begins with a discussion of strategic alliances and then analyses the nature of the multiple interventions, their rationalization, and their possible long-term legacies in the region. As actors position themselves to benefit as allies in the ‘war on terror’ the possibility of an imminent French exit from the region has disappeared in the sand.

Crisis and strategic alliances

The Tuareg nationalist separatist movement, Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), was created in November 2011. The fall of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011 resulted in an influx of Tuareg who had fought for Libya and returned to Mali heavily armed. The MNLA was merely the latest in a series of organizations implicated in Tuareg rebellions that would occur and reoccur over the 50 years since Malian independence. Shortly after its creation, the MNLA began an offensive in northern Mali. From 18 to 24 January 2012 between 70 and 153 Malian soldiers were killed in Aguelhok in the Kidal region.6 Anger and frustration of Malian soldiers and their families was sparked by the lack of information from the Malian government regarding the incident. On 31 January 2012 women, many widows of the soldiers who had been unaccounted for, burned tires and marched from the garrison town of Kati to Bamako to demand answers from the government.7 No answers were given. Tensions increased and protests spread. On 22 March soldiers stormed President Amadou Toumani Touré's residence and the national television station. Hours later the civilian regime had collapsed and Captain Amadou Sanogo emerged as the public face of the junta. While Sanogo knew there was widespread discontent concerning President Touré's government, his claim that the coup was necessary to quell the Tuareg rebellion effectively proved to be delusional. The New York Times reported on 13 January 2013 that as many as 1600 troops defected to join the MNLA after the coup in March 2012, taking with them what arms and equipment they had. Within three weeks of the coup, the Malian army lost control of all of
northern Mali to the MNLA. On 6 April 2012, they announced the creation of the Independent State of Azawad.

The weaknesses of the MNLA were immediately apparent as they were outgunned and outmaneuvered by the militant Islamist group Ansar Dine (led by Iyad Ag Ghali), which worked in alliance with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Days after the fall of the northern cities of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal to the MNLA, Ansar Dine and AQIM successfully overtook the territory that the MNLA had briefly but defiantly claimed. A divide within the MNLA was immediately apparent as some representatives claimed that the MNLA was a secular movement seeking independence for the secular state of Azawad, while others called for the creation of an Islamic republic. Complicating matters, the MNLA was geographically dispersed, with spokespeople in Mali, France, and Mauritania, and lacked cohesion. With the increasing strength of AQIM, its offshoot MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa), and Ansar Dine, the MNLA was, for the moment, effectively sidelined. AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine dominated northern Mali and implemented a brutal form of sharia law, effectively terrorizing much of the local population. This situation prevailed until the aforementioned rebel advance in January 2013 and French intervention.

The French intervention led to maneuvering among armed groups. Religious, as well as clan and sub-clan, ties dictated shifting alliances. The former National Assembly deputy for Kidal, Alghabass Ag Intalla, split from Ansar Dine and created the Islamic Movement of Azawad (MIA). He deliberately distanced himself from the leader of Ansar Dine, Iyad Ag Ghali, who had been designated as a terrorist by the US government in February 2013 because of his close ties with AQIM. Ag Intalla acted strategically hoping to gain greater international acceptance. Once the international community had labeled Ansar Dine as a terrorist movement, they were not welcome at the negotiating table in either Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in June 2013 or subsequently in Algiers where a peace agreement was finally signed in June 2015. MIA existed only briefly prior to merging with the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), which is allied with the MNLA and the ‘dissident’ branch of the MAA (Arab Movement of Azawad). Alghabass Ag Intalla began with ties to Ansar Dine and was an ally of the MNLA. He then separated himself first from the MNLA (as Ansar Dine and AQIM ousted MNLA) then left Ansar Dine, ultimately folding his newly formed MIA back into the MNLA. He had come full circle, presumably in order to have the best strategic position in terms of peace negotiations. Alghabass Ag Intalla is the son of the traditional chief of the Ifoghas clan, Intalla Ag Attaher, and as such has a certain amount of social standing. His frequent shifting allegiances are opportunistic but likely effective.

In March 2014 another important Tuareg figure, Ibrahim Ag Mohammed Assaleh, left the MNLA to form the Coalition for the People of Azawad (CPA). Assaleh then traveled to Algiers to promote the possibility of reconciliation talks to be led by Algeria. This meeting was convened on 16 January 2014, without
the participation of the MNLA. Meanwhile, Bilal Ag Cherif, the head of MNLA, visited Morocco. This division sparked concerns that the regional archrivals Morocco and Algeria were being drawn into the Sahelian crisis as headlines read ‘Split in the MNLA: The Saharan War Moved to Mali?’

It is evident that multiple Tuareg movements have been created and shifted allegiances over time. Tuareg nationalists have looked toward alliances with foreign powers and international institutions (the United Nations and the European Union) in order to further their cause. Over the years, clans and sub-clans and ‘big men’ affiliated with them have competed for power. It is impossible to claim any coherent ‘Tuareg interests’ because there is simply no unified identity or interests. Adam Morgan writes that the very notion of ‘the Tuareg’ is a creation of nineteenth-century anthropologists and explorers. Nomadic clans and sub-clans with loose affiliations have interacted in the area for centuries. At independence in 1960, Mali, Algeria, and Niger effectively co-opted the French strategy of divide and rule to deal with their Tuareg populations, favoring, and advancing ‘friendly’ tribal chiefs while curtailing the power of hostile ones. At different points in Malian history different Tuareg clans have had access to the state creating tensions among clans. The conflicts among Tuareg leaders continue as various big men vie for power and a role in determining the future of northern Mali.

The tension between Bilal Ag Cherif and Assaleh became quite evident as Ag Cherif participated in an MNLA delegation to Moscow on 14 March 2014. In response, the Malian Foreign Ministry met with the Russian ambassador to Mali to determine the nature of the meetings. While visiting Dakar, Senegal President Keita accused the MNLA of asking the Russians to sell them arms to be used against the Malian military. This meeting took place at the same time that Assaleh and the CPA were trying to participate in peace talks led by MINUSMA. The MNLA missions to Russia and to Morocco were deliberate attempts to remain significant as other organizations maneuvered for a voice in negotiations. As reported in *Africa Confidential*, Assaleh blames the split on the MNLA leader Bilal ag Acherif’s decision to court Morocco as a new mediator in the peace process. In reality the differences go back further and are more visceral. From its inception the MNLA’s existence depended on the uneasy ethnic jostling of Idnan and Ifoghas Tuaregs overlapping the group’s political military divide.

Bilal Ag Cherif is a member of the Ifoghas clan; his nephew is Iyad Ag Ghali who was excluded from MNLA leadership. In an attempt to increase his power, Ag Ghali allied with AQIM and formed Ansar Dine. The military chief of the MNLA, Mohammed Ag Najem, is from the Idnan Tuareg clan and Assaleh’s cousin. Assaleh gained his position within MNLA in part based on Najem’s insistence and his separation from the MNLA is ‘certainly mounted with Ag Najem’s blessing. Unlike the mainstream MNLA, the dissidents believe there is still mileage in the principles set out in last year’s Ouagadougou accord, including the cantonment
of fighters. The creation of various organizations illustrates the long-standing rivalries among leadership within and between clans.

In Algiers, on 16 July 2014, armed groups (these groups never disarmed prior to negotiations) agreed to 'a federal political and institutional system for Azawad to be recognized by the state and the international community'. Bilal Ag Cherif signed for the Coordination des mouvements de l’Azawad, or CMA (which includes MNLA, HCUA, MAA-dissident, and CM-FPR2); Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed signed for MAA (Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad); and par Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Assaleh for Coalition du peuple pour l’Azawad, CPA. A second round of peace talks began in Algiers on 1 September 2014. The MNLA ultimately agreed to participate in reconciliation talks that included representatives from the Malian government and two alliances. The first alliance included MNLA, HCUA, and MAA (dissident faction). The second alliance included: Coordination des mouvements et forces patriotiques de resistance (CM-FPR), led by Harouna Toure, former leader of Songhai movement Ganda Koy; Coalition du peuple pour l’Azawad (CPA); and the MAA (loyalist faction). Assaleh was ousted by the CPA during the talks, though he and three others refused to leave. These talks were then suspended after armed groups (MNLA, HCUA, and MAA-dissident) walked out, claiming that the fact that the CM-FPR was sitting alongside the government representatives and therefore should not be considered as a dissident group. According to the armed groups, the CM-FPR was showing its allegiance to the government of Mali. Ganda Koy, whose former leader headed the CM-FPR, was a predominately Songhai militia that joined forces with the government against the armed rebellion. In August 2014, GATIA (Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés) led by Imghad General Hajj Ag Gamou was created as an armed alliance between Tuareg and Arab who were loyal to Bamako.

After nearly a year of on again off again negotiations, on 15 May 2015, the Malian government and loyalist, armed groups (GATIA) signed the Algiers Accord. The occasion was celebrated with the attendance of a dozen African heads of state and over 20 countries were represented, unfortunately the CMA had not yet agreed to sign. It was not until 20 June 2015 that the CMA signed the accord. Given their designation as terrorist organizations, AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine were all absent from the negotiation table, while Alghabass Ag Intalla and Bilal Ag Cherif both had seats at the peace table. Ag Cherif was accused of having caved to international pressure and accepting an accord that would never be implemented on the ground. Others suspected Iyad Ag Ghali of having his interests represented through former lieutenants in Ansar Dine, namely Alghabass Ag Intalla and Cheick ag Aussa. A peace deal may have been reached, but subsequent outbreaks of violence between the CMA and GATIA belie the challenges of implementation.
Multiple interventions

Just as the crisis in Mali involves multiple groups and shifting alliances, it also resulted in multiple interventions: namely, those led by the French, the African Union and ECOWAS forces, and the United Nations (MINUSMA). The French military Operation Serval began on 11 January 2013 and included a force of 5000 at its peak.25 One year later, France announced that forces would be reduced first to 1600 then to 1000. In a statement remarkably reminiscent of President George Bush's famous 'mission accomplished' speech, President Hollande spoke at an airbase in France, saying that the 'situation is well under control' in Mali, where the 'key objectives of the mission have been accomplished'. Within eight months, Hollande announced the conclusion of Serval and the launching of Operation Barkhane across the region. Some argue that François Hollande's decision to intervene was linked at least in part to public opinion and to boosting support at home. The intervention was a chance for Hollande to establish himself as a strong president.26

In July 2013, in accordance with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100, the French handed over responsibility for Malian security to MINUSMA. According to the Serval commander the French operation only had the authority to intervene in support of MINUSMA troops 'under imminent and serious threat'. French troops shifted their focus to solely counterterrorism activities.27 Given the limited capacity of MINUSMA it is not surprising that in February 2014 it still needed to convince the public that MINUSMA 'has teeth and doesn’t take orders from France'.28

The French intervention was the most dramatic intervention in Mali and it gained the most attention. ECOWAS and the African Union helped organize and participated in peace negotiations but also contributed troops under the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). Mali’s neighbors responded very quickly to the coup in March 2012 by placing sanctions on the junta and demanding the creation of a transitional government. The organizing of African-led forces to oust the rebels in the north was symbolic to the extent that there were no troops with the necessary numbers, and neither tactical training nor equipment available to combat the well-armed militant groups in northern Mali. Many Malians welcomed the French intervention because they feared what would happen should Mali collapse entirely and the diverse rebel groups from the north begin to vie for control of the vast territory. Planning for AFISMA began well before the French intervention and boots were to be on the ground in September 2013. The slow beginning is linked to difficulty in getting African troops committed to the contingent and making sure that they had the appropriate training. The slow mobilization of AFISMA forces has also been linked to the insurgent advance on Konna and the fact that the immediate intervention by France necessitated an accelerated timetable. On 17 January, Nigeria sent troops to work alongside the French in the early stages of the
conflict. Chad, which is not a member of ECOWAS but is a member of the African Union and is a concerned ally of Mali with a strong military, sent 2000 troops to northern Mali to oust the armed militants. The Chadian forces were particularly welcome not only for their large numbers but also for their familiarity with and ability to operate effectively in the Sahelian terrain. AFISMA came under the authority of MINUSMA in July 2013. As of September 2015, the United Nations listed on its website that MINUSMA, the sixteenth UN peacekeeping mission to be deployed around the globe, was just over 10,200 strong. It was designed to include 12,600 military and police personnel that would make it the third largest peacekeeping mission in Africa.

In April 2014, the cohabitation of the Malian army, the French military, and MINUSMA seemed to result in an overall lack of coordination among forces and lack of clarity of roles. Youth in Gao protested and complained of the lack of a security perimeter around the city. ‘The protestors were surprised by the fact that despite their large numbers, they (MINUSMA and Serval forces) have not brought the necessary support to the Malian army in the fight against terrorists.’ The protestors also accuse the forces of being concerned more with their own security than with the security of inhabitants.

While MINUSMA sought to advance peace and reconciliation talks, their role was deemed especially important since ‘France lost much local credibility by allowing ransom to be paid for hostages, and, critics say, handing over the Northern town of Kidal to the (MNLA).’ When Kidal was freed from the control of Ansar Dine and AQIM, the French allowed the MNLA to remain patrolling the city, until a peace deal was made. The army was permitted to enter the town prior to the July 2013 elections. As conflict and insecurity continue in Mali, suspicions such as these are likely to become even more widespread. Despite the peace agreement reached in June 2015, palpable progress must be made building peace if the continued disillusionment with the French and MINUSMA military presence is to be overcome. On 21 May 2014, events in Kidal further reiterated this point. Prime Minister Moussa Mara entered Kidal with Malian troops and fighting ensued, leaving 50 military casualties and the call for the prime minister’s resignation. In conversations that I had in Bamako during those days, many argued that the French were allowing the MNLA to control Kidal and were in fact reinforcing the MNLA.

Popular frustration is ongoing. As peace talks took place in the fall of 2014 a reporter wrote that ‘Populations see no impact on the ground of MINUSMA, despite their abundant equipment’ and ‘everyone believes that (French forces) favor separatists to the detriment of the populations.’ The French conclusion of Operation Serval created an opportunity for the French to remove themselves from the debate over northern Mali and announce a regional focus on counterterrorism. MINUSMA and the Malian army were left to provide security and secure the pathway to peace. On 7 March 2015, an assailant with a machine gun killed five people at La Terrasse, a Bamako bar popular with expats, including
United Nations employees. An attack on a hotel in Sevaré on 7 August 2015 left 12 people dead. Most recently, gunmen attacked the Radisson Hotel in Bamako and 21 people were killed. These incidents occurred in cities that had previously not witnessed such attacks. Both MINUSMA and the Malian army have been targeted in multiple strikes, including an ambush that killed six peacekeepers on 2 July, just two weeks after the peace deal was signed. Unfortunately that peace remains elusive.

**Framing the enemy**

The interventions were successful in that they paved the way for the presidential election in July (Round One) and August 2013 (Round Two) and legislative elections in November 2013 that were deemed essential to rebuilding stability and governmental legitimacy. The newly elected Malian government is highly indebted to the French for their intervention, which is widely seen as preventing a complete collapse of the Malian state. Other allegiances are more complicated. Attempts have been made by armed rebels to gain the support of the French military. A strategic shifting of allegiances among rebels has taken place over time and rebel groups have been created and dissolved. As groups sought a place at the negotiating table, and thus a say in the future of the region, they have distanced themselves from ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’. Former allies have become enemies in the move to join in the bargaining for peace.

The UN Security Council Report on Mali, based on a mission by the Security Council to Mali in February 2014, stated that civil society members from northern cities are concerned that MINUSMA is focusing on securing the cities of Timbuktu and Gao and not the region more broadly.

Malian and international interlocutors stressed that the terrorist threat remained, as jihadist groups retained significant capacity and maintained their objective of regaining control over northern Mali. The northern armed groups stated that they continued to fight against terrorist groups and that this would need to be taken into account when planning the further cantonment and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of their combatants.

MINUSMA was expected to play a central role in securing the north as the French troops were scaled down. ‘Northern armed groups’ translates to the MNLA and others (MIA, HCUA, etc.). While the presence of self-proclaimed jihadists is not unlikely, it is important to note that in this instance the ‘northern armed groups’ are using the threat of their presence to negotiate particular terms to DDR operations. They are seeking to remain armed. There was a great deal of negotiation over whether groups must disarm prior to joining peace talks. By the time peace negotiations began in Algiers these groups had not disarmed but had agreed to a ceasefire.

While Tuareg factions shift alliances (and are likely to continue to do so), actors on all sides strategically frame who the ‘enemy’ is. This framing occurs in
the broader context of the ‘war on terror’. The Malian government claimed that ‘terrorists’ had killed 30 Tuareg on 6 February 2014. The government security minister, Sada Samaké, linked MUJAO to the massacre. The statement by the Malian government contradicted the statement made by the Malian Mission to the United Nations that claimed ‘intercommunal clashes’ were responsible for the deaths. The labeling of ‘terrorists’ highlights one of the risks of intervention whose foundation is counterterrorism. Within this framework, ‘terrorists’ are unquestionably the enemy. The reality is usually far more complex. Reports state that the attack that took place in Tamkoutat, 80 km north of Gao, and armed men from the Fulani ethnic group led the attack as retaliation for the kidnapping of one Fulani member. Communal violence has occurred sporadically for decades as herders and nomads have fought over access to land for cattle grazing. The use of the word ‘terrorist’ in this context serves the purpose of underscoring the necessity for and preserving international support for Malian security forces. It also shifts attention away from the complex roots of the problem including, but not limited to, desertification and the shortage of grazing lands. ‘Ethnic tensions in the north were already running high before the war, fuelled by accelerating desertification and scarcity of irrigated land.’ As Stephen Smith notes, sedentary communities asserted their ‘autochthony’ in the north and created militias such as Ganda Izo and Boun Ba Hawi. ‘These groups were only too ready to join forces with the Malian army reinvigorated and refurbished by the French. Even in Bamako, Tuaregs [sic] no longer feel safe.’ Baba Ahmed reporting for the Associated Press on 12 February 2014 wrote that another clash a week later had left 30 dead near the Mali–Niger border. Tuareg villagers loyal to the Malian government had clashed with MUJAO fighters who were mostly Fulani. MUJAO, like Ansar Dine, has been designated a terrorist group by the United States. Malian intelligence official confirmed these reports. These examples illustrate the complexity of communal relations in the region and the challenge of identifying ‘terrorists’. I do not intend to claim that MUJAO was not responsible for the attack, positions on that vary, these examples do suggest, however, that we must be suspicious as to why and for what purposes the label ‘terrorist’ is used.

Several months later, on 15 September 2014 the Malian newspaper L’Aube reported another incident between armed groups and Fulani herders that took place on 9 September. One interviewee claimed the rebels that attacked were from the MNLA, MAA, and HCUA, without any evidence as to how the connection was made to these groups, which suggests that, for that individual, anyone taking up arms against the Fulani herders would necessarily have allegiance to the dissident armed rebels. There is not enough reported on this case to confirm who was actually involved.

The Macina Liberation Front (MLF) was formed in January 2015 under the leadership of preacher, Amadou Koufa. Koufa has called for a holy war and the implementation of sharia across all of Mali. The MLF has been tied to multiple attacks in central Mali, including the hotel attack in Sevaré. Koufa has recruited
young Fulani in the region and promised to reestablish the Fulani empire of Macina and create a Fulani caliphate. As Michael Shurkin argues, the MLF is linking revivalist leanings of Islam within the Fulani community with imported forms of radical Islam. The result is a dangerous mix of ethnic mobilization and radical Islam that risks destabilization of a region previously free from widespread violence. Not only has the threat of attack spread outside of northern Mali but organizing is occurring along distinctly ethnic lines. While the name is a celebration of an ancient Fulani empire, the leader has been linked to Ansar Dine and Iyad Ag Ghali as well as MUJAO. The use of the term ‘Macina’ is certainly a recruiting tool for young Fulani who are joining a larger and more ethnically diverse movement.

Multiple factions and interests intertwine to make resolution of the crisis even more complex. The very fact that the rebellion in northern Mali has percolated and boiled over for decades is evidence of the unlikely idea that military intervention will resolve the problem. To be sure, the regional and international actors involved in this crisis are aware of this fact and have made immediate stability and security in the area their priority, in the hope that elections and increased political legitimacy in Bamako may offer a possibility for building long-term peace. The continuing violence after peace accords and the formation of even more rebel groups illustrate the lack of progress in both protecting local populations and fighting terrorism in the region.

Regional militarization and the fight against terrorist groups

The fluidity of the so-called war on terror and the complicated internal and regional dynamics of the conflict in Mali make negotiating an exit a particularly difficult task. The Malian troops, while they have been trained and reinforced, remain weak. The insurgency in the north continued with sporadic suicide bombings and rocket attacks in and around Gao and Timbuktu and a violent clash in May 2014 in Kidal. With UN troops and the Malian army taking over the security of territory (predominately of the major cities according to critics) and the creation of Operation Barkhane for regional counterterrorism, it is clear that the French will have a long-term presence on the ground in Mali and throughout the region. This ‘new French militarism’ is a rejection of recent French security policy in Africa with a turn toward expanded presence across the Sahel. Barkhane includes the establishment of a French base in Gao with 1000 French troops remaining in Mali. The operational command center with 1200 troops is based in N’djamena, Chad. Intelligence operations are based in Niger with 300 personnel, and Special Forces are based in Burkina Faso. Equipment is to include 6 fighter jets, 3 drones, 20 helicopters, 10 transport planes, and 200 vehicles. This is a far cry from President Hollande’s ‘mission accomplished’ and announcement of imminent troop reductions. It would appear that France has taken the position that complete exit is not viable and some argue that a
permanent military presence in the Sahara is the realization of a dream for the French.\footnote{\textsuperscript{43}} It should also be noted that the French intervention in Mali occurred while the White Paper on Defense and Security was being negotiated in the French National Assembly. When it was released on 29 April 2013, cuts to military spending were much less than had been predicted and the international context, including the Malian crisis, influenced this outcome.\footnote{\textsuperscript{44}} The argument was made that France needed to be able to act independently in order to protect its national security in cases where allies do not have the capacity or commitment to act. Once the Malian crisis was framed as an issue of national security for France, defense spending was unlikely to be drastically cut.

In February 2014, Stephen Smith wrote ‘Jihadism looks less like a rising phenomenon in the north of Mali than a force in retreat. The French intervention may well give them purpose and greater coherence.’ Indeed, from this perspective, the French intervention will provide insurgents in Mali ‘an expeditionary force of infidels on the home turf.’\footnote{\textsuperscript{45}} It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the presence of the French is required to fight terrorism and that very terrorism is perpetuated by the French presence. The rise of the MLF is evidence of jihadist activity expanding into a territory that had once been spared such violence. Koufa has called directly for attacks against ‘les Blancs.’\footnote{\textsuperscript{46}}

The crisis did open the door for the French to expand their military presence in the region with bases established with the blessing of regional heads of state. French President François Hollande spoke at the opening of the 68th United Nations General Assembly. He began by stating ‘The UN’s honour comes from acting whenever people’s freedom is denied … (and when) fundamental rights are compromised … (and) from intervening when extremism threatens international security … (and) from acting to advance peace.’ He spoke of tumultuous conflicts around the globe including Syria and Iraq. Mali was proclaimed a victory with the new president of Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, representing ‘a great West African victory against terrorism.’

Victories against terrorism are possible. In Mali, for example, with a clear mandate from the Security Council, African and French forces with support from the Europeans responded to the Bamako authorities’ appeal to intervene, and succeeded in ending a large-scale terrorist offensive. Today the results speak for themselves. Mali has regained all of its territory, is guaranteeing the security of its population, and even managed to hold presidential elections on schedule, elections that were recognized as indisputable.\footnote{\textsuperscript{47}}

Decontextualization is evident when we consider violence in Mali but also in Nigeria and Niger. As Caitriona Dowd and Clionadh Raleigh argue, ‘The rapid deterioration of conditions in Mali does not constitute a discrete phenomenon, which can be wholly divorced from the political and social context of that or any other country.’\footnote{\textsuperscript{48}} Throughout the region where we have seen religious extremism, sedentary and nomadic populations often come in conflict and weak states have been ineffective in addressing political, economic and social crises.
Operation Barkhane provides further evidence of the decontextualization of security problems in the region.

. . . that France and its African partners agree on an offensive against so-called terrorist groups hides an important aspect of the political problem. In the face of rising social and economic discontent in Africa and the multitude of groups who violently challenge state monopoly, it has become difficult to distinguish between those whose fights are political and those who hide their struggle behind religious discourse and refuse to compromise their principles.49

When we consider the difficulty of separating so-called terrorism from ongoing political, social, and economic conflicts, it is clear that compartmentalizing French presence as counterterrorism is complicated. Intervention by invitation has led to the establishment (or in some cases simply strengthening) of French military bases across the region. The strength of those heads of states in whose countries the French have established Barkhane is increased by the reinforcement of ties with France. Barkhane has not only impinged on Malian sovereignty but imposes itself, again upon invitation, on states across the region.

When determining the fate of allies in the region one might look to the heads of state who have welcomed the French presence. These leaders are bolstered by the economic and political benefits of the French presence. However, the history of the Cold War has shown that populations often bore the brunt of policies that propped up dictators who acted with impunity toward citizens. One case in point is Chad, the headquarters for Barkhane, where Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2014, designates the country as ‘not free’. Civil liberties and political rights in Chad are among the lowest in the world. President Idriss Déby and his government have little incentive to end the oppression of the population particularly so long as the French depend on them as allies in the ‘war on terror’.

**Intervention by invitation**

Benign foreign forces don’t exist anywhere.

Boubacar Boris Diop50

Humanitarian and military interventions are not easily categorized and inevitably raise an array of normative concerns. Holzgrefe defines humanitarian intervention as

the threat or use of force across state borders by a state (or group of states) aimed at preventing or ending widespread and grave violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals other than its own citizens without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied. 51

This definition clearly excludes the Malian example as the French, the United Nations, and the African Union all intervened at the invitation of the interim...
Malian government. In fact the intervention was framed by President Hollande as repayment of the country’s historical debt toward Mali and this was ‘a more acceptable framework of gift and counter gift between states and peoples’.\textsuperscript{52} In Bamako, three months after the French intervention, some individuals argued that ‘France had the moral and political obligation to accept and honour President Traoré’s request for intervention’.\textsuperscript{53} While there was debate about the legality of the French invasion the case has been made that Operation Serval was in fact legal. This is established in three ways: first, by the legitimacy of the government requesting the intervention; second, the determination that this is not a civil war; third, the terrorist threat to Mali.\textsuperscript{54} The intervention may have been legal but any military intervention violates the international legal norm of sovereignty as well as ‘a central ethical component of international community (self-determination)’.\textsuperscript{55} Through this ‘intervention by invitation’ Mali chose to limit its own sovereignty, precisely because this sovereignty was already precarious given that armed rebels already controlled a large part of Malian territory. The invitation by its very nature constructs who is, and who is not, the enemy.

The French military has intervened in postcolonial Africa on multiple occasions. Across Francophone Africa, the credibility of French-led peacekeeping missions in Chad, the Central African Republic, and Cote d’Ivoire was undermined by French support of one conflict party over another. This opened the door for African actors ‘to instrumentalize the ambiguity of French policy for their purposes’.\textsuperscript{56} According to some critics, the different reception of French forces in Mali can be linked to how various political narratives were presented.

While in other contexts the deployment of such force was judged to be neocolonial by many, as in Cote d’Ivoire in 2011 (see Charbonneau 2012), the management of contested political narratives in Mali through French military means received unambiguous support.\textsuperscript{57} At the very outset, the missions of Serval and Barkhane are framed in the ‘war on terror’. As Bruce Charbonneau and Jonathan Sears argue, ‘the use of terms such as Islamist, jihadist, salafist and terrorist to express security considerations legitimizes international military violence and it legitimizes the ontological priority given to the Malian state.’\textsuperscript{58} The importance of framing the terrorist threat is further evident in the legitimization of the interim Malian government.

The emphasis on Islamist and ‘terrorist’ violence made the French military intervention and the authority of the Malian political elites unproblematic: ‘interim authorities clearly capitalized on a widespread perception of an Islamist threat, and it effectively garnered international support for the Malian government at a time when its domestic standing was doubtful’.\textsuperscript{59} Of particular note in the shift from Serval to Barkhane is that once the door was open to the French there was a shift across the region with respect to sovereignty. Mali and regional leaders invited the French military and, subsequently, regional leaders in particular agreed to compromise their own sovereignty by permitting the regional presence of the French. As Martha Finnemore argues,
there is never any doubt that on some level intervention serves state interests but the more interesting point is ‘what state interests are and which interests intervention serves’\textsuperscript{60} This becomes particularly interesting in the context of French intervention in the Sahel. President Hollande is very careful to emphasize first and foremost the African role (MINUSMA) and the Malian invitation, rather than threats to France and Europe. While these issues certainly arise, they are subjugated to the greater African regional interests. The participation of regional actors as allies to the French also serves their economic and political interests by bolstering their militaries and their international standing. As Bruce Charbonneau writes, the dichotomy of local versus international interests (as well as humanitarian intervention versus military intervention) should be questioned. It becomes nearly impossible to delineate between local and international interests that tend to blur together.\textsuperscript{61}

A regional approach to counterterrorism is not new. The United States has pursued a regional approach to counterterrorism through the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative, TSCTI under Africa Command. The European Union has also pursued a regional approach through the European Union Training Mission, EUTM. Barkhane marks a change in the French military strategy from a targeted to a regional approach.\textsuperscript{62} Liberal arguments on the intervention would include claims that it supported global justice, was legal, and supported the global rule of law and regional/international opinion concerning what was the morally responsible thing to do. A more critical argument would be that this was a French neocolonialist move to entrench themselves geographically in the Sahel region.\textsuperscript{63} The twist is that the French were invited to intervene.

President Hollande emphasized in a speech at the French military airbase in Chad, ‘If we let terrorists prosper in this part of the African continent, there will be consequences for Europe and France.’\textsuperscript{64} In the following statement, President Hollande rationalizes the military expansion in the region and the original Malian intervention by emphasizing the ‘Africanness’ of the operation and the role as ‘rescuer’. He reiterates that ‘terrorist groups were broken’ thanks to the proximity of French air and ground troops.

\ldots when France intervened in Mali, we must never forget, that is to say when I made the decision to come in support of, to the aid of, to the rescue of the interim President of Mali, M. Traoré, and as part of an African operation. The first planes that took off, the first strikes that broke the terrorist column, those planes came from Ndjamenah. We must salute the soldiers who fulfilled this mission because it was extremely perilous. But it was because we were nearby, well not very far away, that there was the capacity to intervene.\ldots And this could only have been done by air and that is how the terrorist groups were broken. Then next, the ground intervention was able to achieve the results that you are familiar with.\textsuperscript{65}
Conclusions

Previous peace accords in Mali, such as the Tamanrasset Accords (1991), the National Pact (1992), and the Algiers Accords (2006) were not fully implemented. In addition, decentralization, which was created in part as an institutional mechanism for greater autonomy in the north was never effectively implemented. The failure of the Malian government to follow through on agreements has rightly frustrated northern populations. The Ouagadougou Agreement resulted in the MNLA and MIA agreeing to the critical elements of secularism and territorial integrity. In an article in the Washington Post (18 April 2014), critics argued President Keita was not being serious in creating an effective peace process in the north. Prior to the Algiers meetings, there was a perceived lack of coherence in peacemaking. While efforts such as the Estates General on Decentralization and the Assises nationales sur le nord (1–3 November 2013) stand out as concrete steps in the process of peacebuilding, the delegation from Gao did not participate in Assises and is therefore a significant failure of the process. It has also been reported that ‘peace activists in Timbuktu hold regular inter-communal meetings but complain of a lack of support from the state’. Despite the Peace Accords signed in Algiers in June 2015, peace has remained elusive and there have been multiple violations of the ceasefire. In September 2015, GATIA and CMA came into conflict over control of occupation of Anefis, a town in Kidal region, and signaled the continued tensions over strategic towns in the north.

The framing of the ongoing militarization in the Sahel around terrorism is critical to the international legitimacy of the mission. The French intervention by invitation has been managed in a way such that most Malians welcomed the French presence and did not define it as neocolonial. As one Malian in Bamako proclaimed at the time of the French intervention, ‘Hollande saved us, he saved Mali.’ The refusal of the French to insist on the disarming of the MNLA and reduce the insurgent presence in the Kidal region and the MNLA’s success in not being labeled by the international community as a terrorist organization has resulted in a shift in attitude toward French military presence. France relied upon the MNLA in the fight against rebel groups in the north at the same time that the MNLA was perceived from Bamako as being responsible for the rebellion in the first place. The expansion across the region and creation of bases may further change the perception of the French role, but those leaders welcoming the French seek to benefit through increased military support. In addition, French allies will certainly be targeted. In September 2014, five Tuareg suspected of providing intelligence to the French were kidnapped and one was beheaded. With the French presence expanding across the Sahel, attacks on allies in Burkina Faso, Niger, and other countries will likely increase. The death toll among soldiers in the UN peacekeeping mission has been on the rise, and President Idriss Déby accused MINUSMA of using Chadian soldiers as ‘shields’ and not giving all UN soldiers equal protection. In the wake of attacks, a Bamako headline read
'Insecurity in the Sahel: Barkhane and MINUSMA lose the desert'. According to the official MINUSMA website, 56 peacekeepers have now been killed during the MINUSMA mission. Several of the soldiers have been ambushed on roads in northern Mali.

The crisis in Mali remains a complex issue. By altering their mission from Serval to Barkhane, the French sought to extract themselves from Mali’s internal political problems while pursuing a regional strategy in the war on terror. The decontextualization and lack of understanding of the roots of the armed rebellion as well as increased militarization do little to resolve the underlying problems that lead to conflict and a rise in insurgent attacks in the first place. The continued strikes against French and UN targets, the multiple violations of the Algiers ceasefire agreement, and the expansion of the zone of conflict out of northern Mali are all ominous signs for the region.

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9. For analysis of the structure and hierarchies of Tuareg society, see Pezard and Shurkin, ‘Toward a Secure and Stable Mali’.
10. United States, ‘Terrorist Designations of Iyad Ag Ghali’.
12. ‘Scission au MNLA’.
13. For discussion of political divisions, see Tinti, ‘Lines in the Malian Sand’.
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53. Ibid.
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