

France's Invasion of Mali: A Carefully Planned Military Intervention

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France perpetrated two large deceptions in conducting its military intervention into Mali more than seven weeks ago. These have been universally accepted in mainstream media reporting. The first is that the unilateral decision to invade Mali on January 11, 2013 was hastily made, prompted by imminent military threats by Islamic fundamentalist forces against the south of the country where the large majority of Malians live.

The second is that France intends to quickly exit Mali. "French leaders have said they intend to start pulling out the 4000 troops in Mali in March to hand over security to the Malian army and to the UN-backed AFISMA force, an African military contingent," says a typical report, in the *Chicago Tribune* on February 18.

Restoring capitalist stability in Mali will be a tough job. The Mali population is deeply sensitive to violations of its national sovereignty. And the peoples of the world are weary from the recent military adventures in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.



But the economic stakes leave France, the U.S. and their allies little choice but to carry on with intervention. Billions of dollars of capitalist investment is pouring into Africa in an unprecedented grab for resource wealth. Mining investments from Canada alone have risen from \$6-billion in 2005 to \$31.6-billion in 2011. Meanwhile, as an article in the *Toronto Star* [recently reported](#), there is a "troubling trend" in the continent toward "resource nationalism."

"Under pressure from civil society groups and labour unions, governments are driving a harder bargain" to obtain a better share of resource wealth and perhaps improve environmental and other regulations.

Far from planning any withdrawal, the imperialists are putting into place a long-term military occupation of Mali, likely masked with an "African" component and a rubber stamp approval of the UN Security Council.

A Planned Intervention

A February 7 report [published in the France daily](#) *Le Nouvel Observateur* provides an extraordinary, blow by blow account of the lead-up to the France intervention in Mali. Columnist Vincent Jauvert and his colleague Sarah Halifa-Legrand spoke to officials in the French government and ministry of defence. The journalists describe the deep concern that arose in the halls of power in France following the military defeat of Mali's army and

government in early 2012 by the pro-autonomy movements of the Tuareg and other national minorities in the north of the country.

The defeat became a double fiasco when the U.S.-trained leader of Mali's army, Captain Amadou Sanogo, led an overthrow of the country's constitutional government one month later, on March 22. None other than General Carter Ham, commander of the U.S. Africa Command (Africom) recently acknowledged the fiasco when he admitted to an audience at Howard University in Washington on January 24 that there [have been "shortcomings"](#) in the years-long training program of the Mali army.

French-led plans for intervention accelerated following the election in France in May 2012. "When the outgoing government passed over the (foreign affairs) files, Mali was on the top of the pile," one official at the ministry of defence told the journalists.

New French president François Hollande has strenuously denied any planned intention to intervene in Mali. But soon after his election, French special military forces were infiltrating the north of the country to map aerial bombing targets and conduct other preparations.

The Hollande government masked its intentions by proposing an "African-led" military force to take control of northern Mali. But Jauvert reports that this was never a serious proposal. The United States was entirely unconvinced, saying that few, if any, of the African militaries are up to the task. Some leaders of African countries told France the same thing. Whether France believed its own words is largely unimportant because plans for an intervention proceeded apace.

Three UN Security Council resolutions on Mali were voted in 2012. They opposed the national rights struggles of the Tuaregs, Arabs and other national minorities in the north in increasingly harsh language. However, none endorsed a French intervention. The last resolution, in December, mentioned the creation of an "African-led" military occupation force, but that was left in the dust by the intervention of January 11.

France had no international mandate to intervene, and that's equally the case in Mali law. There is no constitutional government in the country. The elected government was overthrown last March. The "interim" prime minister eventually invested by "interim" president Dioncounda Traoré was tossed out of office by the military on December 11. Traoré himself was badly beaten by Mali soldiers last May and went to Paris for safety and treatment. The army's U.S. and French "trainers" were reduced to pressuring for Traoré's return and resumption of office.

Adding to the political farce, Sanogo was appointed last week by Traoré to head a commission that is supposed to "reform" Mali's military. The first fruit of the new commission appears to be the disbanding of the paratroop regiment that intervened unsuccessfully last April to reverse the March coup. [As reported](#) in January by the *Ottawa Citizen's* David Pugliese, several dozen of the Canadian-trained paratroopers were kidnapped and disappeared soon after by the army. Tensions remain high between that regiment and the army.

Without UN approval or an authoritative Mali government in place, a fable was needed by France to justify intervention. This appeared in the form of dire reports in early January that well-armed Islamic fundamentalists along the unofficial line demarcating the north of Mali were about to move on the south, possibly targeting the capital city Bamako. International

news reports were all over this story, further lending it an air of credibility.

Who Are the 'Jihadists'?

The entry of heavily armed and well-financed Islamic fundamentalist forces in the north of Mali last year has indeed been a deeply troubling event for the country. They pushed aside the longstanding, national rights movements of the Tuareg and other national minorities and ruled with an iron fist, violating the elementary rights of the populations they controlled and causing Malians to fear they could take control of larger areas of the country. France had considerable success in selling its military intervention as a rescue effort.

Author and professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London) Jeremy Keenan reported in some detail in a [December 2012 article](#) about the shadowy ties that link the fundamentalist forces across north Africa to Algeria, the U.S. and the Gulf states. His article was titled "How Washington helped foster the Islamist uprising in Mali" and he writes, "The catastrophe now being played out in Mali is the inevitable outcome of the way in which the Global War on Terror has been inserted into the Sahara-Sahel by the U.S., in concert with Algerian intelligence operatives, since 2002."[\[1\]](#)

In the past decade, the United States has initiated a vast militarization of the countries of west Africa. It founded the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership in 2005, now regrouping 10 west African countries. For three of the past six years, Mali was the host country of the annual military exercises of the partnership, termed "Operation Flintlock."

Such wasteful expenditures of resources are especially repugnant considering the existing difficulties in west Africa, including extreme poverty, public health emergencies and sharp shifts in climate and rainfall patterns that are affecting peasant livelihoods and food production.

No Peace or Reconciliation

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) has offered to cooperate with France in battling the fundamentalists.[\[2\]](#) There are reports of coexistence, if not cooperation, in some northern areas. On February 17, the movement issued a statement welcoming an eventual UN military force.

An [earlier communiqué](#) by the group on February 11 listed 12 proposals to guide the recovery and future development of the north of Mali, including respect for human rights, meaningful economic and social development and a resolution of decades-old demands for political self-determination. These could well serve as a social and economic blueprint for the whole country.

But there is little evidence that France and its allies have any intention of doing anything but continue the plunder of Mali's and Africa's resources. The MNLA's demand that the Mali army not be allowed into the north of Mali has been ignored, for example. Leading human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and FIDA, as well as some media in France have documented predictable reprisals by the army against civilian populations as it arrived in the footsteps of the France invasion.

One tragic story among many has been the [forced exodus](#) of the Tuareg and Arab populations from Timbuktu as the French and Malian armies took control of the city in early February (a story that has been ignored by the world's media).

A February 17 [declaration by the MNLA](#) explains, “The MNLA has established that the return of the army, militias and administration of Mali into the territory of Azawad with the support of France has opened the door to reprisals and massacres of the Tuareg and Arab populations.”

France has blocked journalists from traveling to and reporting from northern Mali.

Meanwhile, the offensive by the fundamentalists in 2011-12 has stirred an already existing anti-Tuareg chauvinism in southern Mali and in neighbouring countries, perhaps fueled by what may have been strategic errors by the MNLA in creating temporary alliances with fundamentalists to try and end the Mali army’s deepening war against Tuareg autonomy.

One capitalist politician in Mali calls the MNLA and its demands for political autonomy a “trojan horse” of Islamic fundamentalists. Another, former prime minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (1994-2000), says Mali should never talk to the MNLA because of the latter’s pro-autonomy program.

Most political parties in Mali, including those on the left, have supported the French intervention. Some on the left even backed the military coup last year. The coup’s declared aim was to prosecute a more effective war against “secessionists” in the north (this was even before the arrival of large numbers of armed fundamentalists).

Regional tensions are heightened by the French intervention, particularly with neighbouring Niger. Like Mali, it is a desperately poor country with a non-democratic government and with an even larger Tuareg population. AFP reported on February 10 that Niger’s President Mahamadou Issoufou “has made forceful demands for the disarmament of the MNLA and spoken out against talks with the movement on self-determination.”

Niger [recently agreed](#) to allow the U.S. to operate drones from its soil and U.S. President Barack Obama has dispatched [100 U.S. soldiers](#) to the country. Niger has suffered three military coups in the past 16 years.

Obfuscation by media of the numbers and origins of people made refugees by the conflict in Mali further confuses the situation. The “hundreds of thousands” of refugees from northern Mali reported in mainstream press refer mostly to who fled the *Mali army’s* war against the peoples of the north.

Looking at prospects for peace, Peter Pham of the U.S. think-tank Atlantic Council (himself a supporter of the French intervention) told an *IRIN News* report on February 12, “The Tuareg historically have had three deals with Malian governments that were legitimate, but all of them are now in the dustbin of history. Why would they possibly believe that a deal with the current batch of characters would hold?”

At least one mining industry observer in Canada doesn’t hold out much hope for reconciliation in Mali, either. *Canadian Business* reports that Toronto mining analyst Pawel Rajszel, head of the precious metals team at Veritas Investment Research, told investors in January to, “take their money and run.” “We haven’t changed our opinion,” he told the *Canadian Press* more recently.

Imperial Solutions

France and its allies are now working at the UN Security Council to cobble together a Haiti-

style military/political occupation mission in Mali. Ground soldiers will be African as much as possible, but the overall direction will be firmly in the hands of the U.S. and Europe. That will be all the more the case in Mali than in Haiti for there is no African military that can assume the same leading role as Brazil and Chile have rather successfully done in Haiti.

The European Union has already taken a big step toward occupation through its decision this week to dispatch a military “training” force of 500 soldiers. Lead contingents, including from Germany, have already arrived.

Another parallel with Haiti is the insistence by the foreign powers to stage a quick national election. Never mind that hundreds of thousands of people in Mali have been driven into refugee camps or other harsh living conditions and that the country’s military is still in control of political decision-making.

During a visit this past week to Mali of a delegation of U.S. senators and members of Congress, [Senator Christopher Coons](#) said, “After there is a full restoration of democracy, I would think it is likely that we will renew our support for the Malian military.” Coons is chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa.

Mali’s population has been weakened and disempowered by decades of neocolonial plunder, foreign aid and military intervention. As they recover from the disastrous policies of their pliant governments and foreign overseers, active solidarity is needed to assist them in asserting anew their class and national interests. •

Roger Annis is a writer and antiwar activist in Vancouver, Canada. This article first appeared on the [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) website.

Notes:

[1.](#) Jeremy Keenan is the author of the 2009 *The Dark Sahara: America’s War on Terror in the Sahara* and of the forthcoming *The Dying Sahara: U.S. Imperialism and Terror in Africa*, both published by Pluto Press.

[2.](#) Azawad is the name given by the Tuareg people to their historic homeland that transcends the present-day borders of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya and Algeria. For background on the Tuareg people, read the recent article, “[Who are the Tuareg?](#),” by Sarah Knopp.

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