



Survival

Global Politics and Strategy

ISSN: 0039-6338 (Print) 1468-2699 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tsur20>

A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali

François Heisbourg

To cite this article: François Heisbourg (2013) A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali, *Survival*, 55:2, 7-18, DOI: [10.1080/00396338.2013.784458](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2013.784458)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2013.784458>



Published online: 03 Apr 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4705



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali

François Heisbourg

The war in Mali broke out on 11 January 2013 in the form of an out-of-the-blue French offensive against two armed columns heading towards Bamako, the country's capital. During the following weeks, a brigade-sized French force, accompanied by a similar number of soldiers from West African countries, reclaimed an area the size of Texas from jihadist groups, which in spring 2012 proclaimed to have set up an independent territory called Azawad in the northern 60% of Mali.¹ Although the war in Mali was not a blitzkrieg, as claimed by some, in some ways it can be considered a harbinger of postmodern conflict.² The war may yet slide into a strategic dead end reminiscent of Iraq and Afghanistan, but such a fate is not preordained.

Background and genesis

Landlocked Mali is one of the world's poorest countries, ranking 175th on the Human Development Index, framed by artificial colonial-era boundaries and lacking all but agricultural and pastoral resources.³ Twice the size of France, the country is desert and scrub in the north, and savannah and riverine wetland in the south, with the Niger River forming the great hub along which its largest cities are aligned: Bamako, Ségou and Mopti in the south; Timbuktu and Gao in the north. Mali's 16 million inhabitants are overwhelmingly Muslim, and are linguistically and ethnically diverse.

François Heisbourg is special adviser at the Paris-based Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique and Chairman of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. He has served as a member of the French presidential commissions preparing the Defence and National Security White Papers of 2008 and 2013. This article builds on a lecture given at the IISS in London on 15 February 2013.



French, the official language, is written and spoken by less than one-sixth of the population; the inhabitants of the desert and semi-desert northern half of the country are largely of Berber (Tuareg) and Arabic origin, and make up about one-tenth of the population. This historically deep divide between the peoples of the desert and those of the cultivated south exists in various forms in neighbouring Mauritania and Niger, as well as in Chad. It was also evident in pre-partition Sudan. In Mali, as in these countries, the handling, or mishandling, of this cultural chasm lies at the heart of post-independence strife.⁴ However, Mali also has a strong sense of self as the heir to the erstwhile Mali Empire, which, during the European medieval era, was a seat of trade, prosperity and learning. This past came back into the spotlight when Timbuktu's invaluable trove of manuscripts was threat-

ened by the jihadists, who had also begun to destroy some of the city's fabled shrines.

Mali's early decades of independence were atypical in the sense that, after a failed attempt at federation with neighbouring Senegal, the country distanced itself from France, leaving the French monetary area and looking to the Soviet bloc for military (but not ideological) assistance.⁵ The overthrow of Mali's military government in 1992 was followed by a decade of democratic rule, which has since soured into a combination of kleptocracy and fecklessness in the face of deteriorating regional security. Traditional trans-Saharan smuggling; modern drug-running on the route between Latin America and Europe; and the spread of jihadist terrorism spearheaded by militants expelled from Algeria during the country's civil war: these factors combined with the unhappy relationship between an incompetent central government and the unfulfilled aspirations of the Tuareg minority. Matters came to a head in March 2012 with a military coup that was successful only in the south and the parallel decision of the non-sectarian Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), the mainstream Tuareg political organisation, to join forces with the various jihadist groups in the north: Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique; Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest; and the largely Tuareg Ansar Dine. Infighting occurred on parallel lines in both segments of the country. In the south, a counter-coup by part of the Malian army, the red berets, was crushed by the incumbent green berets; in the north, the MNLA was rewarded for its Faustian pact with the jihadists with expulsion from Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal. The enforcement of the most severe interpretation of sharia became the order of the day. Flush with money from contraband and ransom payments, and awash with weaponry from captured Malian army stockpiles or purchased from the great Libyan arms-mart, the jihadists were in a position to contemplate the regional expansion of their activities, possibly in conjunction with like-minded groups operating in northern Nigeria (Boko Haram) and in its vicinity (Ansaru).⁶

*Matters came
to a head in
March*

With the territorial integrity of Mali openly threatened, the UN Security Council found it unusually easy to agree on a set of unanimous resolutions,

which first allowed for the planning of the return of Mali's 'sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity', and, in December 2012, for the deployment of an African-led international mission to support Mali under chapter VII of the UN Charter (UNSCR 2085).⁷ The countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) were to contribute to the force, called *Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali* (MISMA).⁸ The working assumption was that the force would be set up gradually during 2013 and trained by an EU mission, with operations possibly beginning in the autumn after the waters of the Niger River receded with the onset of the dry season. The enemy, as is so often the case in war, decided to follow its own timetable.

Preventing 'Sahelistan'

During 8/9 January 2013, the signature 'technicals' of the jihadist groups started to congregate on both sides of the Niger River, around 500km from Bamako.⁹ On 10 January, two columns of around 150 vehicles, most with a weapons platform and half-a-dozen crew members, moved towards Mopti on the right bank, and Ségou on the left bank. In the absence of opposition or natural obstacles, such flying columns can readily cover 500 kilometres in formation within 24 hours. Malian army resistance was sufficiently stiff to allow Dioncounda Traoré, Bamako's interim president, to request assistance from France, which acted under article 51 of the UN Charter on the same day.¹⁰ French President François Hollande ordered an immediate military intervention, which took effect on 11 January. Special forces combat helicopters stationed in Burkina Faso attacked the column approaching Mopti and an air base at Sévaré; with some delay, the first bombing operation was conducted by four *Mirage* 2000D combat aircraft based at N'Djamena in Chad (travelling a distance equivalent to that between London and Saint Petersburg); light armour entered Bamako by road within less than 24 hours from the French *Licorne* force based in Côte d'Ivoire. The enemy was caught unawares by the suddenness of the French attack. Having decided to operate as a military force, and having tied themselves to the logistical constraints of motorised long-range warfare across vast distances, the jihadists had 'gone symmetrical' against a military force more capable than their own. The enemy may have assumed that an even-

tual French operation would not have occurred until after the two – maybe three – days it would have taken it to enter Bamako after brushing aside residual Malian forces. ‘Sahelistan’ appeared to be in sight. Indeed, some technicals on the left bank of the Niger River managed to get within 200km of Bamako before they were eliminated.

Opération Serval, as it became known on 12 January, then proceeded in two distinct phases, in operational and political terms. During the first ten days, the declared war aims were to secure Bamako, stop the terrorist offensive, strike the enemy’s rear bases and prepare for the arrival of African forces – ECOWAS having announced its decision to send forces to Mali, which began arriving from 19 January onwards. This was no mean feat, given the limited readiness of these forces.¹¹ By 20 January, the Malian towns south of Azawad that had been seized by jihadists were liberated.

Stage two saw the war aims shift to the restoration of territorial integrity, along with an emphasis on the fight against terrorism.¹² A French spearhead retook Gao, while Timbuktu’s fall was hastened by a night assault airdrop, a very rare military tactic. By mid-February, all towns of consequence, including those lying close to the Algerian (Kidal, Tessalit) and Niger borders, had been seized.

The manoeuvre phase of the war had reached its conclusion. French and Chadian soldiers then sought to ferret out jihadist fighters in hotly contested fire-fights in the hill country abutting Algeria, while stay-behind jihadist forces harassed African garrisons in Gao and Kidal.

Preliminary military lessons

Among the war’s initial characteristics was a standing-start intervention, with less than 24 hours’ warning to bring a peacetime military array into action, a situation akin to the beginning of air operations in Libya. Operations took place over vast distances, both within the theatre (the distance from Bamako to Tessalit is in excess of 1,300km) and between the theatre and main operating bases in France (4,000km). The conflict was three-dimensional in all aspects of the operation, including the use of manoeuvre and assault helicopters to sustain long-distance, high-tempo ground forces operations. The scale of in-theatre forces was limited by the deliberate emphasis on prompt,

high-tempo action, and by the logistical constraints of a large, limited-infrastructure environment.

Success was achieved, in the first instance, by the pre-conflict positioning of a small (several hundred soldiers), expert (largely special forces) and air-mobile force in Burkina Faso, within a few hundred kilometres of the enemy, backstopped by air power in Chad and France, and light armour in Côte d'Ivoire.¹³ Prior contingency planning (tied to the eventual operations flowing from UNSC resolutions) and the ability to adapt such planning in close-to-real time to new circumstances after 10 January played a major role. Although the tempo and momentum of the pre-intervention OPLAN had little in common with what actually took place, logistical requirements and lines of advance had been thought through beforehand. No less important was an unprecedented array of sensors to provide timely, useful intelligence to forces operating in theatre, with an equally unprecedented integration and shortening of the observation–decision–action loop.¹⁴ Given the small size of the *Serval* force, the leverage provided by all-sources intelligence was critical. The timely availability of air transport and in-flight refuelling enablers was essential to sustaining the rhythm of operations, French assets being either stretched (in-flight refuelling) or close to non-existent (strategic airlift, with its A400M aircraft six years behind their delivery schedule). The rapid provision of C-17 aircraft by the UK and Canada (later followed by the United States and Sweden, among others) and the early leasing of commercial heavy-lift Antonovs were particularly important to the tempo of operations.

Beyond the specifics of the Mali theatre, several interlinked generic lessons can be learned. Strategic upsets – what the French called *ruptures stratégiques* in their 2008 Defence White Paper – are characteristic of international security in the era of globalisation. Circumstances can change suddenly and brutally: in military terms, a premium will then tend to be placed on a timely response, as was the case in Libya and Mali (and may be the case in Syria if chemical weapons are used).¹⁵ Pre-conflict positioning, even on a modest scale; highly adaptive planning; and the availability of high-readiness combat forces and enablers will be more important than in the past. Such readiness, however, comes at a very high cost, at a time of shrinking defence budgets.

In turn, the requirement for prompt action and the reality of spending cuts accentuates the broader trend towards smaller military forces. This further shifts the emphasis towards a knowledge-based military, with a smaller number of units leveraged by a proportionally greater investment in intelligence support. The fact that information gathering, processing and integration responds to the benign effect of Moore's Law rather than the unsustainable constraints of Augustine's Law (whereby the unit cost of weapons platforms doubles each generation) contributes to this trend.¹⁶ In other words, even if one strips the Mali conflict of its intelligence-friendly specifics (a sunny, wide-open desert in much of the north), it is wise to increasingly invest in *connaissance et anticipation* (knowledge and anticipation) resources, while acknowledging that a minimum number of weapons platforms are still necessary. Indeed, most European countries have already lost broad-spectrum kinetic military capabilities without having invested in knowledge-based assets. France and the United Kingdom are exceptions – and threatened ones at that – rather than the rule.

Exit?

Recent experience, from Iraq to Libya and Afghanistan, has demonstrated the immense difficulty of translating immediate military success into long-term political and strategic advantage. Unsurprisingly, questions about *enlissement* (quagmire) were posed in the French media within hours of the launch of *Opération Serval*. The question of the exit strategy is no less compelling to politicians and defence experts.¹⁷ However, the strategic impasses in Iraq and Afghanistan may have dragged us into an intellectual dead end, making us pose the wrong question. Rather than asking 'when and under what circumstances are we going to get out of here?', it may be more worthwhile to ask 'what kind of military commitment do we need, and can we afford to achieve our follow-on political and strategic aims?' The difference between these approaches is deep and highly material. The deployments of US forces in Western Europe and East Asia are, rightly, not over-determined by the 'exit' question but by the 'what's it for?' question. France has been operating in Chad, off and on, since 1968: one example of several open-ended operational deployments by the French. As long as the mission is

widely seen as legitimate, affordable and achievable, exit per se should not be of the essence.¹⁸

In other words, the challenge for the French in Mali is less that of ‘when do we leave?’ but under what set of goals and means could it make sense for us to stay. Legitimacy will probably not be the main problem; if anything, there may be a strong pull by the Malian authorities to convince France to assume broader missions – such as counter-insurgency and stabilisation – all too reminiscent of the Afghan experience. Affordability will mercifully temper any temptation to go down a road that leads to public disaffection and strategic failure. Conversely, Mali may prove to be a convenient location for positioning forces in the relatively low-cost ‘light footprint’ mode which has served France so well, to deal with the intertwined threats jihadist terrorism and narco-trafficking pose in West Africa. Achievability is another criterion which may lead the French to stay in Mali. With Algeria closing off its territory to cross-border columns of smugglers and terrorists, Mali provides an alternative link between North and West Africa. Special forces from France, the United States (which has its own, little-publicised assets in the Sahel) and others, working with local partners (such as the French-trained forces in Mauritania or the hardened desert fighters from Chad), would be natural players.

However, this may be to paint too reassuring a picture. The threat level in West Africa has risen greatly during the last decade, with well-armed jihadist groups from Algeria and the Sahel benefitting from the ready availability of weapons and money, while sub-Saharan terrorism, notably in Nigeria, becomes ever more violent and deeply entrenched in densely populated countries. Jihadist aims and capabilities were highlighted by the attack against a key Algerian natural gas processing facility at In Amenas in January 2013, shortly after Algiers had closed its border with Mali and allowed over-flight rights to French combat aircraft en route to *Opération Serval*. US Vice President Joe Biden may have been too sanguine when he stated in Munich that most al-Qaeda affiliates ‘do not pose the same threat, with the same capacity, to our homelands as core al-Qaeda once did’.¹⁹ In view of these trends, even with help from United States Africa Command and ad hoc support from European partners, France may not be able to hold

the ring on her own in the Sahel as it has done ever since forces controlled by Muammar Gadhafi, Libya's former leader, invaded Chad several decades ago. A much higher level of economic, political and, on occasion, military involvement by the EU and the United States may be necessary for sustainable development and good governance in the Sahel. In the meantime, the French soldier on.

Notes

- 1 The force included close to 4,000 French military personnel; some 5,400 Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali and Chadian soldiers; and an unspecified number of Malian soldiers on 21 February, according to the French defence ministry website, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/mali/actualite/operation-serval-point-de-situation-du-21-fevrier-2013>. Although debatable in theological terms, the word jihadist is used here because it includes all terrorist groups professing holy war, encompassing, for instance, Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest and Ansar Dine, as well as those claiming to be affiliated with al-Qaeda, such as Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique. The word Azawad comes from *azawagh*, Tuareg for 'land of transhumance'.
- 2 Jean-Dominique Merchet, 'Au Mali la Blitzkrieg de l'Armée Française', *Marianne*, 28 January 2013, <http://www.marianne.net/blogsecretdefense/?start=35>.
- 3 The Human Development Index listed 187 countries in 2011. See <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics>.
- There has been speculation about Mali's mineral resources, notably uranium. See Mark Hibbs, 'Uranium in Sharan Sands', *Arms Control Wonk*, 22 January 2013, <http://hibbs.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1427/uranium-in-saharan-sands>.
- 4 During the colonial era, Mali was called *Soudan* (paralleling the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan), from the Arabic word *sudanen*, meaning 'the Blacks'. The slave trade was at the heart of pre-modern Arab-African relations.
- 5 Communauté Financière Africaine was created by France in 1945. Mali dropped out in 1962 and returned in 1985. The CFA franc is pegged to the euro and is currently used by 15 countries, including eight West African states in the framework of the West African Monetary Union (Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine).
- 6 Vicki Huddleston, a former US ambassador to Mali, has claimed that France paid \$17m for the attempted recovery of hostages in Niger. See Lori Hinnant, 'France's Ransom to Free Mali Hostages Ultimately Funded Al Qaeda, Former Ambassador Says', *Huffington Post*, 8 February 2013, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.

- com/2013/02/08/france-17-million-ransoms-al-qaeda_n_2645426.html. During the last decade, dozens of hostages from a broad array of Western countries have been taken and freed in the Sahara, presumably involving ransoms similar to that alleged by Huddleston.
- 7 http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2085.
 - 8 ECOWAS's 15 member states are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
 - 9 In Africa, the word 'technical' is used to designate improvised armed vehicles, usually derived from four-wheel-drive pickup trucks. The word was coined in Somalia at the beginning of that country's civil war in the early 1990s.
 - 10 Providing, notably, for the 'inherent right of individual and collective self-defence'. See <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter7.shtml>.
 - 11 For more detail, see Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian's hearing by the National Assembly's Defence Commission on 23 January 2013 at http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr-cdef/12-13/c1213041.asp#P4_203.
 - 12 See Hollande's speech at Bamako on 2 February 2013, <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/allocutions-du-president-de-la-republique-et-de-m-dioncounda-traore-president-de-la-republique-du-mali>.
 - 13 This force array, set up before 2012 as a result of the spate of hostage-taking in the region, was known as *Dispositif Sabre*.
 - 14 Including the recently launched, highly agile *Pléiades* surveillance satellite constellation; *Hélios* II surveillance satellites; more than six electronic intercept aircraft of various sorts; two *Harfang* MALE drones; and foreign intelligence-gathering assets such as a British *Sentinel* radar ground surveillance aircraft and, under French-German-Italian pre-war pooling agreements, radar satellite imagery from Italy's *COSMO-SkyMed* and Germany's *SAR-Lupe*.
 - 15 English-language translation available at http://merln.ndu.edu/whitepapers/france_english2008.pdf.
 - 16 Gordon Moore, founder of Intel, observed in 1965 that the number of transistors per square inch of semiconductor would double every year or so. In practice, information-processing has doubled every 18 months for more than 40 years, with a corresponding reduction in unit cost. Norman Ralph Augustine, former Secretary of the US Army, observed during the mid-1970s that the cost of combat aircraft grows exponentially (by extension, this law applies to other weapons platforms), predicting that in the year 2054, the entire US defence budget would purchase one tactical aircraft.
 - 17 French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius has been prominent in mentioning exit dates. See Scott Sayare and Alan Cowell, 'As Mali Fighting Persists, France Vows to Exit in Weeks', *New York Times*, 6 February 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/07/world/africa/france-mali-militants.html>. Etienne de Durand's answer, like mine, is to advocate a degree of

ongoing presence. See Etienne de Durand, 'Does France have an Exit Strategy in Mali?', *Foreign Affairs*, 20 February 2013, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139020/etienne-de-durand/does-france-have-an-exit-strategy-in-mali.

- ¹⁸ With three significant combat operations (*Tacaud*, brigade-sized *Manta* and *Epervier*), including the 1986 bombing of the Libyan air base at Ouadi Doum. See Stéphane Mantoux, 'De Tacaud à Toyota – La Guerre au Tchad (1978 – 1987)', Alliance

Géostratégique, 22 February 2013, <http://alliancegeostrategique.org/2013/02/02/au-commencement-etait-la-guerre-22de-tacaud-a-toyota-la-guerre-au-tchad-1978-1987/>.

- ¹⁹ Joe Biden, 'Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden to the Munich Security Conference. Hotel Bayerischer Hof Munich, Germany', The White House Press Office, 2 February 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/02/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-munich-security-conference-hotel-bayeri>.

