1   FRANCE, MALI, AND AFRICAN JIHAD

PANETTA GETS A PHONE CALL

It was Friday, January 11, 2013 morning in Washington afternoon in Paris and Bamako. U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta took an emergency telephone call from French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. Le Drian had requested the call through his defense attaché Bruno Caitucoli only a few hours earlier. The normally collected Caitucoli had been visibly concerned. No one was sure exactly what had prompted the emergency call.[1] Their French counterparts had been focused on a developing crisis in their former West African colony of Mali for the last few days, but U.S. officials had several more pressing national security issues on their minds – especially NATO's controversial drawdown after a decade of war in Afghanistan and a civil war in Syria that was growing bloodier by the day.

The call got off on the wrong foot when Le Drian began by explaining the time had come to take action "rapidly" in Mali,[2] and Panetta took this to be a request that the United States start the process of considering some form of joint intervention – perhaps some modified version of the 2011 intervention in Libya – and responded positively that he was prepared to begin discussing an intervention. "No, Mr. Secretary," replied the French defense minister, "We are not asking for you to consider an operation. I am calling to inform you that we have just begun one."

Secretary Panetta's jaw dropped.[3] At the French Defense Ministry, officials waited for the silence on the other end of the line to break.[4] Terrorist groups closely tied to al Qa'ida had been in control of

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northern Mali for a year, but that France should act so precipitously, so boldly, and so independently came as a surprise in Washington. For several months France and the United States had been struggling to put together an African-led response to the problem of Mali's north. France's decision to go in alone was a near total about-face. It went against a recent, hard-won Franco-American agreement on how the situation in Mali would be handled and threatened to open new rifts within the U.S. government over the role of military force in resolving the crisis.

But Secretary Panetta's fierce antiterrorist convictions immediately overcame any initial hesitations. "We're with you, this is a common fight," he told Le Drian.[5] Defeating al Qa'ida was a core interest shared by France and the United States. The two nations had been waging a global war against it worldwide for more than a decade. Anything France could do to further the common cause was clearly in the U.S. interest. Panetta thus pledged "whatever" American support France needed.[6] Unfortunately, it would turn out to be harder than expected to follow through on that pledge, and would generate friction on both sides of the Atlantic – as well as in the field – before it could be worked out.

In the meantime, thousands of miles away from both capitals and hundreds of miles northwest of the Malian capital of Bamako, in the sandy, semiarid plains outside the town of Mopti, two French special forces Gazelle helicopters were already in a fierce firefight with hundreds of al Qa'ida associates on the ground. The French special operations troops had taken off only an hour earlier from Burkina Faso, where they were stationed as part of the regional French counterterrorism operation *Sabre*. Terrified by reports of an advancing vanguard of al Qa'ida fighters, the Malian army had fled the scene, leaving the French and their two helicopters the only barrier that stood between al Qa'ida and Bamako, a city of more than a million with an international airport and daily direct flights to Paris. By the time Secretary Panetta and Minister Le Drian spoke, the first French soldier had already been killed in action. The French war on al Qa'ida in Africa and what would become operation *Serval* – "wildcat" – was under way.

A little more than two years before, the Arab Spring had unleashed turbulent political and social forces across North Africa, buffeting

the region into crisis. Although global attention had focused primarily on the impact of the Arab uprisings further east in Egypt and Syria, the shockwave of the revolts against traditional authority was also felt far to the west, nearly reaching Africa's Atlantic shores. The jihadist threat to the states of the Maghreb and Sahel regions, which include the states along Africa's Mediterranean coast and Sahara desert, had been growing for years. Now, regional Salafi jihadist groups wanted to seize the opportunity created by the Arab Spring to realize their dream of an Islamic caliphate governed by an extreme and brutal interpretation of *shari'a* law. As in Syria, where al Qa'ida–linked groups had used the uprising against President Bashar al Assad to expand their influence and control, North African jihadists had profited from turmoil in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia to extend their influence and strengthen their operating bases in the region. In the process they had also established links with regional groups in sub-Saharan Africa, including the increasingly violent and destabilizing Nigerian group Boko Haram. (See Annex 1 for a list of African jihadist groups.)

The expansion of terrorist groups linked to al Qa'ida and the fracturing of security in the Sahel and Maghreb reached an apotheosis in Mali in 2012. For decades, this former French colony had faced sporadic revolts from the nomadic Tuareg people who inhabited its deserted north. When the Tuareg's regional benefactor, Muammar Qaddafi, succumbed to a NATO-backed revolt in 2011, bands of Tuareg revolutionaries returned to Mali to fight again for independence. Using a strategy that had worked for al Qa'ida in Afghanistan and in Iraq, al Qa'ida's North African affiliate successfully folded itself into the Tuareg revolt, and over the course of 2012 established control over half of Mali's territory and brutally implemented *shar'ia*. Jihadists from far and wide were reported flocking to this new "Malistan," which increasingly looked like an African version of the safe haven al Qa'ida had once enjoyed in Pushtun areas thousands of miles away along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border – and in several ways presaged the larger "caliphate" the Islamic State of Iraq and al Shām (ISIS) would build in Iraq and Syria a year later.

Key international actors, including the United States and France, largely agreed on the threat but were divided over what to do about it.

The jihadists' push south in early 2013 changed the picture. Fearful of what an African al Qa'ida stronghold would mean for France – not to mention French West Africa itself – French President François Hollande ordered his military to step in, hunt the terrorists down, and help restore Mali's democracy.

This was a risky move that surprised many onlookers. It became the largest French unilateral military operation in Africa since the Algerian war half a century earlier. Within a few months, however, the French had successfully prevented the jihadists from taking over the country and killed or chased a great many of them out. This book is about the challenge of Salafi jihadists in North and West Africa, how and why the French have used their military to meet this challenge, the success they have had, its limits, and the lessons that can be gleaned from the experience so far.[7]

AL QA'IDA'S AFRICAN AMBITION

The French intervention in Mali was an initial western response to the recent proliferation of anti-Western terrorist groups across North and West Africa. These groups are now active from Libya, where ISIS made startling gains in late 2014 and 2015 through the Sahel, where al Qa'ida has long had a foothold, and into Nigeria, where Boko Haram has been a serious menace to the local population. These groups have widespread access to weapons and subscribe to a violent, anti-Western and anti-modern ideology. They are already a serious problem and could become a much larger one if more is not done to contain and dismantle them.

Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb has been particularly problematic for the French. "Africa will be our neighborhood Afghanistan," said Jean-Claude Cousseran, the former head of the Direction Générale pour la Sécurité Exterieure – the French counterpart to the CIA – as the situation in Mali deteriorated in the spring of 2012. The Sahel in particular was an "African powder keg" right on Europe's doorstep.[8] Al Qa'ida's North African affiliate was in the vanguard of a broader African jihadist movement that has become one of the most problematic in the world.

Africa's often troubled modern history; geography; and political, social, and economic conditions make excellent culture for the growth of terrorist groups.[9] Poverty; weak institutions; ethnic, religious, and tribal conflicts; corruption; an abundance of small arms; deeply rooted (albeit varied) conservative Islamic traditions; lingering postcolonial anti-European sentiment; and proximity to both Europe and the Middle East have made Salafi jihadist terrorism a force in Africa since well before 9/11, when Osama Bin Laden ran al Qa'ida operations from Sudan. Bin Laden's first major attacks were on the U.S. embassies in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, in 1998. Although al Qa'ida's leader eventually decamped for Afghanistan as pressure on him grew, Africa remained fertile ground for those inspired by his message. Terrorist attacks continued, for example, in Kenya in 2002, as well as in Somalia, Algeria, Nigeria, and elsewhere. Groups multiplied and spread to Somalia, Nigeria, and the countries of the Sahel and Maghreb.

After Bin Laden's death in 2011, Africa's importance as a proving ground for al Qa'ida reemerged. Globally, al Qa'ida–linked groups have proliferated in recent years.[10] Although the connections between them are shifting and often tenuous, Africa and the Middle East have been the regions most seriously affected by this trend. Boko Haram is a serious threat to Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and other countries nearby. Shabab is still entrenched in southern Somalia – well enough to stymie an October 2013 U.S. Navy Seal team strike aimed at taking out one of their leaders. In North and West Africa, al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb – the main group implicated in Mali – increased its regional reach in the messy aftermath of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi's fall in 2011. Loosely affiliated Libyan, Tunisian, and Egyptian jihadist groups have meanwhile sought to destabilize the Maghreb in hope of seizing the reins of the 2011 Arab uprisings to establish extreme forms of Islamic law. More recently, ISIS has established a foothold in Libya, taking over whole towns. This, in turn, threatened an expansion of the war that has ravaged Syria and Iraq to the Maghreb and forced European officials to stretch their limited resources even further in fear of terrorist threats emanating directly from Libya's shores.

The growing threat from African jihadists was driven home for many Americans in 2012, when Ansar al Shar'ia, a local Libyan jihadist

Figure 1. Salafi Jihadist Threatened States in Africa.
Source: Author assessment based on reported jihadist activities and political and economic conditions. Note that in most cases, the whole country is not at risk, only parts of it.

group, overran the U.S. diplomatic facilities in Benghazi, Libya, killing U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens.[11] The Benghazi attacks were too often portrayed inaccurately in the media and by some members of the U.S. Congress as a straightforward al Qa'ida plot, but whatever al Qa'ida's involvement, the tragedy was a clear sign of the enduring appeal of jihadism in the region.[12]

Soon after Benghazi, as French forces moved into Mali, a recent defector from al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, Mokthar Belmokthar, took more than a hundred hostages at a gas plant near In Amenas in southern Algeria. In August 2013, the Somali group al Shabab took dozens of innocent civilians hostage at the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, sparking a standoff that lasted for several days in which more than sixty people were killed.[13] In 2014, the Nigerian group Boko Haram took hundreds of schoolgirls captive, drawing worldwide attention. Smaller-scale terrorist attacks in Africa had also grown more frequent in recent years, including guerilla assaults on government buildings and kidnappings of Europeans and Africans alike.

To be sure, jihadists in Africa are not a monolithic threat. Africa is an enormous, extremely diverse continent with more than a billion inhabitants, of which these groups make up some ten thousand adherents at most, spread out over millions of square miles, much of which is uninhabitable even for seasoned jihadists like Belmokhtar. There are important differences between al Shabab, Boko Haram, al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, ISIS, and the jihadist groups in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, as well as rifts within these groups themselves. Their allegiances can also be very fluid – a pattern that would be replicated when they occupied northern Mali. Their relationship with "core" al Qa'ida leaders such as Ayman al Zawahiri is tenuous at best. Although al Qa'ida and ISIS have both sent emissaries to liaise with the African groups and Bin Laden often advised the Africans on strategy, leaders like Zawahiri have limited influence over what the Africans do. The emergence of ISIS as a regional and global competitor to al Qa'ida further complicates the picture. To date, African terrorist groups have targeted their own countrymen far more avidly than they do Westerners. Even if they share a common hatred for democracy and Western civilization, they have not been very successful in attacking targets in Europe, let alone the United States.

Nevertheless, if the currents are diverse, they are growing stronger and in some cases cooperating more and more. There is an unpredictability about them that is unnerving, especially when viewed in light of the startlingly rapid transformation of rump al Qa'ida in Iraq into the malignant growth that is ISIS. Even as these groups splinter and morph into a miasma of varying shades of ill and lethality, it is impossible not to acknowledge a serious security challenge that should and does concern Western capitals. Access to cell phones, computers, and especially the Internet, and the phenomenon of increasing movement of would-be jihadists across and between continents, mean that the trajectory and violent potential of even small groups cannot be ignored.

Moreover, African jihadists are catalyzing the spread of vitriol and violence across one of the poorest and most fragile parts of the world (see Figure 1). They are unquestionably a real menace to regional security, and if left unchecked, the problem could metastasize, threatening the United States and France in particular. Without an effective

international strategy, it is not unthinkable that North and West Africa could eventually rival the Middle East as a center of global jihad.

Understanding what France has and has not done in the region so far is an essential part of planning for the road ahead. *Serval* was only the beginning of what will need to be a long-term strategy to address a tangled security threat likely to persist for years. Eighteen months after the initial intervention, France transitioned to a new operation, *Barkhane*, that kept 3,000 troops on semipermanent bases across Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad specifically for counterterrorism operations. France and its allies also launched a new program to train local security services in the hope that they will eventually be able to combat Salafi jihadist groups themselves. It will be a long haul.

THE MOST INTERVENTIONIST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD?

Secretary Panetta was not the only one surprised by France's decision to intervene in Mali. In 2013 there were many signs that France would be unfavorable to military action. The French-backed aerial intervention that helped topple Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, was increasingly drawing fire as postwar Libya fell apart and then spiraled downward into anarchy. Hollande's mercurial predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, had sent highly capable French forces to fight in Afghanistan's dangerous eastern province of Kapisa in 2008, but four years later, facing a tough reelection campaign and low and declining public support for the mission, had withdrawn them despite protests from the United States, Britain, and other allies. Before that, French leaders, had of course been some of the most vociferous opponents of the U.S.-led Iraq war. In 2013, a French intervention in Mali seemed even more unlikely given the campaign promises Hollande had made to avoid a return to France's neocolonial role in Africa – often referred to pejoratively as *Françafrique*. Indeed, the Socialist Hollande was widely expected to make deep cuts to the French defense budget in response to the strain of the European financial crisis. Just a few months before France sent forces in, as Mali was falling apart, most French officials thought an intervention impossible. "To send in the French Army?

No one wants that. *Françafrique* is over!" said one senior official, for example.[14] As in so many other NATO capitals, the mantra in Paris was, "no boots on the ground."

It is thus no surprise Secretary Panetta was caught off guard by the news that French forces were already in action in Mali. But France halted speculation that the days of European military intervention had ended in the Hindu Kush. Over the course of the next several months, French forces would surge north into Mali's vast desert expanses, drive the jihadists back, hammer their northern base along the Algerian border, kill hundreds of them, and splinter them into neighboring countries.

Coming at the time when the United States and Great Britain, not to mention most continental European countries, were recoiling from the possibility of intervention anywhere, France's willingness to intervene, first in Libya and then in Mali, suggested that France was different. When Hollande backed military strikes against Syria later that year, despite U.S. and U.K. reversals on the issue, and then intervened again in the Central African Republic, articles dubbing France "the most interventionist country in the world" rolled off the presses.[15] Two very different French presidencies, one socialist, one conservative, had chosen to risk French lives in North Africa, and, for the most part, the French public supported these interventions. Not even a decade since French President Jacques Chirac broke with the United States and Britain over the invasion of Iraq, it looked like France was going through a neoconservative moment, ready to use its military to promote not only its security interests, but also democracy and human rights.

That France was the most interventionist country in the world may have been an exaggeration, but historically, France has been no more timid to intervene militarily than any other major power. The intervention in Mali was one in a long history of French military interventions in Africa and elsewhere in the world. (Table 1 shows post–Cold War French interventions in which more than 500 troops were involved.) Complex and deep historical forces pulled France toward military action in Mali. Several other factors also drove the French to intervene, including recent terrorist attacks in France, a perception of U.S. retrenchment from Europe, and the fact that because France had

Table 1. Major post–Cold War French military and peacekeeping deployments, by peak force levels and year

Intervention location	Mission(s)/Operation(s)	Peak Force Level	Peak Force Year
Cambodia	UNTAC	1,400	1991
Croatia	UNPROFOR I & SFOR	2,900	1991
Iraq	Operation Desert Storm, Operation Desert Shield, Operation Salamandre, Operation Daguet	15,200	1991
Somalia	UNOSOM, Operation Restore Hope	1,100	1992
Adriatic Sea	Operation Sharp Guard (NATO)	3,200	1993
Rwanda	UNAMIR, Operation Turquoise, Operation Amaryllis, & Operation Noroit	3,000	1994
Bosnia	UNPROFOR II, UNMIBH, IFOR, SFOR, SFOR II, EUFOR II, Operation Althea, Operation Astree	7,500	1995
Albania	Operation Alba (Italian led)	1,000	1996
Kosovo (Yugoslavia/ Serbia & Montenegro)	KFOR & Operation Joint Guardian	5,100	2000
Cote d'Ivoire	Operation Licorne & UNOCI	3,900	2002
DRCongo	Operation Artemis (EU)	900	2003
	EUFOR Congo	500	2006
Chad	Operation Epervier, EUFOR Tchad/RCA, & MINURCAT	1,500	2007
Lebanon	UNIFIL I, UNIFIL II, Operation Baliste	2,200	2008
Afghanistan	ISAF/NATO, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Pamir, Operation Herakles, Operation Epidote, Operation Ares	3,900	2011