

Countering Violent Extremism in Mali



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On the cover. Malian army soldiers engage in heavy fighting against insurgents in Gao, Mali. Photo used by permission of Newscom.



Countering Violent Extremism in Mali

Mark Moyar

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Foreword

In this monograph, Dr. Mark Moyar analyzes U.S. and international efforts to counter Mali's panoply of extremist organizations. Violent opposition to Mali's government has deep roots, which include historic tensions between the Tuaregs and other ethnic groups, as well as the emergence of Salafist extremist groups in Algeria. Although the United States began to take interest in Malian extremists after the 9/11 attacks, Mali did not attract widespread attention until the fall of Libyan chief of state Muammar Ghadafi in October 2011, which led to an influx of fighters and weapons into Mali and the use of Mali as a staging ground for attacks across the region.

As Dr. Moyar explains, extremist attacks on Mali's democratic government in late 2011 and early 2012 led to military setbacks and internal disension, culminating in a military coup that allowed rebels to take control of northern Mali. Because Mali had received extensive military and non-military assistance from the United States and other foreign countries in the preceding years, these disasters led to the questioning of aid practices, including those of United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF). The author navigates the debates over the effectiveness of foreign assistance and assesses the competing positions based on the available evidence.

Mali's neighbors and other allies believed that northern Mali had to be retaken from the extremists, with some advocating diplomacy and others recommending military action. Their deliberations were superseded by a rebel offensive in January 2013 that overran key defensive positions in central Mali and opened the way for a rebel advance on the national capital, Bamako. Dr. Moyar examines the French-led intervention that turned the rebels back and subsequently forced the rebels from the north, an episode that highlights major opportunities and challenges in multinational and interagency operations.

This study adds to a growing body of knowledge on special operations and counterterrorism in Africa, a continent on which USSOF have become much more active in recent years. It also contributes to the general understanding of the troubling events in Mali, where the government continues to confront violent extremism and other forms of rebellion. Perhaps most significantly for USSOF, the monograph offers insights into the building of

partner capacity. In light of ongoing problems of instability and extremism in much of the world, U.S. Special Operations Command and the rest of the U.S. Government are likely to remain heavily engaged in capacity building activities for years to come, and Mali's lessons should be of value to anyone participating in those activities.

Kenneth H. Poole, Ed.D.
Director, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

About the Author

Dr. Mark Moyar is a Visiting Scholar at the Foreign Policy Initiative. He served previously as a Senior Fellow at the Joint Special Operations University, and as a professor at the U.S. Marine Corps University, where he held the Kim T. Adamson Chair of Insurgency and Terrorism. He has also taught at Texas A&M University, the Ohio State University, Cambridge University, and the Foreign Service Institute. He holds a B.A. *summa cum laude* from Harvard and a Ph.D. from Cambridge.

A frequent visitor to Afghanistan and other foreign conflict zones, Dr. Moyar has served as a consultant to the senior leadership of the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan, U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan. He has lectured at numerous military and civilian educational institutions in the United States and abroad. A historian by training, he also writes and speaks frequently on subjects of contemporary national security as well as the relationship between past and present security issues. He is a member of the Hoover Institution Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict.

Dr. Moyar's articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and many other publications. His 2009 book, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (Yale University Press, 2009) ranks among the most original and influential theoretical works on counterinsurgency, presenting an alternative approach to counterinsurgency that is focused on empowering the right people rather than on implementing the right methods. Dr. Moyar's book *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) is one of the most acclaimed and controversial histories of the past decade, having been the subject of an academic conference at Williams College, several academic forums, and the book *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (Routledge, 2010). In 2007, Bison Books published a new edition of Dr. Moyar's first book, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and*



Counterterrorism in Vietnam, which included a new chapter offering lessons for the contemporary practitioner.

Dr. Moyar's most recent book is *Strategic Failure: How President Obama's Drone Warfare, Defense Cuts, and Military Amateurism Have Imperiled America* (Threshold, 2015). His next book, to be published by Cambridge University Press, is titled *Aid for Elites: Building Partner Nations and Ending Poverty with Human Capital*. At present, he is writing a history of USSOF for Basic Books. His prior JSOU Press publications include *Persistent Engagement in Colombia* (2014) and *Village Stability Operations and the Afghan Local Police* (2014).

Introduction

Prior to 2012, Mali was all but unknown in the United States. To international development experts, Mali served as an exemplar for other countries to emulate. To governance experts, it served as a paragon of democratization, having enjoyed more than two decades of stable democracy. A few counterterrorism and counternarcotics experts warned that malign actors were using Mali's thinly populated and politically fractious north as bases or transit areas, but those threats seemed minor in comparison with the instability and violence sweeping over much of North Africa and the Middle East in 2010 and 2011, and some observers doubted whether the threats were more than trifles.



Figure 1. Map of Mali. Source: worldatlas.com.

An unexpected military coup on 21 March 2012 brought Mali to the attention of the international news media. Such a collapse, in a nation considered to be one of Africa's most prosperous and democratic, came as a shocking disappointment to those familiar with Africa. The military overthrow of an elected government was interpreted in many quarters as regression to a dark era of military domination of African politics.

What captured the most foreign attention, however, was the subsequent cataclysm in northern Mali. The coup precipitated the defection and disintegration of government security forces in northern Mali, paving the way for Islamists and separatists to seize control of the population centers. Led by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), extremists imposed draconian punishments on the northern population and desecrated holy sites. For eight months, the United States and other foreign actors attempted to restore democracy in Mali and negotiate a political settlement, hoping to strike a deal with Tuareg separatists at the expense of the Islamists.

The separatists and Islamic extremists refused to be split apart, and chose instead to invade southern Mali in January 2013. Their initial victories over the debilitated Malian forces portended a rebel victory over all of Mali. France, which had a large number of its citizens in southern Mali, decided that it could not tolerate such a victory. It intervened with military advisers and aircraft, followed by a more active role in the conflict in order to halt the enemy onslaught and retake the north.

In the space of a few weeks, French intervention saved southern Mali and drove the rebels from northern Mali cities. The French intended to hand the country over to Malian and other African security forces within a matter of months, but ended up staying much longer after realizing that the African forces were not equal to the task. As of this writing, the French retain a sizable military presence in Mali, which provides protection against major attacks and permits surgical operations against enemy leaders. Efforts to produce African forces that can replace the French forces have yet to bear fruit, and will likely require additional time and resources.

This monograph begins with historical analysis of rebellion, extremism, and the countering of violent extremism in Mali, in order to illuminate the context in which more recent events have taken place. It chronicles the rise of Islamic extremism in Mali, and explains how the Malian government and United States perceived and attempted to address that rise. Included in the explanation of the American response is the growing role of Special

Operations Forces (SOF) in building the capacity of Malian forces. The monograph then examines the extremist military gains that began in 2011, the military coup of March 2012, the Islamist offensive in January 2013, and the French intervention. The narrative concludes with French efforts to hold stubborn enemies at bay while multiple international actors attempt to build local capacity. The final chapter analyzes the most important issues and challenges in countering Mali's violent extremists, particularly in terms of SOF, and explains how they might be relevant in confronting violent extremism elsewhere in Africa or other regions.

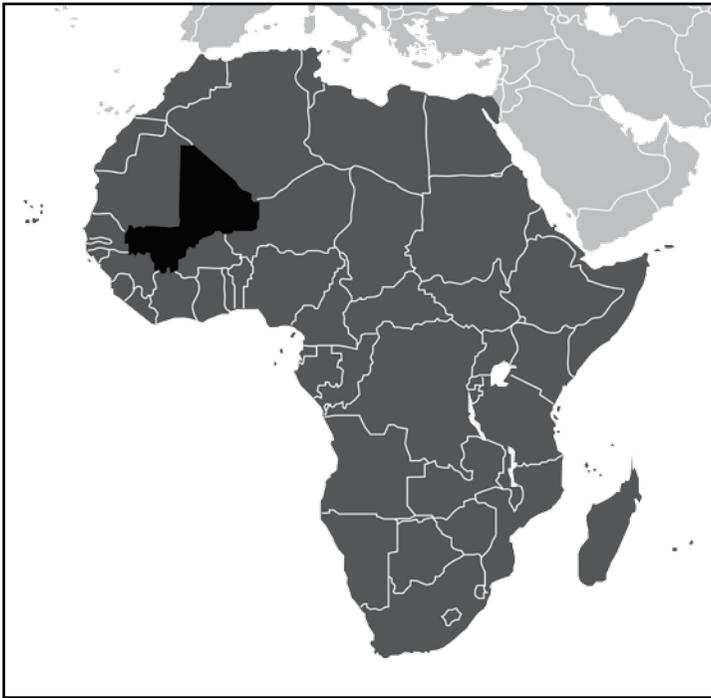


Figure 2. Africa Map showing Mali's geographic position. A landlocked country, Mali borders seven other African nations: Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Senegal, and Mauritania. Source: Central Intelligence Agency.

1. Historical Background

In territorial terms, modern Mali is as large as Afghanistan and twice the size of France. Its borders are twice as long as the border separating the United States and Mexico. Mali is landlocked, though it does possess a major waterway, the Niger River, next to which most of the major population centers are located. Its southern zone, which has a subtropical climate, is home to 80 percent of the population and most of the agricultural production and other economic output.

Muslims comprise approximately 90 percent of Mali's population, and nearly all of the Muslims are Sunnis. The Mandé ethnic group, accounting for half of Mali's population, is the dominant group in the south. The best educated of Mali's ethnic groups, the Mandé, comprise most of the nation's political elite. Northern Mali, consisting of the Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu regions, lies within the Sahara and the Sahel, the latter constituting the transition zone between the Sahara desert to the north and the Savannah to the south. Northern Mali is populated by four main ethnic groups: Tuareg, Arab, Songhai, and Fula. According to a 2009 census, more than 95 percent of the people of northern Mali lived in either Timbuktu or Gao.¹

Of the northern groups, the one most resistant to outside authority has been the Tuaregs, who are concentrated in the Kidal region. Descendants of Arabs and Berbers, the Tuaregs have lived as nomads throughout their history, moving across the Sahel with livestock according to the seasons.² Their nomadic existence and their familiarity with the terrain have made them into deft smugglers, an increasingly profitable profession in recent centuries with the rise in international commerce and transnational crime. Attempts by distant Malian governments or foreign powers to curb smuggling in northern Mali have been a leading cause of conflict between the Tuaregs and neighboring populations. Most effective at suppressing Tuareg smuggling were the French, who incorporated Mali into the colony of French Sudan in 1890 and asserted control over government and commerce in the Tuareg areas, vanquishing several Tuareg revolts in the process.

Racial differences also account for conflict between the Tuaregs and other Malians. The Tuaregs once helped enslave the Mandé, and they have since continued to view the Mandé as inferior. Tuareg resistance to the Mandé

has been undercut in recent times by the numerical inferiority of the Tuareg population and by internal divisions among the Tuaregs. The low population sizes of the Tuaregs and the other northern groups have left the north with little clout in democratic elections. It has also allowed politicians to neglect the north without suffering adverse electoral consequences. Rulers in southern Mali have played Tuareg factions off against one another to keep control over the north without having to occupy it with large military forces.

When Mali gained its independence from France in 1960, its ethnically and politically heterogeneous groups shared no common sense of nationalism. When democratic elections took place at the dawn of independence, Mali's citizens voted for candidates based on ethnicity rather than ideology or policy. The Mandé majority voted in Mali's first president, Modibo Keita, to the general dissatisfaction of the minority groups in the north. The Tuaregs rebelled against the new government almost immediately. The Malian army put their insurrection down and maintained a large presence in northern Mali thereafter to keep the Tuaregs under control.

Keita, a socialist by persuasion, rejected the tenets of liberal democracy. Following his initial electoral victory in 1960, he rigged all subsequent elections and imprisoned political oppositionists. A young military officer named Moussa Traoré overthrew Keita in 1968, and for the next two decades, ran Mali as a military dictatorship.

In the 1970s and 1980s, rising oil prices spurred a migration of Tuaregs from Mali to Libya, whose chief of state Muammar Gadhafi was promising them economic opportunities and military training. Malians fought in Gadhafi's expeditionary corps in Chad and Lebanon, and some returned to Mali in the early 1990s to join the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA), a Tuareg rebel group that had entered into open rebellion against the Malian government in June 1990.³

The Malian government countered MPLA attacks with harsh measures that alienated the Tuareg and Arab populations of northern Mali, driving more young men into the ranks of the rebels. President Traoré negotiated a peace treaty in early 1991 that removed the Malian army from the north, gave greater political authority to local communities, and promised more development funds to the north. But the treaty, like many peace treaties in Mali's history, did not halt the bloodshed. The army continued its repressive actions, while the government did not deliver the promised funds to the north, inciting the rebels to strike back.⁴

In March of 1991, President Traoré ordered troops to open fire on student protesters in the capital. The order so disgusted a number of Malian military officers that they chose to oust Traoré.⁵ The military officers who led the coup and political oppositionists who opposed the Traoré regime formed a new ruling entity, the Comité de Transition pour le Salut du Peuple, which governed Mali for the next year while endeavoring to prepare the country for democracy. During the summer, the committee convened a National Conference of Mali, inviting nearly 2,000 Malians representing all the country's political, ethnic, religious, and regional groups. The participants drafted a new constitution, according to which the centralization of the state authority was diminished in an effort to accommodate the preferences of diverse population groups. Elections held in April 1992 returned Alpha Oumar Konaré as president.⁶

This democratization did not lead to the good governance that democracy advocates had forecast. Konaré and other newly elected politicians employed the state as a means of patronage, dispensing jobs to their followers without regard for merit. Exploiting the state's resources for private gains, they deprived most of the population of governmental services. "The politicization of the civil service in Mali in the context of democratization had a catastrophic effect on the democratization and development process in Mali," asserted Marietou Macalou in a study of the Malian civil service. The party in power "permeated and used the civil service to control and take advantage of state resources. In addition, the civil service has been transformed into a funding agency for the 'dominant' party as well as coercion and exclusion machinery."⁷

In 1996, Tuareg rebels and the government reached a peace agreement whereby 12,000 Tuareg fighters joined the Malian armed forces or government. This time, the peace held. Impressed by the return of peace in northern Mali, Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) flocked to the area to engage in development activities. Islamic NGOs arrived as well, some of them inspired by the desire to spread their version of Islam.⁸

2. The Rise of Violent Extremism

Less conspicuous during the 1990s was the emergence of Islamic extremist organizations in Mali. Most of these groups originated in neighboring Algeria and continued to take direction from their Algerian branches. Chief among the Algerian Islamist groups at this time was the *Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat* (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or GSPC).⁹ The GSPC adhered to the *jihadi* variant of *Salafism*, which differed from other Islamic schools of thought in that it did not automatically accept the authority of the ruler and was willing to use armed struggle to overthrow the existing political order.¹⁰ The GSPC ingratiated itself with the population of Timbuktu in the late 1990s by buying goods at high prices, providing cellular phone service, intermarrying with local families, and dispensing medical care.¹¹

In the first years of the new millennium, the GSPC took advantage of a burgeoning cocaine trade in the Sahel, which increased sixtyfold from 2002 to 2007 in response to increased international policing of Western Africa's coastline.¹² According to United Nations (UN) estimates, one quarter of the approximately 140 tons of cocaine consumed annually in Europe during this period transited western Africa. The GSPC colluded with Latin American drug traffickers to move drugs through the Sahel, obtaining funds and weapons from the traffickers in exchange for smuggling services.¹³

At the same time, the Algerian government was becoming increasingly proficient in counterinsurgency operations against the GSPC, which diminished the organization's ability to recruit supporters in its traditional base areas of northern Algeria. As a consequence, GSPC leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar decided to shift the emphasis of recruiting to the Sahara. Beginning in 2004, the GSPC stepped up recruitment in southern Algeria, northern Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad.¹⁴ Further military setbacks in southern Algeria during 2006 compelled GSPC to shift still further south, into the Sahel, which was sufficiently distant for the Algerian government, which did not see a need to assist Sahelian countries such as Mali in combating the GSPC.¹⁵

At this same juncture, the GSPC rebranded itself. Becoming a franchise of al-Qaeda, the organization changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb.¹⁶ On 11 September 2006, in commemoration of the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri proclaimed in a radio address:

Osama Bin Laden has told me to announce to Muslims that the GSPC has joined al-Qaeda. This should be a source of chagrin, frustration, and sadness for the apostates [of the regime in Algeria], the treacherous sons of France ... We pray to God that our brothers from the GSPC succeed in causing harm to the top members of the crusader coalition, and particularly their leader, the vicious America.¹⁷

The GSPC leadership issued a statement that read, "We pledge allegiance to Sheikh Osama Bin Laden ... Our soldiers are at his call so that he may strike who and where he likes."¹⁸ Setting their sights beyond the African continent, AQIM leaders vowed to support al-Qaeda affiliates in their efforts to attack targets in Western Europe.¹⁹

Soon after the rebranding, a new emir, Yahia Djaouadi, took charge of AQIM operations in the Saharan theater. He orchestrated the kidnapping of Europeans for ransom, which proved an exceedingly lucrative business.²⁰ According to one estimate, AQIM hauled in a total of \$90 million from kidnapping between 2002 and 2012.²¹ While most of AQIM's targets for kidnapping and terrorism were from Western European countries known for their willingness to pay high ransoms, AQIM occasionally targeted North Americans. In December 2008, they kidnapped Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler, an event that ultimately led Canada to contribute SOF to the training of Mali's armed forces. In June 2009, a botched AQIM kidnapping attempt in the Mauritanian capital of Nouakchott ended in the death of U.S. citizen Christopher Leggett.²² While Algeria remained a high long-term priority for AQIM, the organization's leadership focused in the near term on developing safe havens among the Tuaregs of Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. As a result, AQIM made Kidal its main base for its southern theater of operations.²³

Mali's Tuareg separatists were, in the meantime, fighting another war against the central government. It began in March 2006, when 60 Tuaregs deserted from the Malian army and plundered weapons from government outposts in northeastern Mali. Establishing a stronghold in the Tigharghar Mountains of the Kidal region near the border with Algeria, the rebels built a force of nearly 1,000 fighters.²⁴ Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré chose to negotiate with the rebels, and in July they reached a peace deal that

entailed the withdrawal of the government's security forces from northern Mali.²⁵ Tuareg rebels nonetheless continued to fight pro-government Tuareg tribes and Arab militias until 2009. Foreign diplomats complained that the Arab militias were collaborating with AQIM and participating in drug trafficking and kidnapping, but President Touré appeared unconcerned, content to condone smuggling by both the Arabs and AQIM since he could take fees from both groups.²⁶

The Tuareg rebels generally avoided collaboration with AQIM, claiming that their form of Islam was incompatible with AQIM's *Salafist* worldview. Historically, most Tuaregs practiced a form of Sunni Islam that contained elements of animism from the pre-Islamic era.²⁷ They rejected the *Salafist* practice of *takfirism*—the denunciation of theologically incorrect Muslims and the use of coercive force to eliminate theological deviance. Like other mainstream Sunni Muslims, most Tuaregs believed that incorrect views should be countered with teaching and consensus-building. On the main rebel website, separatists wrote that because their version of Islam was “tolerant and knowledgeable,” it would be “dangerous and truly evil to try to connect it to the GPSC *Salafists*, who are banished from the land that spawned them and rejected by their own brothers in arms in Algeria.”²⁸

During this same period, however, *Salafist* preachers were making inroads with elements of Mali's Tuareg population.²⁹ AQIM members were strengthening their ties with Tuaregs through marriages and business relationships.³⁰ These developments would prove critical assets to AQIM in allying with Mali's Tuaregs in the coming years.

3. The United States and Mali

Islamic extremism in Mali and elsewhere held the attention of few people in the U.S. Government prior to 11 September 2001. Following the 9/11 attacks, the surging American interest in Islamic extremism reached into every country with a significant Muslim population, to include those in the Sahel. From 2002 to 2004, the United States underwrote the Pan-Sahel Initiative, which equipped 150-man rapid-reaction companies in Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Chad, and trained them using United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF).³¹ Within Mali, soldiers from the 1st battalion, 10th U.S. Special Forces Group trained elements of the Malian 33rd Parachute Commando Regiment (RCP). Administered at Bamako, Gao, and Timbuktu, the training covered marksmanship, planning, communications, land navigation, patrolling, and medical care.³²

The United States also began to develop capabilities for unilateral counterterrorism operations in the region. In 2003, American military officers proposed a plan to fire missiles at Mokhtar Belmokhtar at a camp in northern Mali where he was reported to be located. The American Ambassador to Mali, Vicki Huddleston, vetoed the operation, arguing that Belmokhtar was only a minor figure and that action against him would fuel resentment of the United States. She also vetoed a plan to help Malian and Algerian forces capture Belmokhtar. Ambassador Huddleston's refusals infuriated Air Force General Charles F. Wald, the senior U.S. military officer in the region at the time. Belmokhtar "was well within reach," Wald remembered. "It would have been easy." The United States "allowed Belmokhtar to become larger than life."³³

In early 2004, the Pan-Sahel Initiative gave way to the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), for which the United States earmarked \$500 million over five years. The main military arm of TSCTP, Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans Sahara, funded the training and equipping of security forces and a periodic regional military exercise called Flintlock.³⁴ It also underwrote "whole-of-government" approaches to counterterrorism, which included economic development programs, governance programs, and "public diplomacy programs" aimed at "preserving the traditional tolerance and moderation displayed in most African Muslim communities and

countering the development of extremism, particularly in youth and rural populations.”³⁵

In 2006, a small number of USSOF officers formed the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Trans Sahara (JSOTF-TS) to orchestrate all Department of Defense counterterrorism initiatives under the TSCTP umbrella. Those initiatives spanned 10 northern and western African countries, including Mali. In October 2008, the newly formed combatant command U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) took control of JSOTF-TS, and seven months later it moved again, becoming a subordinate element of the Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA).³⁶

Given the relatively modest amounts of funding and U.S. personnel assigned to the TSCTP, American capacity-building efforts were restricted to a small set of elite forces in the recipient countries. The military deficiencies of the rest of the armed forces received little attention from the United States or other nations. In light of past military interference in politics in Mali and neighboring countries, Mali’s political leaders wanted to keep the military weak, a position accepted by a large number of foreign donors who were similarly suspicious of the military. The political leadership meddled with recruitment, promotion, and command in the military, to the detriment of the military’s competence, organization, and morale.³⁷ Because of low levels of defense spending as well as high levels of corruption, most Malian units were short on basic equipment and supplies. Lacking in aircraft or tactical wheeled vehicles, they could not seek out the enemy in the country’s vast expanses.³⁸

Under the Obama administration, emphasis on social and economic development in Mali and other Trans-Saharan countries received a further boost. “Underdevelopment in key areas represents a critical security challenge in the Sahel,” remarked Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson in November 2009.

In Northern Mali, for example, insecurity in isolated border areas and along traditional smuggling routes is perpetuated by unmet economic expectations and the lack of legitimate alternatives to smuggling or opportunistic commerce with criminal networks ... [Mali’s] efforts to address insecurity in the northern part of the country are severely hampered by poor infrastructure and the

inability to provide adequate service delivery and educational and vocational opportunities to isolated areas.³⁹

Carson attributed AQIM's recruiting successes in the region to its ability to provide food in areas where the government could not offer any services.

The Obama administration asserted that the TSCTP would "address the drivers of violent extremism" in northern Mali. It earmarked funds for 10 FM radio stations, "interactive radio instruction" for 200,000 students at madrasas, basic education, vocational training, microenterprise development, governance, and "conflict prevention."⁴⁰ The U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation also spent heavily on development projects in Mali. It concentrated its efforts near Bamako, at least in part for security reasons, though that geographic focus kept it far from the areas of unrest.

Because of doubts about the value of assisting foreign militaries, the Obama administration reduced funding for security sector programs.⁴¹ But insecurity in the north turned out to be a leading obstacle to development programs. "Development is critical in dealing with the north," Ambassador Gillian Milovanovic said in January 2011. "So long as security is unstable, it is hard to get those projects going." U.S. embassy personnel could not travel to Northern Mali except with the express permission of the ambassador, which Milovanovic rarely granted.⁴²

The Obama administration chose not to allocate significant resources to combating corruption in Mali, a position consistent with the theory, popularized by Jeffrey Sachs, that corruption was not a major cause of national economic weakness.⁴³ U.S. aid to Mali for programs related to governance totaled less than \$1 million per year. The suitability of this approach would come under question with new revelations of poor governance and its consequences. In 2009, for instance, an internal audit by the Malian government found that the government had suffered a loss of \$224 million in the past year because of mismanagement or theft of government funds for rural development, infrastructure, public administration, health, and justice.⁴⁴

4. SOF Engagement in Mali

On 31 May 2009, militants in Mali executed British tourist Edwin Dyer, who had been kidnapped several months earlier near the border between Mali and Niger. Malian Colonel Lamana Ould Cheikh arrested two men in the killing, but then was himself assassinated. President Touré blamed the killings on AQIM and told the U.S. that this violence demonstrated the need for greater U.S. support for his security forces.⁴⁵

The U.S. Department of Defense wanted to respond to Touré's request for more assistance by increasing the number of U.S. military personnel in Mali for training purposes. AFRICOM and SOCAFRICA recommended allowing U.S. military advisers to accompany Malian forces on counterterrorism operations. The State Department, the lead U.S. agency for foreign policy, rejected these proposals. It did, however, grant the Defense Department permission to boost the number of short-term SOF training sessions in Mali to seven, up from two in 2008. During 2009, the 3rd Special Forces Group, 3rd Marine Special Operations Battalion, 6th Air Force Special Operations Squadron, and U.S. Navy SEALs provided short training events to Mali's armed forces.⁴⁶

The 10th Special Forces Group began training units called *Echelon Tactique Inter-Armée* (ETIA), company-sized motorized infantry units with approximately 160 men. The ETIAs were the Malian government's main weapon for use against AQIM in the north. Ethnically mixed, with a significant representation of Tuaregs, the ETIAs had been formed by pulling men from other army regiments.

American advisers were appalled by the condition of the ETIAs' equipment. Many AK-47s lacked stocks or other vital parts. Some soldiers had old SKS rifles, which were no match for the AK-47s that AQIM's fighters carried. When the U.S. Special Forces advisers pleaded with the Malian Ministry of Defense to provide new rifles and rifle stocks, none were forthcoming. The American advisers then ordered some rifle stocks on their own initiative, but when the shipments arrived it was learned that they were the wrong stocks.⁴⁷

Malian soldiers rotated in and out of the ETIAs in six-month intervals, rather than staying together for sustained periods. USSOF discovered this fact through biometric testing of trainees, as the Malian military had not

divulged that it was sending different troops in for each training cycle. Malian military personnel, moreover, rotated between the south to the north every three years, giving them time off in the relatively peaceful south after several years of hardship and danger in the north. In the view of one USSOF officer, these rotation policies created “essentially insurmountable problems for those attempting to assist the Malians to improve their capabilities.”⁴⁸

The first USSOF training of the ETIAs, a 30-day Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) event, led the Americans to conclude that the ETIA capabilities were so low that they would need much more than short training programs. “Due to extreme deficiencies displayed at the basic level and beyond, a full 30-day period would need to be devoted to just one or two aspects of training, such as rifle marksmanship or squad dismounted movement,” concluded Simon J. Powelson, a U.S. Special Forces officer responsible for ETIA training. The Americans extended the next two JCETs to 45 days. During those two events, the Malian soldiers again evidenced a startling inability to perform the most basic military tasks, such as firing and disassembling a rifle.⁴⁹ They also displayed, in Powelson’s words, “a culture overrun by apathy.” Individual soldiers and officers demonstrated no initiative, acting only when commanded. Infantry officers “did not attempt to conduct daily training to ensure unit competence and readiness.”⁵⁰ Much longer training of individuals, and perhaps fundamental changes in rotation policies, would be required to change this culture.

Further complicating American assistance to Mali’s security forces was a lack of commitment from the top of Mali’s government. President Touré was talking of getting tough with AQIM, vowing to wage a “total struggle,” but in practice he was not vigorous in combating AQIM. Other countries suspected that Touré had a “non-aggression” pact with AQIM in order to augment his personal wealth and avoid attacks in Bamako and other cities that would undermine the image of a great leader he was seeking to cultivate.⁵¹ In early 2010, Mauritania recalled its ambassador from Mali for eight months following the Malian government’s release of four Mauritanian AQIM detainees. In August 2010, Touré again thumbed his nose at the Mauritanian government by releasing an AQIM fighter who had been extradited from Mauritania.⁵²

During 2010 and 2011, the United States again extended the duration of JCETs to three months. But even events of that duration proved insufficient to raise the capabilities of the ETIAs satisfactorily. At the conclusion of

the JCETs, Powelson observed, the Malians' "proficiency at performing any semblance of a coordinated assault on a fixed position was nonexistent."⁵³

Because of the frequent rotation of Malian personnel and the limitation of JCETs to one for each of the four ETIAs per year, all ETIA personnel were rotated before a second JCET took place. The trainers thus had to start at square one with each new JCET, necessitating that they cover only basic skills, such as rifle marksmanship, individual movement, driver's training, and crew-served weapons familiarization. In frustration, the Americans urged the Ministry of Defense to change its six-month personnel rotation policy for the ETIAs, but to no avail.⁵⁴ A small number of USSOF were working with the Ministry of Defense at this time, in coordination with the U.S. State Department, but they were focused on operational planning, not personnel.⁵⁵

AFRICOM provided some episodic support to the ETIAs for intelligence, with training taking place in three-week rotations. Malian intelligence capabilities were modest, and they were more focused on preventing coups and other internal problems than defeating the enemy. Convincing the Malian military whom to train was also problematic, since the black African leaders wanted the training recipients to be black Africans, not Tuaregs, whom they distrusted. When the AFRICOM trainers returned to visit their pupils after a break in training, they checked to see whether the Malians were making use of the prior training; if they were not, then the Malians would have to go back and start over with the prior training modules. The effectiveness of this approach would be cut short by events, as only two ETIAs had received intelligence training when American aid abruptly ceased.⁵⁶

In June 2010, an Operational Detachment–Alpha (ODA) from the 10th Special Forces Group that had been assigned to the newly formed Joint Planning Assistance Team (JPAT) decided to seek alternatives to the existing SOF training program. Their analysis had led them to conclude that Malian forces needed the ability to attack fortified positions in the Tigharghar mountains, which would require coordinated use of indirect fire, mounted fire, and maneuver. Achieving the necessary military proficiency would require prolonged SOF engagement with a Malian unit that retained its personnel. The ODA asked the Malian Ministry of Defense if it could work continuously with a Malian unit that would not rotate its soldiers on a routine basis. The Malians agreed to let the Americans work with a new company of the 33rd RCP, composed of personnel from the regiment's four existing companies.

Designated the Special Forces Company (CFS), it was to consist of 152 men and would be organized like a U.S. Army Ranger company.⁵⁷ To provide continuity on the American side, SOF teams were to rotate into the JPAT at six month intervals.

The 33rd RCP was already an elite unit, and it was much better organized, trained, and motivated than the ETIAs and other Malian units. Until this point, it had kept one of its companies in the north, while two companies concentrated on security for the president and the fourth was in a down cycle. Although the regiment had received periodic training from U.S. and French forces, its skills had not developed to the point that the Americans deemed necessary for effective operations in the mountains. Much of the training the troops had received from American and French forces had been concentrated on advanced skills, some of which were not very useful for operations in northern Mali. Many soldiers were deficient in the most elementary skills, such as zeroing their rifles. The paratroopers were also very short on equipment and supplies.⁵⁸

The initial training that the American ODA administered to the CFS covered basic skills like marksmanship, first aid, and land navigation. USSOF taught the officers and the noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and then the officers and NCOs taught the skills to the enlisted men. To obtain additional equipment for the CFS, the Americans used a peacekeeping operations account from which they could draw funds more easily and quickly than from other funding streams.⁵⁹

Prolonged and continuous training permitted SOF to concentrate on a task as long as it took the Malians to master it, rather than having to end at an arbitrary date as had been necessary with the JCETs. The progress was sufficiently promising that the CFS began training with the Malian air force in combined air-ground operations in 2011. Whereas all of Mali's forces had ranked near the bottom of African forces in competence during the Flintlock regional military exercise in 2010, the CFS ranked near the top at the 2011 exercise.⁶⁰

5. Extremists on the Offensive

Mali, for all its problems, was considered a model of African success until the eve of the cataclysm. International commentators praised Mali as an exemplar of liberal democracy and good governance in Africa. From the mid-1990s to 2010, noted the admirers, Mali had achieved gross domestic product growth of 5.5 percent per year, reduced poverty by 33 percent, cut infant mortality by 25 percent, and increased access to primary education from 20 percent of children to 80 percent.⁶¹ As late as March 2012, the Millennium Challenge issued a publication entitled “Prosperity Takes Root in Mali,” which asserted that “the region is being transformed into a thriving hub of rice and vegetable production that will improve the lives of farmers and strengthen the country’s food security.”⁶² Numerous foreign observers did not comprehend the magnitude of Mali’s weaknesses in governance and security, or else did not consider them an obstacle to Mali’s betterment.

During 2011 and early 2012, some academic and policy experts, including the U.S. ambassador to Mali, downplayed the possibility that extremist organizations such as AQIM posed a threat to Mali and its neighbors. Mali’s government was said to be too strong and AQIM too weak and unpopular with local populations to endanger the Malian state. Several groups reportedly were breaking off from AQIM, including the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which appeared to be focused mainly on Africa, and hence were cited as evidence that Malian extremists did not pose a threat to Western homelands.⁶³ The contention that Mali was safe and secure served as a key debating point for those who maintained that security assistance to Mali was too large, or too focused on the military at the expense of civil governance.⁶⁴ It was also invoked by the ambassador in turning down the U.S. military’s recommendations to allow SOF to accompany Malian forces into the field.⁶⁵

However, other experts and other elements of the U.S. mission in Bamako rated the extremist threat to be much greater. They attached considerable weight to reports that extremists were migrating from Libya to Mali and that the Tuaregs were gravitating toward an alliance with AQIM. The extremist migration included an estimated 2,000 to 4,000 armed Tuaregs who had

fought on Gadhafi's side in Libya. Americans who deemed the extremists to be a dire threat to Mali noted that AQIM had developed deep roots in local communities through intermarriage and had also gained the cooperation of government officials.⁶⁶ They also pointed to AQIM's ability to raise revenue through drug trafficking in cahoots with Tuareg smugglers.⁶⁷ Much of the threat information came from the open-source reporting of the American-sponsored Native Prospector program, which relied on Malian nationals to cull information from local sources.⁶⁸

Of the Tuareg migrants who were deemed most dangerous, a large fraction hailed from the Ifogha tribe, the Tuareg tribe most hostile to the government of Mali. On 16 October 2011, an Ifogha who had served as a colonel in the Libyan Army, Ag Mohamed Najem, formed a Tuareg separatist movement called the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which included members of most of the Tuareg communities of northern Mali. For those who considered the Malian extremists a serious threat to U.S. interests, though, the greatest concern was the growth of Ansar Dine, an offshoot of AQIM with Malian Tuareg leadership. Western analysts believed that AQIM had helped form Ansar Dine to help put a Malian "face" on AQIM, knowing that a movement led by Malian Tuaregs would be much more effective in northern Mali than a foreign-led organization. By late 2011, Ansar Dine vied with MNLA for the distinction of largest rebel group in the north.⁶⁹

The Tuaregs who left Libya for northern Mali in 2011 brought with them weapons plundered from Gadhafi's arsenals. Some Western security experts believed that the weaponry included portable anti-aircraft missile launchers, though no such weapons were used or captured in the ensuing period.⁷⁰ Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch, recounted, "The weapons proliferation that we saw coming out of the Libyan conflict was of a scale greater than any previous conflict—probably 10 times more weapons than we saw going on the loose in places like Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan."⁷¹ The loot from Gadhafi's stocks left the Tuareg rebels and their allies far better equipped than nearly all of Mali's forces. The experience and training they had received in Libya made them much more competent.

The MNLA and Ansar Dine stepped up their attacks in northern Mali near the end of 2011, and by early 2012 they were capturing significant prizes. On 17 January, rebels overran Menaka, a town in northeastern Mali. The Malian headquarters in Gao ordered the 33rd RCP to form a task force to

retake Menaka. The CFS company, which was a component of the task force, spearheaded a convoy of task force vehicles that headed toward Menaka. When rebels ambushed the convoy, the CFS soldiers dismounted from their vehicles and used SPG-9 recoilless rifles to pour fire on the enemy, driving them off. The Task Force proceeded to Menaka, which they took with support from Malian reconnaissance aircraft and helicopter gunships. The task force camped out in the town, but was compelled to leave on 3 February because the military headquarters at Gao failed to deliver promised supplies. Once the task force returned to Gao, hostile forces retook Menaka.⁷²

On 25 January 2012, rebels overran an isolated military garrison at the northern town of Aguelhok after a weeklong siege. The Malian soldiers had held off the attackers until they ran out of ammunition, their requests for resupply having gone unfulfilled. Upon taking the town, the rebels slaughtered nearly 100 people, including the wives and children of the defenders.

In early February, hostile forces surrounded the Malian military base and airfield at Tessalit, in the Kidal region. Guarded by several hundred soldiers, Tessalit was critical to governmental control of northern Mali. On 25 February, the 33rd RCP Task Force fought its way from Gao to Tessalit, fending off the enemy for several days while evacuating its wounded by air. Again it ran low on supplies because of the inability of the military base at Gao to send what was needed. Eventually the paratroopers and their SOF advisers convinced the Malian air force and the U.S. Embassy to deliver supplies by air, but the supplies received were sufficient only to get the task force back to Gao, not to keep it at Tessalit. Shortly after the paratroopers departed Tessalit, the garrison they left behind negotiated a surrender whereby everyone at the military base was permitted safe passage to Gao.⁷³

After the fall of Tessalit, discontent with the national leadership soared amid the ranks of the armed forces. Junior officers and enlisted men blamed the president, minister of defense, and senior military leaders for failing to keep the units in the north adequately supplied. Army widows blocked off streets in Bamako in protest of the government's mishandling of the conflict.

On 21 March, Mali's Minister of Defense Sadio Gassama received word that disgruntled soldiers at the Kati barracks were preparing to march on the capital in protest of the government's mismanagement. Hoping to head off a stampede on downtown Bamako, Gassama had his chauffeur drive him the 20 kilometers from his office to the barracks. When Gassama arrived, he was relieved to find that the troops had not yet left the base. He took the

stage to address an assembly of troops, whose seething discontent could not have been difficult to discern. Overestimating the strength of his position, Gassama scolded the audience, which only enraged them. When the defense minister's bodyguards attempted to keep angry soldiers back with shots in the air, the soldiers grabbed their rifles and fired them in the air. Gassama fled the scene in his car.⁷⁴

Under the leadership of a disreputable captain named Amadou Sanogo, who had been dismissed from his prior job after five soldiers died in a hazing incident,⁷⁵ a mob of soldiers marched to the presidential palace. Upon arrival, the unruly throng fired their weapons in the air and shouted taunts at the "Red Berets" guarding the palace, which belonged to the 33rd RCP. The Red Berets in turn fired their weapons in the air. The standoff gave President Touré time to slip away. Once the president had safely exited the palace, the Red Berets left too, allowing Sanogo and his men to occupy and ransack the premises. Touré, whose term in office was nearly over, did not attempt to organize military action against Sanogo, and instead chose to go into hiding, with protection from the 33rd RCP. Officers from the 33rd RCP asked their USSOF counterparts to provide ammunition for use in a coup, but these Americans had not received guidance from the embassy on the U.S. position toward the coup and therefore avoided providing assistance to the paratroopers.⁷⁶ Touré later went into exile in the neighboring country of Senegal.

Sanogo, who had been a figure of no significance and little ambition on the morning of 21 March, decided to become chief of state that evening. The Malian people accepted the military's overthrow of the democratic government with a readiness that shocked much of the democratic world. Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh of the U.S. National Democratic Institute commented, "the population in Bamako showed surprising indifference to the coup while it was in progress, and was willing to embrace the group of junior officers that staged the coup once President Touré agreed to step down."⁷⁷ To many Malians, the coup was a necessary antidote to a government that was irretrievably corrupt and ineffective.⁷⁸

6. Sanogo in Power

Some U.S. military officers wanted to continue assistance to Mali's security forces after the coup, but were overruled by the State Department, which decided that the continuation of U.S. assistance would constitute the sanctioning of a military coup, which was undesirable, and it would enmesh the United States in an internal conflict between Tuaregs and Malians of Mandé and other ethnic descent. On 23 March, USSOF discontinued all their activities in Mali. SOCAFRICA maintained a team of four to six troops at the embassy in Bamako on a standby basis, but they were not permitted to interact with the Malian military.⁷⁹ The Flintlock exercise, which had been scheduled to take place in northern Mali later in the year, was aborted.

On 10 April 2012, the United States officially terminated assistance to Mali's government in accordance with Section 7008 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act of 2012. This legislation prohibited assistance to any country whose elected head of government had been removed by a military coup. Some humanitarian assistance was permitted to continue, as was assistance for elections.⁸⁰

The suspension of U.S. aid bewildered and infuriated Malian military officers, who shared the general view of their countrymen that a military coup was preferable to the continuation of corrupt democracy. "The coup happens, we're weaker than ever, and then you pull your aid?" said a Malian officer who enjoyed widespread respect among the foreign advisers. "We're fighting the same enemies. Why should a coup be more important than defeating AQIM? It's your enemy just as much as it's ours."⁸¹

The termination of U.S. aid was accompanied by a debilitating purge within the Malian military. On the heels of the coup, Sanogo arrested much of the senior military leadership and gave the senior army posts to colonels who had not been close to the deposed president.⁸² These changes paralyzed the central leadership and led promptly to disorder on the periphery. Within a few days of the coup, the commanders of three of the four ETIAs in the north defected with their entire units to the rebellion, leaving the government with few loyal forces in the north.⁸³ The remaining loyalist forces abandoned the three northern regions of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, withdrawing to Sévaré, Ségou, and Bamako by the end of March.⁸⁴

Into the void stepped the MNLA, Ansar Dine, and AQIM, who took charge of local governance and plundered foreign-financed development projects.⁸⁵ U.S. military officers warned that the extremists were strong enough and the Malian army weak enough that Bamako could fall in a day's time, causing Western governments to plan for an emergency evacuation. For reasons that remain unclear, AQIM and the others chose not to push into southern Mali at this precarious time.⁸⁶

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) responded to these developments swiftly and decisively. On 27 March, the heads of state of ECOWAS announced that they were activating a force of 3,000 ECOWAS troops for use against the rebels in northern Mali should they refuse to accept a peaceful resolution of the conflict.⁸⁷ ECOWAS also pressured the military junta to agree to an interim government and democratic elections, which Sanogo did on 6 April. The military named the speaker of the National Assembly, Dioncounda Traoré, as interim president, and Cheick Modibo Diarra as interim prime minister.

Although this agreement eased tensions in Bamako and reduced international criticism, it did not put an end to infighting among Mali's elites. On April 30, the Red Berets of the presidential guard, still smarting from the deposing of the president, attempted a coup against Sanogo and his supporters in the regular army. Fighting raged that night at the airport, several military barracks in Bamako, and the national TV and radio stations. Forces loyal to the junta overran the Red Beret base at Djicoroni, outside Bamako, the next day, causing the ring leaders to flee and the coup to collapse. The fighting claimed a total of 14 lives and it wounded another 40. The forces loyal to Sanogo arrested 140 of the Red Berets, including 40 officers, of whom 21 disappeared and may have been killed. Approximately 400 paratroopers from the 33rd RCP joined other units, while most of the remaining 800 refused and insisted the paratroopers be kept together in a single unit.⁸⁸

In northern Mali, the rebels enticed Malian refugees to return to their homes and join rebel fighting units by offering them high pay.⁸⁹ The MNLA soon fell behind Ansar Dine in recruitment of fighters, because it did not have revenue sources comparable to AQIM's hostage taking and drug trafficking activities. Ansar Dine soon took over some of the areas that MNLA had seized at the end of March. AQIM solidified its position as the brains of the rebellion in northern Mali, with Ansar Dine providing the arms and legs.⁹⁰

Ansar Dine and AQIM also lured youth from foreign countries with promises of salaries greatly exceeding the average wages in poor countries. Islamists from many of Mali's neighbors, including Tunisia, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, and Togo went to Mali to join the jihad, as did Islamists from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and France. By the end of the year, according to French intelligence, the number of Islamist fighters in Mali stood between 2,500 and 3,000.⁹¹

The multinational conglomeration of veteran jihadists ran training camps for aspiring extremists in northern Mali. According to Malian witnesses, hundreds of Boko Haram fighters came from Nigeria to Timbuktu in 2012 to receive weapons training at an AQIM training camp. Some of them returned to Nigeria to use newly acquired skills and weapons.⁹² In 2013, Islamists from Tunisia and Algeria were reported to be returning to their native countries after receiving terrorist training in Mali.⁹³

Islamist efforts to govern northern Mali became the subject of much controversy among both their opponents and their own leadership. By some accounts, their draconian justice earned the respect of the citizenry because its impartiality and its lack of corruption contrasted favorably with the misdeeds of the previous government.⁹⁴ The Islamic totalitarians of the Taliban had gained ground in Afghanistan in the 1990s by meting out punishments with similar impartiality and severity.

Other observers believed that the harsh governance measures of the extremists alienated the subject population. Abou Moussab Abdelwadoud, the head of AQIM, leveled this charge. The population had to be educated in Islam before harsh punishments could be imposed, he asserted in July. He said:

Our previous experience proved that applying Shariah this way, without taking the environment into consideration, will lead to people rejecting the religion, and engender hatred toward the Mujahideen, and will consequently lead to the failure of our experiment.⁹⁵

The rebels needed to indoctrinate more of northern Mali's people in order to gain their support for jihadi *Salafism* and mobilize them in defense of the area. To those who sought to win without careful cultivation of the population, he warned, "You are in danger of destroying our experiment, of killing off our baby, our beautiful tree."⁹⁶

Abou Moussab Abdelwadoud also warned against provocative actions that might induce foreign powers to intervene. MNLA and Ansar Dine had pillaged several Christian churches, a Christian school, and a Christian radio station, causing nearby Christian populations to flee their homes.⁹⁷ Ansar Dine had also destroyed seven mausoleums of Muslim saints in Timbuktu, which it claimed represented polytheistic tendencies that had to be rooted out in accordance with the *Salafist* conception of strict monotheism. When the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) protested publicly that the world should not “allow vandals to wipe out historical monuments,” Ansar Dine responded by destroying the Sidi Yahya mosque, which dated back to 1400. “We don’t acknowledge UNESCO,” said Ansar Dine spokesman Sanda Ould Bouamama. “What is UNESCO? We don’t care about the words of any entity because God is one without partners.”⁹⁸

Abou Moussab Abdelwadoud found particular fault with effrontery of this sort. “You must adopt mature and moderate rhetoric that reassures and calms,” he admonished. “To do so, you must avoid any statements that are provocative to neighboring countries and avoid repeated threats.” Evidently aware of the tendency of some Westerners to emphasize the local concerns of Islamic rebels and discount their international objectives, he advised, “Better for you to be silent and pretend to be a ‘domestic’ movement that has its own causes and concerns. There is no call for you to show that we have an expansionary, jihadi, Qaida or any other sort of project.” He also called for an end to provocations against other rebel groups, especially MNLA.⁹⁹

At least some of the rebels appear to have heeded the AQIM leader’s rebuke. In the ensuing period, reports emerged of rebel organizers adopting a more lenient approach toward the population. The foreign extremist leaders in particular focused more on providing government services than on meting out punishments.¹⁰⁰ They permitted international humanitarian organizations to distribute food and conduct other relief operations.¹⁰¹

During the second half of 2012, AQIM improved relations with MNLA and recruited more natives of northern Mali into AQIM and Ansar Dine. Mali’s government and its allies attempted to exploit differences between the “local” groups MNLA and Ansar Dine and the “global jihadist” groups AQIM and MUJAO. But AQIM’s recent proselytization among the Tuaregs and its ongoing outreach to the MNLA and other native Malians ensured that those efforts came to naught.¹⁰²

In recent years, the United States had exploited its technical intelligence assets to locate violent Islamists, and then employed drones or surgical ground strikes to eliminate them.¹⁰³ In the aftermath of the Malian coup, U.S. aircraft flew over Mali to obtain information, but the lack of friendly forces on the ground prevented the use of ground platforms and minimized the availability of human intelligence. The Islamists took aggressive countermeasures to technical collection, banning cell phones, dismantling cellular towers, and shutting down Internet cafes. “It’s tough to penetrate,” remarked General Carter Ham, then-commander of AFRICOM. “It’s tough to get access for platforms that can collect. It’s an extraordinarily tough environment for human intelligence, not just ours but the neighboring countries as well.”¹⁰⁴

For most of the year, the Obama administration was cool to recommendations from ECOWAS to send their military forces into northern Mali, convinced that the problem did not merit such a risky solution. Senior U.S. officials expressed doubt as to whether AQIM posed a threat to the United States. “AQIM has always been way more talk than action,” asserted one senior U.S. counterterrorism official.¹⁰⁵ This sort of skepticism also kept the U.S. Government from adding AQIM leaders to high-value targeting lists.¹⁰⁶

American perceptions about Mali began to change in late September after U.S. intelligence agencies concluded AQIM may have used Mali as a staging ground for an attack in Benghazi on 11 September 2012, which killed four Americans, including U.S. Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens. At a special UN meeting on the Maghreb and the Sahel on 26 September, Secretary of State Clinton publicly linked AQIM’s Mali presence to the Benghazi attack.¹⁰⁷ On 1 October, Carson said, “there will have to be at some point military action to push” the rebels out of northern Mali. According to Carson, the military action would have to be led by Mali’s forces and supported by Mali’s neighbors.¹⁰⁸

In November, ECOWAS resolved to send a force of 3,000 to Mali, composed primarily of soldiers from Nigeria, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Ivory Coast President Alassane Outtara said that these soldiers could go to Mali as soon as the UN approved the plan, which he hoped would be in late November or early December. The plan envisioned a period of six months of training and developing bases in the south, followed by operations into the north.¹⁰⁹

France, the European Union (EU), and most of the UN Security Council backed the ECOWAS plan.¹¹⁰ French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian

warned that Mali would become a “terrorist sanctuary” if no actions were taken. “In Mali, it is our own security that is at stake: the security of France, the security of Europe,” he said. “If we don’t move, a terrorist entity will take shape which could hit this or another country, including France, and including Europe.”¹¹¹

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was more muted in his support, asserting that a military operation “may be required as a last resort to deal with the most hardline extremist and criminal elements in the north.” First, he said:

the focus must be on initiating a broad-based and inclusive political dialogue aimed at forging national consensus around a road map for the transition and at addressing the long-standing grievances of the Tuaregs and other communities in the north.¹¹²

He also pointed out the difficulty of combating the heavily armed rebel groups in Mali, whose strength had risen to an estimated 3,000 core combatants. Mali’s military paled in comparison, as it was “highly politicized, bitterly divided and poorly trained and equipped.”¹¹³ Many of Mali’s high-ranking officers were still in jail.¹¹⁴

The specifics of the ECOWAS intervention plan came under fire from Western military experts, who deemed the text of the plan confused and inadequate.¹¹⁵ In early December, U.S. ambassador to the UN Susan Rice was reported to be “highly skeptical” of the ECOWAS plan. According to one diplomat, Rice said that the plan was “crap.”¹¹⁶ Rice insisted that the intervening force must be a “credible” force that “must kick al-Qaeda hard,” said a second diplomat. She believed that the Malian and other West African troops did not meet that standard.¹¹⁷ AFRICOM sent military personnel to help develop the ECOWAS plan, but they would need time and cooperation to develop the plan to the point that it was acceptable to Western experts.¹¹⁸

In light of the weaknesses of the African forces and the ECOWAS military planning, the U.S. military offered to act unilaterally against the leaders of Ansar Dine and AQIM. Precision strikes by SOF could at least weaken the Islamist organizations and impede their terrorist plotting. The Obama administration rejected the offer, on the grounds that it would inspire Islamic militants to undertake new acts of violence, including terrorist strikes against Western targets.¹¹⁹

In early December, lack of confidence in the available military options led the Obama administration to call for a delay in military intervention until Mali had elected a new president. “Mali’s first challenge is the restoration of democratic governance,” Carson told the African Affairs Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on 5 December. Carson said:

The United States has made elections in Mali a priority because historically transitional governments that are not pressed to hold elections and restore constitutional order tend to hold on to power long beyond their mandate ... Elections are critical for ensuring that the Malian government has the legitimacy needed to negotiate with indigenous northern groups and effectively coordinate with regional and international partners to oust AQIM.¹²⁰

France raised its voice in opposition to the American position. Malians living under Islamist domination, they pointed out, would be unable to vote. “Do you think that al-Qaeda will be securing voting booths for a fair election?” remarked one UN Security Council diplomat.¹²¹ The French sought to obtain American acquiescence to a military mission by offering a provision that would allow the Americans to review and approve the actual military plan prior to implementation.¹²²

The French sweetener proved sufficient to gain American concurrence. On 20 December, the UN Security Council unanimously authorized an African-led security mission to Mali, called the International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), for a period of one year. Its principal objectives would be recovery of the areas held by the rebels and reunification of the country. The Security Council called on UN member states to provide financial support for the mission.¹²³

7. The January Offensive and Counteroffensive

The enemy would render these deliberations moot by forcing the issue on the ground. On 5 January, military elements of Ansar Dine and MUJAO advanced southward toward Konna, the only government-held town north of Mopti, which was the main redoubt protecting southern Mali from the north. AQIM, along with local imams, *marabout* (holy men), and local notables, supported the jihadist groups. Those who had doubted that the “local” and “global jihadist” groups could be split from one another through negotiations cited the collaboration between Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM as vindication of their doubts.¹²⁴

Riding all-terrain vehicles, the extremists ran into Malian army forces north of Konna on 8 January. The extremists got the better of the army, pushing the Malian soldiers back. Other extremist forces advanced in western Mali.¹²⁵ Rebel forces captured Konna the next day and pressed on toward Mopti. On 10 January, the French ambassador in Bamako notified Paris that the enemy was on the verge of taking Mopti, and if Mopti fell then there would be nothing to stop the insurgents from advancing on Bamako itself.

French President François Hollande in turn declared that the extremists were “seeking to deal a fatal blow to the very existence of Mali.”¹²⁶ Of special concern to Hollande were the more than 6,000 French citizens and 1,000 other Europeans in Mali, most of them in Bamako, for the French could not evacuate so many people if the enemy attacked the capital. Were AQIM to take thousands of Europeans captive, it could demand thousands of ransoms or the release of thousands of Islamist prisoners.¹²⁷ When Malian interim President Dioncounda Traoré called President Hollande on 10 January to request his help, Hollande agreed to take military action. Hollande then notified President Obama that the French were about to intervene militarily in Mali.¹²⁸

On that same day, roughly three dozen French special operations troops landed at the Sévaré military base near Mopti, where they immediately began assisting Malian forces. The French troops at first served solely as spotters for air strikes by French aircraft. But on 11 January, as Malian forces came under fierce enemy attack, the French SOF took part in the ground action as

well.¹²⁹ From bases in Burkina Faso, French SOF Gazelle helicopters began to attack rebel columns in Mali, and French conventional forces began to arrive in the country hours later.¹³⁰

The French special operators found the enemy to be much more formidable than anticipated. “What has struck us markedly is how modern their equipment is and their ability to use it,” commented one French official. “In Libya they picked up modern, sophisticated kit that is a lot more robust and effective than could have been imagined.”¹³¹

Enemy tactics also proved better than expected. The rebels employed a host of tactical innovations intended to offset Western technological advantage, many of which were spelled out in an al-Qaeda document found by an Associated Press correspondent after the fighting. The document’s purported author was a senior Yemeni member of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, but Osama Bin Laden was believed to have provided some of the tips himself. Drawing upon lessons learned in other countries, the document enumerated a host of techniques for thwarting drones. “It is possible to know the intention and the mission of the drone by using the Russian-made ‘sky grabber’ device to infiltrate the drone’s waves and the frequencies,” one section read. “The device is available in the market for \$2,595 and the one who operates it should be a computer know-how.” Another section recommended “using devices that broadcast frequencies or pack of frequencies to disconnect the contacts and confuse the frequencies used to control the drone.” The document called for vigilance against spies, noting that the spy “is the main pillar” of drone warfare. To deter would-be spies, a captured spy should be “hanged in public places with a sign hanging from his neck identifying him as an ‘American Spy’ or any other deterrent means similar to that done to (Israeli spy hanged in Syria) Levy Cohen or (late Afghan president) Najibullah.”¹³²

Islamist fighters deftly exploited the Western aversion to inflicting civilian casualties. They mounted anti-aircraft weapons on the roofs of homes to discourage French aircraft from firing at them, and moved around in civilian clothing on scooters of the sort employed by the populace. They did their best to stick close to civilians and their dwellings, offering food and religious education to prevent the people from shunning them or ratting them out.¹³³

Within the U.S. Government, military officers proposed committing SOF in support of the French. The State Department rejected the proposal. The number of U.S. military personnel was limited to 12 at the embassy in Bamako, and 10 others serving as liaisons with French forces.¹³⁴

On 14 January, the Islamists attacked Diabaly in western Mali. Some Malian soldiers threw away their weapons, removed their uniforms, and tried to blend into the civilian population. “We thought the army would protect us,” said Gaoussou Keita, a radio repairman in Diabaly. “But they simply ran away.”¹³⁵ Local resident Gaoussou Kone remarked, “We were surprised to learn that our soldiers ran away. There is no African country that is strong enough to fight these people on their own. They are too well-armed.”¹³⁶

French aircraft arrived at Diabaly to rain destruction down on the attackers, in the hope that air power would suffice to stop the rebels before they took the whole town. But the rebels overran Diabaly and a nearby Malian Army outpost anyway.¹³⁷ Acknowledging that ground forces would be required to blunt the enemy offensive, Hollande promptly decided to increase French troop strength from 800 to 2,500 and shift from defense to offense. He directed the French to attack quickly, in order to catch as many of the enemy as possible before they slipped away.¹³⁸

To facilitate the expansion of French ground operations, French diplomats asked the Americans to provide refueling aircraft. France had only a few aging KC-135 refuelers, which were not up to a task of this magnitude. Years earlier, France had ordered 14 new Airbus 330 tankers, but the purchase had been put on hold in 2010, owing to shrinkage of the French defense budget.¹³⁹

The French expected the American help to be readily forthcoming. According to French and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) officials who attended the private meetings, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Michael Sheehan had said at a NATO summit a few months earlier that the United States would provide “whatever it takes” to help the French in Mali. U.S. defense officials would later dispute that recounting, saying their messages to France might have been “lost in translation,” and during those private meetings “neither Mr. Panetta nor Mr. Sheehan directly urged France to use force and didn’t promise specific support.” Panetta’s aides said that “his comments were meant to convey general U.S. support for the aims of the French in Mali.”¹⁴⁰

On 14 January, though, Panetta made additional comments that seemed to suggest the United States would back France to the hilt. In reference to Mali, Panetta said:

We have made a commitment that al-Qaeda is not going to find any place to hide ... We're concerned that any time al-Qaeda establishes a base of operations, while they might not have any immediate plans for attacks in the United States and in Europe, that ultimately that still remains their objective.¹⁴¹

Two days later, Panetta remarked, "This is an al-Qaeda operation, and it is for that reason that we have always been concerned about their presence in Mali, because they would use it as a base of operations."¹⁴²

According to Adam Entous and Julian Barnes of the *Wall Street Journal*, Pentagon officials initially promised to meet the French requests for assistance, but White House officials countermanded the promises. It is not clear whether this turn of affairs resulted from a lack of coordination within the executive branch or a change of heart at the White House. The Obama administration informed the French that it needed more information about the targets of the French aircraft the American tankers would refuel. The French were taken aback, given their impressions from the previous discussions that the United States would back them unequivocally and without hesitation.¹⁴³

The French also asked the United States to help transport troops into Mali and provide intelligence that could be used for targeting. The Americans informed the French government that it would have to pay for the services of the transport aircraft. This reply also appalled the French, who labeled it a "demand without precedent."¹⁴⁴ A senior U.S. official told the *Washington Post* that the U.S. Government was not immediately granting the request for intelligence because it first needed to understand "what the French objectives are and really how they intend to go about them and against whom."¹⁴⁵

As the days wore on with no change in the status of the French request, Obama administration figures discussed the threat of militants in Mali and whether aiding France's efforts was an urgent priority. "No one here is questioning the threat that AQIM poses regionally," an unnamed administration official commented. "The question we all need to ask is, what threat do they pose to the U.S. homeland? The answer so far has been none."¹⁴⁶ Another concern was that the French offensive might be harming elements of the rebel coalition that were not as radical as AQIM. Anonymous U.S. officials said, "the U.S. believes AQIM members are fighting in Mali alongside rebels

whose affiliations and intentions are less clear-cut. Some of these less-radical factions may be open to negotiations.¹⁴⁷

The tendency of European nations to depend on the United States for military assets was cited as a further reason for inaction. One U.S. official said that it was practicing “tough love” with the French. According to this individual, “The message to France and other European allies was that Washington won’t foot the bill as global policeman at a time when European powers are cutting defense investments.”¹⁴⁸ Administration officials also expressed a concern that providing any assistance would make the United States a “co-belligerent” and there would be a “slippery slope” that would draw the United States into Mali more deeply.¹⁴⁹ A senior State Department official told reporters, “We do best if we are in a strong supporting and sustaining role, and not in a role in which we are taking the lead. This is primarily an African problem.”¹⁵⁰ Still another explanation advanced by the U.S. Government was that legal considerations required a delay. U.S. officials were said to be conducting a review of the legalities of such assistance because of the ban on providing aid to the Malian government and the lack of a UN blessing for the French operation.¹⁵¹

Elsewhere on the diplomatic front, Western nations were urging Algeria to help resolve the Mali crisis. The strongest military power in the region, Algeria, had demonstrated an impressive ability to eliminate Islamist extremists, but the Algerian government disregarded the West’s pleas. Combating rebels in northern Mali did not appear to be in its interests, as operations in Mali might cause the rebels to move into Algeria, where many of them had caused trouble in the past. Just a few months earlier, Algerian forces had driven AQIM forces from the Kabylie Mountains into northern Mali.¹⁵²

National pride may also have played a role in Algeria’s refusal. Some Algerian officials contended that their government was unwilling to send forces to Mali because no one had sent forces to help Algeria deal with Islamist rebels in the 1990s. In addition, Algerians were incensed at the United States and France over their intervention in Libya in 2011. NATO countries had used the pretext of humanitarian assistance to engineer Gadhafi’s fall, and then had done little to restore stability or secure weapons in the aftermath, leaving Libyan-based extremists free to run rampant across the region with heavy weapons. Some of those extremists were carrying out complex terror attacks in Algeria.¹⁵³

Among the places where the militants showed up with heavy weapons was a gas plant in the Algerian desert, where a multinational staff was laboring on behalf of the Algerian state energy agency Sonatrach, Norway's Statoil, and BP. Led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a group of armed Islamists seized the facility on 16 January, taking several hundred hostages, including a handful of Americans.¹⁵⁴ Belmokhtar, who had split from AQIM a month earlier to form a new group called the "Masked Brigade," claimed that he had ordered the attack as retaliation for the French intervention in Mali.¹⁵⁵

The attackers intended to blow up the gas facility, creating a spectacular fireball that would kill all of the employees and send a message around the world. But they had made the mistake of blowing up the plant's generators during the initial assault, which shut down the processes required to ignite a massive explosion. On 17 January, with the plant still out of operation, the militants decided to load some of the hostages into five vehicles and break out of the Algerian army's encirclement. The Algerian forces opened fire on the vehicles, three of which exploded, killing some hostages as well as a militant leader.¹⁵⁶

The Algerian government decided to send in military forces on 19 January without consulting the United States or other interested foreign nations.¹⁵⁷ The Algerian army stormed the facility, shooting most of the militants and some of the hostages before securing the plant. A total of 38 workers, including three Americans, perished during the siege.¹⁵⁸

Despite the failure of the militants to blow the plant up, the international jihadist community deemed the event a success. And although Belmokhtar had reportedly split with AQIM a month earlier, AQIM received most of the credit for the attack. As word of the brazen attack spread across the Internet, AQIM was inundated with donations and offers to serve in their jihadist ranks.¹⁵⁹

Back in Mali, the French sent a mechanized infantry force of 600 from Niono toward Diabaly on 18 January, while Malian military forces approached separately.¹⁶⁰ Before French and Malian forces reached Diabaly, French air strikes slammed into the town, which convinced the rebels to flee. When the Malians came close to the town, nevertheless, they halted and refused to go further, for fear the rebels still had fighters in the town or had left booby traps behind. "It's not possible to say if they have left Diabaly 100 percent," said Lieutenant Colonel Seydou Sogoba, a Malian military commander. "It's hard to tell who's an Islamist. They don't have 'Islamist' written

on their faces.” Residents who had evacuated Diabaly during earlier fighting were hesitant to return for fear that the Islamists remained or would soon return.¹⁶¹ French forces finally took full control of Diabaly on 21 January.

During the first few weeks of the French intervention, the French government planned to secure Bamako and the rest of the south, then help prepare an African-led force to move into the north. Near the end of January, however, Hollande changed his mind, opting to use French troops to retake the north right away. On 26 January, French paratroopers conducted a night parachute landing near Timbuktu and headed into the city to catch fleeing rebels. The enemy chose not to fight, and nearly all enemy fighters were able to melt into the population or escape the area without getting caught. To take Gao, the French brought Chadian and Nigerien troops by air, entering Mali from Niger on the ground.¹⁶² At Gao, too, the rebels abandoned the city and evaded French attempts to ensnare them.¹⁶³

As the French forces were taking the northern population centers, the U.S. Government remained unwilling to meet the French request for refueling aircraft. On 26 January, Karen DeYoung divulged in the *Washington Post* that the administration’s legal review had concluded that the United States could provide the requested assistance, on the grounds that al-Qaeda posed a threat to the United States. The legal clearance, DeYoung further reported, had not led to action on the French request, owing to ongoing doubts within the administration of the strategic advisability of assistance. An unnamed U.S. official explained the delay in these terms:

What we’ve been working through is not viewing Mali as a one-off but rather as part of a continuum of counterterrorism efforts and decisions that we’re making to address the situation in northern Africa [over the medium and long term] ... We need to think through what our engagement means—what the risk of getting further engaged could be to U.S. personnel abroad, [and] the duration of time that we’re being asked to get involved.¹⁶⁴

On the evening of 26 January, the same day that the *Washington Post* article appeared, the Pentagon announced that it would meet the French request for refueling aircraft.¹⁶⁵ Three U.S. KC-135 tankers based in Moron Air Base in Spain began providing in-flight refueling to French aircraft flying from N’Djamena, the capital of Chad. On 18 January, the U.S. Air Force’s 818th Contingency Response Group moved from Joint Base

McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey to an air base in Istres, France, where it loaded French vehicles onto U.S. Air Force C-17 aircraft and flew them to Bamako. Several weeks later, the emphasis shifted to flying people and equipment within Mali, primarily with six C-130 airlifters that were assigned to AFRICOM and U.S. European Command. American airmen would remain in Mali to the end of the year and beyond because of the ongoing shortage of French logistical assets.¹⁶⁶

French forces moved into the city of Kidal on 30 January. They cut a deal with the MNLA and an Ansar Dine splinter group called the Islamic Movement of Azawad (MIA), whereby the MNLA and MIA would allow the French to enter peacefully on the condition that the Malian army would not be allowed back into the city. The French were not prepared to govern Kidal, so the MNLA and MIA retained control of governance. Manning roadblocks and collecting taxes, they ran Kidal city until July when, under international pressure, they allowed the Malian military to assume control.¹⁶⁷

At the beginning of February 2012, Chad deployed its Special Anti-Terrorism Group to northern Mali for operations in support of the French counteroffensive. The unit had received prolonged training from USSOF, and had also received American equipment and logistical support.¹⁶⁸ Other neighboring countries, including Nigeria and Senegal, said they would send forces to Mali, but their forces were slow in arriving, and once in Mali they did not participate in dangerous combat missions as the Chadians did.¹⁶⁹

French and Chadian forces entered Aguelhok and Tessalit on 7 and 8 February, bringing them into closer proximity to the Ifoghas and Tigharghar Mountains, where AQIM and other rebel groups were believed to have bases. The French and Chadian forces began patrolling the mountains with the assistance of friendly Tuareg militiamen, but without the Malian army, which the French wanted to keep away to prevent a rekindling of conflict with the MNLA.¹⁷⁰ Only occasionally did the hunters manage to find and engage the rebels. In the middle of February, 1,200 French and 900 Chadian troops caught a large AQIM force in the Ametettai valley, in northeastern Mali. The French and Chadians killed more than 100 AQIM fighters and took five prisoners, at a cost of 26 Chadian and two French personnel.¹⁷¹

Large numbers of residents fled the northern cities when the French and their allies arrived. Some families fled merely to avoid the fighting, or to avoid retribution for their support of the rebels. Others, especially among the youth, were recruited by the militants to join them as they retreated to

hidden base areas. Between 200 and 300 pupils were reported to have gone with the militants from Gao. “MUJAO took many of the students from the Quranic schools because they speak Arabic and are easier to convert and manipulate,” remarked Gao Mayor Sadou Diallo.¹⁷²

African nations, which in the past had often condemned Western military action in Africa as a tool of neocolonialism, applauded the French intervention of January 2012. Many of Mali’s neighbors lined up to send troops for the follow-on mission. “All of the African continent, all its heads of state, is happy about the speed with which France acted and with France’s political courage,” said Thomas Boni Yayi, who was both the African Union Chairman and the president of Benin. Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, who offered to provide 1,200 troops, said of the Malian insurgency, “If it is not contained, definitely it will spill into West Africa ... It is one of the reasons we have to move fast.”¹⁷³

Among the world’s violent Islamist groups, the French intervention provoked a torrent of vitriol. Jihadist websites advocated attacks on French citizens and the French homeland, including landmarks like the Eiffel Tower. “Carry out lone-wolf actions, capture and kill and slaughter, even if it is one Frenchman,” one posting read.¹⁷⁴ U.S. Ambassador to Mali Mary Beth Leonard said she was worried that Malians with French passports would conduct terrorist attacks in Europe, since their passports would allow them to enter France and other European countries without extensive scrutiny. Once inside Europe, they could strike American embassies, schools, or military bases.¹⁷⁵

8. After the Storm

Following the French re-conquest of the north, the U.S. Government did not resume training Malian forces. American troops did, however, train some African forces that were heading to Mali as peacekeepers. In May, Army Regionally Aligned Forces from 1-18 IN deployed a 22-person training team to Oullam, Niger, for 10 weeks to mentor and train Nigerien defense forces in preparation for their deployment to Mali.¹⁷⁶

The United States also positioned two unarmed drones near the Nigerien capital of Niamey to gather information in Mali and Niger for the benefit of French forces. Nigerien President Issoufou Mahamadou said that he had asked Washington to send the drones to Niger because he was concerned that Niger on its own might not be strong enough to fend off Islamist fighters based in Mali, Libya, or Nigeria. According to U.S. officials, the drones were intended to conduct surveillance over Mali, but not to launch air strikes, although these individuals did not rule out the use of American air strikes in the future. One U.S. official commented, “Most of the surveillance missions are designed to track broad patterns of human activity and are not aimed at hunting individuals.”¹⁷⁷

In February 2013, 500 EU military personnel arrived in Bamako to provide training to the Malian military. The EU planned to use them to train four battalions of 600-700 Malian soldiers each. The training regimen would include extensive emphasis on human rights, in part because of reports that Malian soldiers had executed Arab and Tuareg civilians suspected of aiding the enemy.¹⁷⁸ The newly arrived head of the EU mission, French General François Lecointre, reported the Malian army to be “in a state of advanced disrepair,” its soldiers “badly trained, badly paid and under-equipped.”¹⁷⁹ General Lecointre asserted that the EU needed to provide weapons, transportation, and communications equipment, in addition to training. The EU mission would work through General Dembélé and Minister of Defense and Veterans’ Affairs Brigadier General Yamoussa Camara, not through Captain Sanogo, whom the Europeans wished to isolate and disempower. Sanogo had just put himself in charge of a military committee responsible for reform of the security forces, and some senior military officers continued to take direction from him.¹⁸⁰

On 2 April, the EU Training Mission began training the first of four Malian battalions at Koulikoro, a military base 37 miles from Bamako.¹⁸¹ The training turned out to be less impressive than advertised. Of the 550 “trainers” present in April, only 150 were trainers, the remainder being support staff and security.¹⁸² Malian soldiers received only two months of training, much too little to impart the skills and attitudes that make for capable and disciplined soldiers. In June, soldiers from the first battalion to complete EU training boycotted their graduation ceremony in protest against their commanders, whom they accused of stealing aid funds that were supposed to be spent on the battalion.¹⁸³

France and the United States, meanwhile, took action to accelerate the transportation of ECOWAS forces to Mali and their integration into AFISMA. By late March, the ECOWAS representation in Mali consisted of 4,300 soldiers from Togo, Senegal, Benin, Ghana, Niger, Sierra Leone, the Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso. Chad had another 2,000 troops in the country. The AFISMA forces were supposed to be self-sufficient for the first 90 days of deployment, but some began experiencing shortages of food, fuel, and water well before that time, which compelled other foreign countries to provide them with logistical support.¹⁸⁴ “If this war has shown one thing about our armies, it is our inability to project power beyond our borders,” said a West African chief of staff. “And it is not only a question of resources. We also lack skills.”¹⁸⁵ In April, Assistant Secretary of Defense Sheehan told a Senate Armed Services subcommittee that the ECOWAS contingent “is a completely incapable force.”¹⁸⁶

During the spring, the Malian government sent 1,200 troops to Gao and 650 to Timbuktu to reassert sovereign authority. The local populations accused the incoming Malian soldiers of human rights abuses, though the claims proved difficult to verify. French, Malian, and AFISMA forces conducted numerous operations in northern Mali, but seldom encountered armed opposition. The enemy occasionally employed suicide bombers against military forces and installations, and otherwise appeared content to stay hidden until the French departed.¹⁸⁷

On 1 July 2013, the UN took control of the 6,000 West African troops in Mali under a new peacekeeping mission called Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Led by a Rwandan officer, Major General Jean Bosco Kazura, MINUSMA was slated to reach a total strength of 12,640 African troops by December. It was to provide security in the north

for upcoming elections, and then ultimately take full responsibility for Mali's security.¹⁸⁸ The change in name and mission notwithstanding, the African forces did not appear to be capable of replacing the French forces as planned. President Hollande had said in March that the number of French troops in Mali would be reduced to 2,000 by the middle of the year, but France still had 3,200 troops in Mali in July, and the same number in August.¹⁸⁹

In the summer elections, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita won the presidential runoff with 78 percent of the vote. The most immediate threat to Keita appeared to come from Sanogo, who in August had managed to get himself promoted to the rank of general.¹⁹⁰ On 30 September, Sanogo's allies from the Committee for Reform of the Armed Forces organized a protest against the government at the Kati barracks, where the 2012 coup had begun. After firing the usual shots in the air, the protesters claimed that they had been denied promotions that had been promised previously. Six soldiers were killed during the incident, and a colonel disappeared.¹⁹¹

President Keita responded by ordering the dissolution of the committee. "I will not tolerate indiscipline and anarchy," Keita said in a nationally televised speech. "Investigations are under way into the reasons and the individuals behind this slap in the face of the nation which comes at a time when soldiers from other nations have left their countries ... to come defend us."¹⁹² The government arrested several military officers, including Malian army Colonel Youssou Traoré, who was accused of inciting the protest.¹⁹³

Later in the fall, President Keita sacked the army chief of staff, the director of the national police, and the head of the military academies, all of whom were close to Sanogo.¹⁹⁴ The critical opportunity presented itself in December, when a forensic team discovered the remains of 21 people in a mass grave where Sanogo loyalists were believed to have carried out a massacre. Seizing on the discovery, Keita arrested Sanogo and charged him with assassination.¹⁹⁵

During the second half of 2013, Keita made some headway in moving the right military officers into the most important positions. In September, the officer in charge of Malian forces in the North was Colonel Didier Dacko, a man highly regarded by American and French officers. Dacko had attended the National Defense University in Washington in 2009, during which time he had absorbed Western counterinsurgency theories that emphasized winning over the population, and he was now putting those principles into practice. Dacko recounted:

What I took away was that in dealing with insurgencies, the most important thing is to work with the population and win them over without using too much force ... We need the Tuareg on our side, or at least not as our enemies. We can't win over the jihadis; we need to crush them. But we can't do it if we're fighting all of the Tuareg as well.¹⁹⁶

In the fall, Hollande kept talking about reducing the French presence, but his withdrawal plans were continuously undercut by the shortcomings of MINUSMA. Instead of rising in numbers as planned, the UN peacekeeping force actually declined to 5,200 troops in October.¹⁹⁷ The quality of those troops did not show an appreciable increase. The peacekeepers also continued to suffer from shortages of equipment and combat enablers.¹⁹⁸

The security situation in northern Mali began to deteriorate in October. Rebel forces increased their terrorist attacks on international peacekeepers, Malian soldiers, and foreign journalists.¹⁹⁹ The violence caused retrenchment among international aid organizations that had returned to northern Mali earlier in the year. A humanitarian worker, who did not wish to be named, said:

Insecurity is still critical in some areas, especially the areas bordering Kidal and Menaka ... Even local organisations cannot get access there. We are receiving information about the infiltration of jihadists in Gao – we believe that people who are recognised as active members of the Islamist groups are coming back, and planning attacks.²⁰⁰

On 2 November, AQIM kidnapped and killed French journalists Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon of Radio France International, who had just finished interviewing a local leader in Kidal. AQIM released a statement saying, “The organisation considers that this is the least price that President François Hollande and his people will pay for their new crusade.”²⁰¹ French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius announced that the French army was redeploying 150 soldiers from the south to Kidal. He added, though, that the decrease in the French troop presence in Mali as a whole would continue unabated.²⁰² At the end of 2013, nevertheless, France still had 2,800 troops in Mali, and the UN peacekeeping mission still had only half of its authorized strength of 12,600.²⁰³

The uptick in violence may have been the result of several changes within the constellation of rebel groups. In late summer, Mokhtar Belmokhtar had joined forces with MUJAO, announcing that they had decided to get together “to confront the Zionist campaign against Islam and Muslims” and to combat “the secular forces who reject all that is Islamist and who have forced the eviction of our Muslim brothers in Egypt.” The groups attested, further, that the ultimate “leaders of jihad” were al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar.²⁰⁴

The Tuaregs of the MNLA made common cause with other separatist groups and spurned the government’s reconciliation efforts. On 4 November, MNLA announced a merger with the High Council for the Unity of Azawad and the Arab Movement of Azawad.²⁰⁵ Later in the month, an MNLA leader informed the French press that MNLA was ending its ceasefire with the government, vowing, “Wherever we find the Malian army we will launch the assault against them.”²⁰⁶

The first Malian battalion to undergo training by the EU deployed to Kidal in the spring of 2014 to combat resurgent rebels. The French negotiation of a truce in Kidal in January 2013 had revitalized hopes that the Malian Tuaregs could indeed be separated from the international extremists, but the Tuaregs of Kidal had subsequently welcomed the extremists back and abetted them in ejecting the Malian army. The Malian government sent its new battalion to Kidal without notifying its foreign allies, which many diplomats applauded as a sign of the government’s growing confidence and independence. But the move prevented those allies from lending support to the Kidal operation. The battalion suffered a humiliating defeat, and had to retreat without retrieving its dead.²⁰⁷

During the spring of 2014, Islamist and separatist rebels also defeated the Malian armed forces in battle at Tessalit, Menaka, Aguelhok, and Anefis. The setbacks compelled President Keita to agree to a ceasefire that provided for negotiations over the ultimate status of Tuareg areas.²⁰⁸ The MNLA and other Tuareg groups continued to fight the government after the ceasefire, taking possession of additional towns.²⁰⁹

The EU announced, in the meantime, that it would be providing 75 experts to train Mali’s police, Gendarmerie, and National Guard.²¹⁰ If properly organized and led, these forces could help provide lasting security in the north. The European trainers were slow in getting started, and daunted by their tasks. Albrecht Conze, the German diplomat who headed the police

training mission, arrived in the summer to find the Malian police forces in abysmal shape. Leaders had been appointed without regard for merit, and the rank and file had received little training.²¹¹

French SOF continued to carry out precision attacks on extremists in Mali during 2014.²¹² Relying on sophisticated intelligence and operational capabilities to carry out high-value targeting, the French did not undertake counterinsurgency operations or prepare the Malians to undertake them. Nor was there much evidence that the French were helping Malians acquire surgical strike capabilities. The French inflicted significant losses on the extremist groups, but remained unable to cause serious harm to their leadership structures. Key leaders were well protected or were living outside of Mali.²¹³ A particularly popular location was southwestern Libya, which had been beyond central control since the fall of Gadhafi. The population of southwestern Libya, of which a substantial fraction was Tuareg by ethnicity, sympathized with the extremists for ideological or commercial reasons. The small number of Libyan security forces in the area left them alone.²¹⁴

The lack of French attention to Malian capacity was to some extent influenced by the growing recognition that France would not get out of Mali as soon as it had planned. In May, the French government announced that it planned to keep 1,000 French troops in Mali and 3,000 in the Sahel-Sahara for “as long as necessary.” The French intended to maintain four major military bases: in Gao, and in the capitals of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad.²¹⁵

The U.S. military still lacked authorization to operate in either Mali or Libya, but it did have authorization to support activities in the infiltration corridor between Mali and Libya, and to provide a small amount of support to the EU Training Mission and the training of MINUSMA forces from other nations. By this time, Mali was a relatively low priority for the United States. The French, whose robust intervention had come as a surprise to most Americans, were believed to be containing Mali’s extremists, though it was far from clear how long they planned to stay. Larger numbers of extremists, moreover, were now located in other countries, such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. Furthermore, AFRICOM was preoccupied with fighting the Ebola virus in western Africa and Boko Haram in Nigeria.²¹⁶

Neither the United States nor anyone else was doing much to address the ongoing drug trafficking in Mali and other West Africa countries. By November 2014, the United States had reported only two successful counter-narcotics operation in West Africa, and European countries had not recorded

a single success. Malian government officials—including drug enforcement officials appointed under foreign pressure—continued to collaborate with drug traffickers as in the past. Such conditions encouraged traffickers to make lavish use of these routes in lieu of riskier routes.²¹⁷

By the fall of 2014, most of the Malian government’s security forces had been driven from northern Mali. Extremists periodically attacked MINUSMA, which was increasingly confined to its bases, and hence unable to interfere with the extremists and separatists roaming the north.²¹⁸ The UN Secretary General reported:

The withdrawal of the Malian Defence and Security Forces from most of northern Mali, the absence of effective control by the armed groups over the areas gained from the Malian Defence and Security Forces in May and the gradual drawdown and reconfiguration of French operation Serval/Barkhane have given way to a marked increase in the activities of extremist groups.²¹⁹

On 8 October, Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop asked the UN Security Council to send a “rapid-reaction force” to reinforce the UN peace-keeping mission, warning that Mali “again runs the risk of becoming the destination of hordes of terrorists who have been forced out of other parts of the world.”²²⁰

Instead of providing the military reinforcements requested by the Malian government, the UN decided to host negotiations. Malian officials and representatives from northern rebel groups gathered in Algiers to discuss an agreement that would permit the reintegration of the north into Mali. The negotiations dragged on for months without agreement, while the rebels continued to kill and wound the UN peacekeepers. As of the middle of 2015, a peace deal remained elusive.

9. Conclusion and Implications for SOF

Among the most striking features of the Malian experience was the disparity of opinion within the U.S. Government on the extremist threat. In 2010 and 2011, some U.S. officials warned that the extremist threat in Mali was growing rapidly, based upon a wide variety of information sources, many of them publicly available. Turmoil in Libya, the links between extremists in Libya and Mali, and collaboration between Islamists and Tuareg separatists provided ominous signs. Others, however, discounted the indicators of rising enemy strength, depicted the threats as purely local, or contended that the enemies could be contained by playing them off against one another. As a consequence, the U.S. Government avoided actions that might have weakened the extremists, such as deploying more U.S. resources to Mali or increasing support to Mali's government and security forces. It took the killing of the U.S. ambassador in Libya and the execution of several Americans at an Algerian gas facility to convince skeptics that AQIM posed a significant threat to U.S. interests. The underestimation of the extremist threat in Mali is worth remembering in future debates about the magnitude of extremist threats.

The extremist offensives in 2011 and 2012 revealed that the North African Islamists had made dramatic advances in their military and political capabilities during and after the Libyan civil war. They fielded capable leaders and developed complex procedures for mitigating the West's technological advantages. They also improved their ability to govern populations, resulting in greater assistance from the population and a greater ability to mingle with civilians who could provide cover from air strikes. The similarities between their operations and those of Sunni extremist groups in the Middle East provided disconcerting evidence that extremist groups were learning from experience and sharing their findings across continents.

Until 2011, some experts believed that Mali's extremist problems, whatever their magnitude, could not be solved militarily. The problems could be solved instead through investment in social and economic development. Hence, aid to Mali ought to be concentrated on development and not on security. The U.S. Government and other donors adhered to this position in the period leading up to the coup of March 2012. But spending in those

sectors failed to curb the extremists, because of weak Malian implementation of development and because of insecurity in the north that impeded implementation.

Another reason for low foreign assistance to Mali's military was the belief that strong militaries are threats to civilian government. Mali's case, however, showed that weak militaries can also overthrow civilian governments, and that starving military organizations of resources may increase their propensity for coups. Sanogo, who had a long record of ineptitude and indiscipline prior to the coup, would not have been an officer in Mali's armed forces had the officer corps been as professional as those in other countries, and that lack of professionalism reflected a dearth of expenditures on the military. Although foreign military assistance cannot guarantee positive results, the United States does have a good record of improving the professionalism of the forces it trains, and one component of that professionalism is a respect for the legal prerogatives of civil authorities.

The U.S. Defense and State Departments differed sharply in their remedies to the problem of insufficient Malian capacity. The Defense Department advocated greater participation by USSOF in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, but was overruled by the State Department, which was worried that American military action could exacerbate extremism and undercut efforts to achieve a political solution. The State Department forbade SOF from providing robust advisory assistance to the Malian military in 2012, and to the French military in 2013. Following the coup of March 2012, the State Department focused on political negotiations as the solution to Mali's extremist problems. That solution failed to remedy the situation, and led instead to the extremist offensive of January 2013, which appeared certain to conquer all of Mali until the French military intervened. Although greater U.S. military participation in such countries may not always be the best option, this episode should give the State Department and White House cause to give more serious consideration to the Defense Department when such controversies arise again, as they undoubtedly will.

Most of the disputes between State and Defense took place behind closed doors, where they are supposed to take place. The State Department listened to Defense's concerns, but by and large decided on policies different from those advocated by Defense, which is the prerogative of the State Department as the nation's principal agency for the conduct of foreign policy. On several occasions, particularly during the French intervention, Defense Department

officials made statements that were subsequently rescinded by other Defense, State, or White House officials. This development suggests that either Defense did not adequately coordinate with State, or that the White House decided to change its policy as events unfolded. Whatever the case, inadequate coordination among executive agencies sent mixed messages to friends and foes, to the detriment of U.S. foreign policy. Greater care in communicating a single, consistent message is required.

U.S. policy also suffered from a lack of clarity over what the United States would give its French ally and what it expected in return. The Secretary of Defense led the French to believe that the United States would unequivocally assist a French military intervention in Mali. Whether the State Department and White House shared this view at the time is not certain, but subsequent statements from the French indicate that neither State nor the White House conveyed a contrary position to the French. Once the French intervened, they were informed that U.S. policy had changed to one of selective support, based upon a review of French objectives and plans. The United States often attaches conditions to its assistance to other nations, and can be expected to do so in the future, but it must communicate those conditions ahead of time if it wishes to facilitate effective planning and avoid accusations of bad faith.

Some U.S. officials soon acknowledged the damage caused by the failure to take the threat seriously enough and by the lack of appropriate assistance in the security sector. Among them was Amanda Dory, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Africa. “We provided training and equip support for many years, but in relatively modest quantities,” Dory told a Senate subcommittee on 5 December 2012. “I don’t think that level of resourcing was commensurate with the threat.”²²¹

U.S. military officers would also fault the subject matter of the training that the United States had administered to Mali’s security forces. In January 2013, General Carter Ham told an audience at Howard University that the United States had erred by focusing the training solely on military tactics and techniques. “We didn’t spend, probably, the requisite time focusing on values, ethics, and military ethos,” General Ham said.²²² Training individuals in values, ethics, and military ethos can do much to improve the competence of security forces and their respect for human rights. It can also increase the military’s respect for civil authority, although it cannot necessarily ensure respect for a dreadful government.

Other U.S. military leaders asserted that Mali demonstrated the weakness of episodic training, in which the exposure of host-nation personnel to U.S. training was too inconsistent to impart skills and culture. In May 2013, Admiral William McRaven asserted:

What we have learned in working around the world in Colombia, Afghanistan and the Philippines is you've got to have that persistent presence. It has been difficult for us in some countries to have a persistent presence, and Mali is a case in point. We had an episodic presence in Mali.²²³

The superior performance of Mali's CFS, the one unit exposed to continuous U.S. training, demonstrated the value of persistent SOF engagement. The CFS displayed superior tactical proficiency, and unlike many of the other units it did not side with Sanogo's rebels or the insurgents in the aftermath of the coup. In fact, the huge disparity between the CFS and the other Malian units contributed to subsequent United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) decisions to shift to persistent training across Africa and other regions. This shift has been a welcome one, though it has meant that USSOCOM, with its fixed manpower numbers, is training fewer host-nation units and hence is increasingly limited to working with elite units. A focus on elite units is improving African counterterrorism capabilities, but it is also inhibiting the development of the broader capabilities required for counterinsurgency. The officers from the elite units may one day become leaders elsewhere in the armed forces, thus broadening the competence of the armed forces, as occurred in Colombia.²²⁴ But that outcome depends on leadership decisions by chiefs of state and ministers of defense, and requires decades to come to fruition.

External critics cited the coup by Mali's military as evidence that SOF training of Malian forces had been an abject failure. Gregory Mann, a Columbia University history professor, wrote in *Foreign Policy*,

a decade of American investment in Special Forces training, cooperation between Sahalien armies and the United States, and counterterrorism programs of all sorts run by both the State Department and the Pentagon has, at best, failed to prevent a new disaster in the desert and, at worst, sowed its seeds.

Mann contended that “military cooperation and training have not helped the army to hold the line in the north.”²²⁵

Vicki Huddleston, the former U.S. Ambassador to Mali, leveled similar charges. In the *New York Times* she wrote:

Years of training by United States Special Forces did not stop the Malian military from fleeing when the Islamist insurgency started last January. In fact, the military exacerbated the chaos by overthrowing Mali’s democratically elected government last March.²²⁶

Such critiques fail to take into account the shortcomings and limitations of the training. As noted above, most of the U.S. training in Mali was handicapped by its episodic nature. The training was confined to tactical units whose personnel rotated frequently, further diluting the exposure of any one individual to American training. Personnel rotation decisions were the responsibility of the host-nation ministry of defense, which SOF could not influence because it did not have the personnel to engage in ministerial development on a substantial scale.

Indeed, one of the most valuable lessons of Mali is that influencing partner nation ministries can be a critical, even essential component of capacity building. The government’s failure to resupply the elite 33rd RPC in early 2012 demonstrated that tactical units, however well trained they may be, cannot stay in the field when higher echelons fail to provide adequate logistical support. Tactical training may influence ministries in the long run, by virtue of the fact that today’s company commander could one day become a senior ministry official. But such promotions will not happen in time to help solve immediate problems.

The case of Mali also demonstrates how bad national leadership can inhibit progress in the security sector. The corrupt practices of President Amadou Toumani Touré resulted in dire shortages of equipment and supplies for Mali’s security forces. Touré’s meddling in military recruitment, training, and promotion caused severe damage to the professionalism of the armed forces. It also squandered some of the U.S. military’s spending on training and education, as individuals of low aptitude—to include Captain Sanogo—were assigned to American programs instead of more capable individuals.

Addressing such problems of governance is primarily a mission for non-military elements of the U.S. Government, especially the State Department.

In the Malian case, the U.S. Government did not adequately appreciate the problems of bad governance, and did not take action to address them. The holding of elections and media commentary about the strength of Mali's democracy helped obscure the ineffectuality and corruption that plagued Mali's government.

Prior to the coup, less than 1 percent of the U.S. aid budget for Mali was spent on governance, and approximately 2 percent was spent on security. The other 97 percent funded programs in social or economic development.²²⁷ Allocating a greater portion of the aid pie to governance and security certainly would have made sense, and the earlier in time the better since the problems had their origins in decisions made well in the past. The State Department, it should be added, is not well prepared to provide assistance in governance; improving U.S. capabilities in governance assistance will require major changes in organization, personnel, and policy.

The U.S. Government's concern about Malian governance spiked following the military coup, as the administration chose to terminate aid to the Sanogo regime because of its anti-democratic and military origins. The decision was attributed to Section 7008 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, although whether that law was actually binding would be cast into doubt by the later refusal of the U.S. Government to withhold aid from Egypt after a military coup in July 2013. The termination of aid to Mali proved to be counterproductive, as it undermined Mali's security forces at a time of enemy military advances. While many in the West found a military coup troubling, the people of Mali supported it because of the weakness of the civilian government, a fact that called into question the viability of Mali's democratic project. Unless Mali's civil leaders can provide better governance than their predecessors, military coups are likely to recur, regardless of U.S. policy toward coups or U.S. training of military officers in the importance of civil control of the military. Given the negative effects of terminating aid in Mali the last time around, the policy of reflexive aid termination deserves reexamination.

After the coup, the U.S. Government emphasized the need for Mali and its neighbors to handle Mali's security problems. But the planning effort for an ECOWAS intervention demonstrated that the African forces were not capable of solving these problems on their own. The French have since tried to turn matters over to MINUSMA and the Malian government, but have been compelled to remain in Mali because others lack the quantity and

quality of troops to assume full responsibility for security. Of the African forces, only the Chadians have proven effective at securing territory and attacking the extremists.

Effective development of Malian and African forces will be essential to averting rebel advances when the last French troops leave. Most of the EU's training effort has taken place in Bamako, which has been problematic because the people who could benefit most from capacity building are in the north and they are loathe to travel to the south for training. The first EU-trained Malian forces to be fielded suffered ignominious defeat, which can be traced to ineffectual leadership. Their failure should not have been surprising, for developing leaders takes decades, not a few months as the EU attempted. A much longer and more careful effort will likely be necessary if Mali is to survive. Whether the French and other Western nations are willing to stay in Mali that long remains to be seen. ↑

Appendix A: Acronyms

AFISMA	International Support Mission in Mali
AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CFS	Malian Special Forces Company
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ETIA	<i>Echelon Tactique Inter-Armée</i>
EU	European Union
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
JCET	Joint Combined Exchange Training
JPAT	Joint Planning Assistance Team
JSOTF-TS	Joint Special Operations Task Force-Trans Sahara
MIA	Islamic Movement of Azawad
MINUSMA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NGO	nongovernmental organization
ODA	Operational Detachment – Alpha
RCP	Parachute Commando Regiment
SOCAFRICA	Special Operations Command Africa

SOF	Special Operations Forces
TSCTP	Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
USSOF	United States Special Operations Forces

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