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MALI: UNDERSTANDING THE CHESSBOARD

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On January 15, I wrote in [my blog](#) a short essay on the situation in Mali. Little did I know then just how much giddy-up-and-go this story would acquire. In just about 50 hours, from the time I left off writing on Tuesday to the present, at least five significant developments have widened the aperture of this episode—some of them because they occurred, some because certain earlier developments became public, and some because ongoing events have matured in a certain way. Before discussing these five developments, the text of my January 15 article, “Flogging Mali” appears more or less as it read then, now under the subhead “Flogging Mali I”; then I append “Flogging Mali II.”

FLOGGING MALI I

An [extraordinary story](#) appeared in Monday's *New York Times* (January 14, 2013), front page above the fold, right side. Written by Adam Nossiter, Eric Schmitt and Mark Mazetti, and datelined Bamako, Mali, it was extraordinary, for the most part, in what has become a depressingly common way. In its twenty paragraphs the word “Libya” is not mentioned until the ninth paragraph, and then only in passing along with several other countries. The word “Tuareg” is not mentioned until the fifteenth paragraph. The article is suffused with superficial contemporary description and amply populated with quotations mostly from unnamed sources, but anything about motives or interests or critical background circumstances is almost completely missing. You get a lot of “what” and “where” and you get a tad of “who” (within which lies one real data nugget of genuine interest, of which more in a moment). But you don't get much “how” or “why.” Is this because the reporters have not done their homework and really have no idea where they are or what is going on around them? Or is it because that's just not how such newspaper stories are supposed to be written anymore? I wish I knew.

The upshot is that unless a reader brings a private stock of knowledge to bear, he or she would never know that Mali is an extreme example of a modern state cobbled together from various ethnic and religious groups. (Look up an [ethnographic map of Mali](#) and you will see that, even by West African standards, it looks like a jigsaw puzzle.) One would never know, until a passing phrase toward the very end of the article, that the Tuareg are the main group that has been in periodic revolt against the central government for decades. One would never know that the catalyst for what has been going on in this country, as well as in neighboring Niger for many months now, was the Obama Administration's decision to start a war in Libya. One would never know that the Tuareg are kindred to the [Berbers who are rising, and raising hell, all over North Africa](#). One would never know that the Tuareg founded a vast empire long before the advent of European colonialism, and that their capital was then, as it is again now, Timbuktu. One would not know any of the storied history of conflict and intrigue between French colonial expeditions and wily, ruthless Tuareg warriors in the late 19th century. One would not even know from this article that [the victorious Tuareg declared the independent state of Azawad](#) in what they consider to be reclaimed, liberated territory, last April 6.

Students have asked me frequently how it is possible to find out what is going on in relatively off-the-radar places like the Sahel, and I have to confess to them that, these days, with serious foreign affairs journalism having declined so dramatically in the United States since the end of the Cold War, it really is difficult. It's virtually a day job, and one that requires knowledge of much history, anthropology and some language skills so that one can read, in this Malian case, the better-informed French press.

Speaking of full-frontal ignorance, this brings me to the only real revelation in the *New York Times* story—that data nugget I mentioned just above. Way down at the bottom of the piece we learn that the U.S. counterterrorism training mission in Mali made the stupefying mistake of choosing three of four northern unit commanders to train who were ethnic Tuareg. As the article says, when the Tuareg rebellion in Mali gained steam after the denouement of the Libya caper, greatly stimulated by the return of heavily armed Tuareg brethren from that fight, these three Tuareg commanders defected to the rebels, bringing soldiers, vehicles, ammunition and more to the anti-government side. Anyone who was surprised by this is at the very least a terminal ignoramus. And anyone in the U.S. military who failed to understand the ethnic composition of the country's politico-military cleavages, such that he let U.S. Special Forces training be lavished on Tuareg commanders, was clearly insufficiently trained to do his job. And believe me, that's about as nice a way to put that as I can summon.

How do things like this (still) happen, after what we should have learned from years of dealing with Iraqis and Afghans and others on their home turf? I happen to know someone who teaches in the U.S. military education system, and this person happens to be a field-experienced Harvard Ph.D. in anthropology. This person tries very hard to clear away the thick fog created by the innocent Enlightenment universalism that pervades the American mind—the toxic fog that tries to convince us that all people, everywhere, are basically the same, have the same value hierarchies, the same habits of moral and tactical judgment, and mean the same things by roughly comparable translated words.

Sometimes this person senses success, because the Special Forces officers in class who are still climbing the promotion tree tend to “get it.” They “get it” because they have collected personal experience—whether in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or Somalia, or Pakistan, or the Philippines, or even in Mali—so that what they are learning in class corresponds to the realities they know. I have been to this person's classes on several occasions to guest-teach, and I agree: A lot of the guys (and the few women in the spec ops field) who have been on the ground do “get it.” But it seems that a lot of their senior officers don't yet get much of anything at all. It is almost inconceivable that we could screw-up so badly, since understanding basic Malian circumstances isn't rocket science, as they say. So why did this get so thoroughly botched? I'm trying to find out; patience, please.

Alas, as useful as the *Times* article is for revealing this critical datum, it is misleading in other ways. The article makes it seem as though the training missions in the Sahel area are the brainchild of the Obama Administration, hence their failure in Mali its sole responsibility. This is not so. This special-forces anti-terrorism training has been going on for quite a while. It certainly was going on when I was in government in the 2003–05 period. Indeed, there was a certain natural muss and fuss associated with small complements of marines going into places like Mali and Niger to train local antiterrorist special forces. I remember a certain American Ambassador (whom I will not name, to protect the guilty) in one of these places objecting strenuously to the arrival of the marines and, with them, a very few serious embedded journalists like Robert Kaplan. (Kaplan wrote about all this in his 2007 book [Hog Pilots, Blue Water Grunts.](#))

Not only is the policy nothing new, but it did not have to fail. Even reasonably intelligent policies that, as in this case, are designed to hedge against worst-case developments can fail if oblivious, poorly prepared officials get their hands on implementation. (This is a good case for State Department officials helping the military rather than trying to foul their grub; I still refuse to believe that the nitwit factor is an inevitable one in the U.S. military or in the U.S. government as a whole.) And what exactly was, and is, a better reasonable alternative to training local forces? Do the *Times* reporters think that sending large numbers of American or allied soldiers to these countries, even in the absence of manifest threats to their governments, would have been a good idea? The article bristles with criticism, usually imported through piquant quotes that enable the reporters to distance themselves from it if challenged. But they offer nothing as substitute except implied praise for French martial boldness.

And this is crap. Obviously, things in Mali have now come to a point where the Tuareg, in the form of a radical Islamist coup that has displaced the traditional national movement, have become capable of threatening the Malian

capital. That is the reason, one has to assume, that the French government has unleashed its air force against the rebels. The press, both here and in France, are characterizing this act of war in a former French colony as a bold step by the heretofore meek-seeming Socialist Party President François Hollande. It is no such thing, at least not yet. This was, and still is, a defensive operation cobbled together quickly to avoid catastrophe. Only if the French and their allies try to retake independent Azawad and reattach it to the Malian state—a policy for which they would very likely seek American support and specialized assistance, if they have not requested it already—can the policy be said to qualify as bold.

Is that likely to happen? In Paris anything is possible, but I frankly doubt that it will. The price of success would be hard to calculate but probably quite high, since one cannot retake and hold territory just by using airpower--and since the writ of the Malian state has never really run into the sparsely populated Tuareg-dominated north in the first place. The price of failure would be even higher. I doubt that the French President, who has to sense the increasing fragility of the domestic economy these days, would take that on lightly. But he appears to have taken it on at least to some extent, and so far, so good; the intervention is popular. But when the body bags start coming home, the bill comes due and the task looks to be much harder and drawn out than anticipated, that is going to change.

I can barely wait for the next drive-by, nomad-journalism *New York Times* potshots aimed at trying to convey the shape of this burgeoning mess to its mostly American readership. Maybe one day they'll even figure out how to connect the dots back to Libya. Maybe...

FLOGGING MALI II

Here are the five developments of the past two days that have changed the shape of what is happening in and around Mali:

1. Agreement on the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) force to go into Mali.
2. The announcement of an increase in French ground forces committed to the theater, and their engagement in combat.
3. The revelation that the French government has requested U.S. military assistance, and the initial U.S. public reactions thereto.
4. The clear failure of the Malian army to achieve any military objective.
5. The attack on a gas-processing plant in southern Algeria, and the taking of foreign-national hostages, a few of whom are U.S. nationals.

Let's take these five items in turn.

The multinational ECOWAS force agreed to after nearly a year of dithering amounts to a mere 3,300 generally under-trained and varyingly organized soldiers. This number of troops cannot do the job, even with the help of the French Air Force and an estimated 2,500 French soldiers either already in place or on the way. While it may be politically useful to many parties to send ECOWAS troops north into combat, it is morally repugnant to put them in harm's way under a circumstance we may summarize succinctly as follows: enough of them to die, but not enough to prevail.

It is true that all of Mali's neighbors see a threat in the putative Tuareg/al-Qaeda menace digging in in the north of the country. But they do not have dogs of equal size in this fight. The Nigerians have a large dog, mainly because they see their own problems with Boko Haram as liable to get lots worse if northern Mali becomes an Islamist terrorism base. But the Ghanaians have no such compelling motive, which is why they agreed to send only engineers, not combat troops.

Of course, engineers do know how to die when they find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. The point, however, is that the asymmetry of the participants' capabilities and interests, along with their different standard rules of engagement, is very liable to render the force ineffective—a lot like the ECOWAS Congo force and a little like the ISAF mess in Afghanistan. To Afghans, it was as though a kind of military theme park, festooned

with colorful banners aplenty, fell out of the sky one day and landed in their country. One can only imagine what Tuareg villagers will make of assorted armed and mostly non-Muslim black, sub-Saharan Africans wandering around their desert.

Before very long, then, the French will have to decide whether Mali is worth doing pretty much all by themselves, along with some probably very modest British and perhaps other allies' help at the margin. Committing 2,500 French soldiers to the fight is not nothing, but it will take a lot more than that to prevail if ECOWAS and the Malian army both prove more or less useless.

What sort of scale problem are we talking about here anyway? Well, from public sources the enemy looks small and manageable, certainly no larger in plain numbers than what the French faced and faced down in the Ivory Coast not that long ago. There are four groups making up what I will for the sake of simplicity call "the bad guys." There are secular Tuareg units, two Islamist militias, and some non-Tuareg "guest fighters", almost exclusively Arabic-speaking and associated with al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. The Arabic-speakers seem to hail mainly from Algeria, being the residual cadres of Algeria's now-in-remission civil war, and from Libya. The total adds to around 3,000, operating in an environment unusually kind to airpower. We're reduced virtually to guesswork at this point as to how these four groups relate to and cooperate with one another.

I don't trust these numbers. There are about 1.2 million Tuareg living in a contiguous area that drapes over several international borders, and these are but notional borders that for the most part don't actually exist on the ground. Even if we subtract the women, the elderly and the very young, we still have a male fighting-age population of at least 250,000. Even if only 5 percent of that number were mobilized in some way, we'd be talking about 12,500 "bad guys." But let's assume an even smaller number. To subdue around 5,000 rebels it would take, by standard General Templar calculation at the 10/1 counterinsurgency ratio, about 50,000 troops. Let's assume further that the French are super-French, so that they need only half of that: 25,000 troops. Well, folks, 2,500 is not 25,000, and 25,000 is a very large number for the contemporary French order-of-battle.

Moreover, the very best way to stimulate the swelling of Tuareg and Islamist-guest-fighter ranks is to mount a noisy European-led intervention. There may be only 3,000 bad guys right now, but that's right now. In another 50 hours there could be 4,000, then 7,000, then.....

As to the Malian army, it has so far proven unable to achieve the only military objective it has been given: to recapture the town of Konna, taken last week by a small rebel force. Konna is within southern Mali, meaning that its population of about 40,000 is mostly black African, not Tuareg. It is on a main road, by Malian standards. There are military camps able to provide a logistical tail not all that far from the town. The rebel force there probably totals no more than 300, though no one seems to know for sure, since they wear no uniforms and do not muster in groups larger than six or seven. And its aims, most likely, are not to hold the town but merely to discombobulate and complicate an expected attack northward. And still the army has failed to retake the town.

In short, from a strictly military point of view, what's going on in Mali is going to keep going on in one form or another for a while. This will not end soon. It is also fairly likely to spread to Niger, possibly to Mauritania, Burkino Faso, Chad, Algeria and back into Libya, too, where the Tuareg live. And, as I have already suggested, a serious French-led intervention in Mali may help to spread it faster. There's nothing like an "imperialist challenge" to stimulate resistance and high morale. On the other hand, an expansion of Tuareg activism might dilute the Islamist element within it, and might make the Arabic-speaking guest fighters unpopular and unwelcome, much as occurred in Iraq.

I suggested a few days ago that the French were likely to ask the United States for "specialized assistance." That's the term I used to not say what I am about to say now, since it has lately become more or less common knowledge. The French need help with airlift and logistics; they need to get themselves to the theater and they need to get the ECOWAS force lifted and delivered.

I remember once, back in August 2003 I think it was, sitting with Secretary Powell in his inner office, just the two of us, discussing some speech or something, when he broke off to take an emergency call from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The UN urgently needed helicopters to ferry personnel into Liberia. Annan didn't know how many helicopters he needed or what kind, so Powell succinctly explained the logistical facts of life to him—it can be

useful to have an army general as Secretary of State—and made a few suggestions about whom he might want to call next.

Lesson? These things are not simple, easy or obvious, even once the political ducks get lined up. Details don't take care of themselves. So fine, ECOWAS agrees to do such-and-such. Now what? Now the French call us and, in effect, say, um, can we borrow some planes and helicopters and stuff?

Now, you would think that, given the situation, we here in the relevant parts of the U.S. government—NSC, DOD, State, intell—would have anticipated this request (and one other I'll get to in a moment). I don't know if we did or not; lately we seem to be completely reactive. From the way Secretary Panetta responded in public yesterday, as if he had just walked out of the dentist's office before the nitrous oxide had worn off, it's hard to know.

Either way, the preternaturally low-keyed U.S. response has already got some people wondering just what we're thinking, or better, *if we're thinking*. Are we ticked that the French went off to the fight without us, when we had counseled more "watchful waiting"? Are we leery of being dragged into an endless mess? Are we even possibly thinking, hey, why not let the Tuareg have their independent Azawad, since reconstituting Mali is neither doable at reasonable cost nor all that significant one way or the other? Nobody knows.

Aside from airlift and logistics, no doubt the French are seeking some help with targeting. We have the requisite modest presence and we have the technology to do that. Can what we supply match up with the French aircraft flying out of Chad and Ivory Coast and other platforms to make them effective? We are just not going to talk about that here, sorry. But that's OK because, again, this is not really a technical issue. It turns on how the Obama Administration is judging this entire problem set, and we don't know much about that yet. The body language so far suggests an extreme reticence to get too far out in front on our skis. That may be good. But it suggests as well that no one of any senior import has taken time to think any of this through. That's not good.

For several hours, a budding hostage "crisis" in Algeria seemed primed to force some energy to attach to the subject. But as I write, there is apparently an Algerian military attack going on at the In Amenas gas-processing plant. So far there are conflicting accounts of what is going, or had gone, down.

What matters, first, is that Algerian authorities did the right thing by not letting the situation fester and by not negotiating with the attackers. What also matters is that Algeria is in a tight spot over Mali and the Tuareg. On the one hand, the Arabs who run the country have no interest in a Tuareg redoubt in northern Mali, especially one with an Islamist tinge. But on the other, they don't want to piss off the Tuareg in Mali, lest it ignite a similar insurrection in Algeria—of which the attack on the gas plant is a very scary portent. What the Algerians are saying, in effect, is we're not going to come after you if you leave us alone; but if you mess with us we will show no mercy. Certainly, too—just in case anyone is trying to think so far out of the box that he falls through the floor—the idea that Algerian soldiers would ever fight alongside the French in a former French colony, notwithstanding some coincidence of interests, is, well, crazy.

But the most serious question concerns the extent to which the attackers were or were not a functional part of a larger al-Qaeda network. If they were, and if Ansar al-Dine and Boko Haram and other groups on the loose in the Sahel are in effect al-Qaeda, that's a problem and U.S. policy needs to be shaped one way. If these are instead weak and essentially independent groups of fanatics, that's something else again. My guess is that we're dealing with the latter scenario, but my mind is open to reliable intell that can persuade me otherwise. Until we reach some kind of at least halfway sensible conclusion on this point, it will not be possible to do a reasonable analysis of how high a price we should be prepared to pay to help the French in Mali, and in the broader region. If that's among the main reasons for the Administration's reticent posture thus far, credit is due them. But we just don't know yet.

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