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## Burn, burn - Africa's Afghanistan

By Pepe Escobar

1/19/2013

One's got to love the sound of a Frenchman's Mirage 2000 fighter jet in the morning. Smells like... a delicious neo-colonial breakfast in Hollandaise sauce. Make it quagmire sauce.

Apparently, it's a no-brainer. Mali holds 15.8 million people - with a per capita gross domestic product of only around US\$1,000 a year and average life expectancy of only 51 years - in a territory twice the size of France (per capital GDP \$35,000 and upwards). Now almost two-thirds of this territory is occupied by heavily weaponized Islamist outfits. What next? Bomb, baby, bomb.

So welcome to the latest African war; Chad-based French Mirages and Gazelle helicopters, plus a smatter of France-based Rafales bombing evil Islamist jihadis in northern Mali. Business is good; French president Francois Hollande spent this past Tuesday in Abu Dhabi clinching the sale of up to 60 Rafales to that Gulf paragon of democracy, the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The formerly wimpy Hollande - now enjoying his "resolute", "determined", tough guy image reversion - has cleverly sold all this as incinerating Islamists in the savannah before they take a one-way Bamako-Paris flight to bomb the Eiffel Tower.

French Special Forces have been on the ground in Mali since early 2012.

The Tuareg-led NMLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), via one of its leaders, now says it's "ready to help" the former colonial power, billing itself as more

knowledgeable about the culture and the terrain than future intervening forces from the CEDEAO (the acronym in French for the Economic Community of Western African States).

Salafi-jihadis in Mali have got a huge problem: they chose the wrong battlefield. If this was Syria, they would have been showered by now with weapons, logistical bases, a London-based "observatory", hours of YouTube videos and all-out diplomatic support by the usual suspects of US, Britain, Turkey, the Gulf petromonarchies and - oui, monsieur - France itself.

Instead, they were slammed by the UN Security Council - faster than a collection of Marvel heroes - duly authorizing a war against them. Their West African neighbors - part of the ECOWAS regional bloc - were given a deadline (late November) to come up with a war plan. This being Africa, nothing happened - and the Islamists kept advancing until a week ago Paris decided to apply some Hollandaise sauce.

Not even a football stadium filled with the best West African shamans can conjure a bunch of disparate - and impoverished - countries to organize an intervening army in short notice, even if the adventure will be fully paid by the West just like the Uganda-led army fighting al-Shabaab in Somalia.

To top it all, this is no cakewalk. The Salafi-jihadis are flush, courtesy of booming cocaine smuggling from South America to Europe via Mali, plus human trafficking. According to the UN Office of Drugs Control, 60% of Europe's cocaine transits Mali. At Paris street prices, that is worth over \$11 billion.

## **Turbulence ahead**

General Carter Ham, the commander of the Pentagon's AFRICOM, has been warning about a major crisis for months. Talk about a self-fulfilling prophecy. But what's really going on in what the New York Times quaintly describes as those "vast and turbulent stretches of the Sahara"?

It all started with a military coup in March 2012, only one month before Mali would hold a presidential election, ousting then president Amadou Toumani Toure. The coup plotters justified it as a response to the government's incompetence in fighting the Tuareg.

The coup leader was one Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, who happened to have been very cozy with the Pentagon; that included his four-month infantry officer basic training course in Fort Benning, Georgia, in 2010. Essentially, Sanogo was also groomed by AFRICOM, under a regional scheme mixing the State Department's Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership program and the Pentagon's Operation Enduring Freedom. It goes without saying that in all this "freedom" business Mali has been the proverbial "steady ally" - as in counterterrorism partner - fighting (at least in thesis) al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Over the last few years, Washington's game has elevated flip-flopping to high art. During the second George W Bush administration, Special Forces were very active side by side with the Tuaregs and the Algerians. During the first Obama administration, they started backing the Mali government against the Tuareg.

An unsuspecting public may pore over Rupert Murdoch's papers - for instance, The Times of London - and its so-called defense correspondent will be pontificating at will on Mali without ever talking about blowback from the Libya war.

Muammar Gaddafi always supported the Tuaregs' independence drive; since the 1960s the NMLA agenda has been to liberate Azawad (North Mali) from the central government in Bamako.

After the March 2012 coup, the NMLA seemed to be on top. They planted their own flag on quite a few government buildings, and on April 5 announced the creation of a new, independent Tuareg country. The "international community" spurned them, only for a few months later to have the NMLA for all practical purposes marginalized, even in their own region, by three other - Islamist - groups; Ansar ed-Dine ("Defenders of the Faith"); the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO); and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

### **Meet the players**

The NMLA is a secular Tuareg movement, created in October 2011. It claims that the liberation of Azawad will allow better integration - and development - for all the peoples in the region. Its hardcore fighters are Tuaregs who were former members of Gaddafi's army. But there are also rebels who had not laid down their arms after the 2007-2008 Tuareg rebellion, and some that defected from the Malian army. Those who came back to Mali after Gaddafi was executed by the NATO rebels in Libya carried plenty of weapons. Yet most heavy weapons actually ended up with the NATO rebels themselves, the Islamists supported by the West.

AQIM is the Northern African branch of al-Qaeda, pledging allegiance to "The Doctor", Ayman al-Zawahiri. Its two crucial characters are Abu Zaid and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, former members of the ultra-hardcore Algerian Islamist outfit Salafist Group for Predication and Combat (SGPC). elmokhtar was already a jihadi in 1980s Afghanistan.

Abu Zaid poses as a sort of North African "Geronimo", aka Osama bin Laden, with the requisite black flag and a strategically positioned Kalashnikov featuring prominently in his videos. The historical leader, though, is Belmokhtar. The problem is that Belmokhtar, known by French intelligence as "The Uncatchable", has recently joined MUJAO.

MUJAO fighters are all former AQIM. In June 2012, MUJAO expelled the NMLA and took over the city of Gao, when it immediately applied the worst aspects of Sharia law. It's the MUJAO base that has been bombed by the French Rafales this week. One of its spokesmen has duly threatened, "in the name of Allah", to respond by attacking "the heart of France".

Finally, Ansar ed-Dine is an Islamist Tuareg outfit, set up last year and directed by Iyad ag Ghali, a former leader of the NMLA who exiled himself in Libya. He turned to Salafism because of - inevitably - Pakistani proselytizers let loose in Northern Africa, then engaged in valuable face time with plenty of AQIM emirs. It's interesting to note in 2007 Mali President Toure

appointed Ghali as consul in Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia. He was then duly expelled in 2010 because he got too close to radical Islamists.

### **Gimme 'a little more terrorism'**

No one in the West is asking why the Pentagon-friendly Sanogo's military coup in the capital ended up with almost two-thirds of Mali in the hands of Islamists who imposed hardcore Sharia law in Azawad - especially in Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, a gruesome catalogue of summary executions, amputations, stonings and the destruction of holy shrines in Timbuktu. How come the latest Tuareg rebellion ended up hijacked by a few hundred hardcore Islamists? It's useless to ask the question to US drones.

The official "leading from behind" Obama 2.0 administration rhetoric is, in a sense, futuristic; the French bombing "could rally jihadis" around the world and lead to - what else - attacks on the West. Once again the good ol' Global War on Terror (GWOT) remains the serpent biting its own tail.

There's no way to understand Mali without examining what Algeria has been up to. The Algerian newspaper El Khabar only scratched the surface, noting that "from categorically refusing an intervention - saying to the people in the region it would be dangerous", Algiers went to "open Algerian skies to the French Mirages".

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was in Algeria last October, trying to organize some semblance of an intervening West African army. Hollande was there in December. Oh yes, this gets juicier by the month.

So let's turn to Professor Jeremy Keenan, from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at London University, and author of *The Dark Sahara* (Pluto Press, 2009) and the upcoming *The Dying Sahara* (Pluto Press, 2013).

Writing in the January edition of *New African*, Keenan stresses, "Libya was the catalyst of the Azawad rebellion, not its underlying cause. Rather, the catastrophe now being played out in Mali is the inevitable outcome of the way in which the 'Global War on Terror' has been inserted into the Sahara-Sahel by the US, in concert with Algerian intelligence operatives, since 2002."

In a nutshell, Bush and the regime in Algiers both needed, as Keenan points out, "a little more terrorism" in the region. Algiers wanted it as the means to get more high-tech weapons. And Bush - or the neo-cons behind him - wanted it to launch the Saharan front of the GWOT, as in the militarization of Africa as the top strategy to control more energy resources, especially oil, thus winning the competition against massive Chinese investment. This is the underlying logic that led to the creation of AFRICOM in 2008.

Algerian intelligence, Washington and the Europeans duly used AQIM, infiltrating its leadership to extract that "little more terrorism". Meanwhile, Algerian intelligence effectively configured the Tuaregs as "terrorists"; the perfect pretext for Bush's Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative, as well as the Pentagon's Operation Flintlock - a trans-Sahara military exercise.

The Tuaregs always scared the hell out of Algerians, who could not even imagine the success of a Tuareg nationalist movement in northern Mali. After all, Algeria always viewed the whole region as its own backyard.

The Tuaregs - the indigenous population of the central Sahara and the Sahel - number up to 3 million. Over 800,000 live in Mali, followed by Niger, with smaller concentrations in Algeria, Burkina Faso and Libya. There have been no less than five Tuareg rebellions in Mali since independence in 1960, plus three others in Niger, and a lot of turbulence in Algeria.

Keenan's analysis is absolutely correct in identifying what happened all along 2012 as the Algerians meticulously destroying the credibility and the political drive of the NMLA. Follow the money: both Ansar ed-Dine's Iyad ag Ghaly and MUJAO's Sultan Ould Badi are very cozy with the DRS, the Algerian intelligence agency. Both groups in the beginning had only a few members.

Then came a tsunami of AQIM fighters. That's the only explanation for why the NMLA was, after only a few months, neutralized both politically and militarily in their own backyard.

### **Round up the usual freedom fighters**

Washington's "leading from behind" position is illustrated by this State Department [press conference](#). Essentially, the government in Bamako asked for the French to get down and dirty.

And that's it.

Not really. Anyone who thinks "bomb al-Qaeda" is all there is to Mali must be living in Oz. To start with, using hardcore Islamists to suffocate an indigenous independence movement comes straight from the historic CIA/Pentagon playbook.

Moreover, Mali is crucial to AFRICOM and to the Pentagon's overall MENA (Middle East-Northern Africa) outlook. Months before 9/11 I had the privilege to crisscross Mali on the road - and by the (Niger) river - and hang out, especially in Mopti and Timbuktu, with the awesome Tuaregs, who gave me a crash course in Northwest Africa. I saw Wahhabi and Pakistani preachers all over the place. I saw the Tuaregs progressively squeezed out. I saw an Afghanistan in the making. And it was not very hard to follow the money sipping tea in the Sahara. Mali borders Algeria, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Guinea. The spectacular Inner Niger delta is in central Mali - just south of the Sahara. Mali overflows with gold, uranium, bauxite, iron, manganese, tin and copper. And - Pipelineistan beckons! - there's plenty of unexplored oil in northern Mali.

As early as February 2008, Vice Admiral Robert T Moeller was [saying](#) that AFRICOM's mission was to protect "the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market"; yes, he did make the crucial connection to China, pronounced guilty of "challenging US interests".

AFRICOM's spy planes have been "observing" Mali, Mauritania and the Sahara for months, in

thesis looking for AQIM fighters; the whole thing is overseen by US Special Forces, part of the classified, code-named Creek Sand operation, based in next-door Burkina Faso. Forget about spotting any Americans; these are - what else - contractors who do not wear military uniforms.

Last month, at Brown University, General Carter Ham, AFRICOM's commander, once more gave a big push to the "mission to advance US security interests across Africa". Now it's all about the - updated - US National Security Strategy in Africa, signed by Obama in June 2012. The (conveniently vague) objectives of this strategy are to "strengthen democratic institutions"; encourage "economic growth, trade and investment"; "advance peace and security"; and "promote opportunity and development."

In practice, it's Western militarization (with Washington "leading from behind") versus the ongoing Chinese seduction/investment drive in Africa. In Mali, the ideal Washington scenario would be a Sudan remix; just like the recent partition of North and South Sudan, which created an extra logistical headache for Beijing, why not a partition of Mali to better exploit its natural wealth? By the way, Mali was known as Western Sudan until independence in 1960.

Already in early December a "[multinational](#)" war in Mali was on the Pentagon cards.

The beauty of it is that even with a Western-financed, Pentagon-supported, "multinational" proxy army about to get into the action, it's the French who are pouring the lethal Hollandaise sauce (nothing like an ex-colony "in trouble" to whet the appetite of its former masters). The Pentagon can always keep using its discreet P-3 spy planes and Global Hawk drones based in Europe, and later on transport West African troops and give them aerial cover. But all secret, and very hush hush.

Mr Quagmire has already reared its ugly head in record time, even before the 1,400 (and counting) French boots on the ground went into offense.

A MUJAO commando team (and not AQIM, as it's been reported), led by who else but the "uncatchable" Belmokhtar, hit a gas field in the middle of the Algerian Sahara desert, over 1,000 km south of Algiers but only 100 km from the Libyan border, where they captured a bunch of Western (and some Japanese) hostages; a rescue operation launched on Wednesday by Algerian Special Forces was, to put it mildly, a giant mess, with at least seven foreign hostages and 23 Algerians so far confirmed killed.

The gas field is being exploited by BP, Statoil and Sonatrach. MUJAO has denounced - what else - the new French "crusade" and the fact that French fighter jets now own Algerian airspace.

As blowback goes, this is just the hors d'oeuvres. And it won't be confined to Mali. It will convulse Algeria and soon Niger, the source of over a third of the uranium in French nuclear power plants, and the whole Sahara-Sahel.

So this new, brewing mega-Afghanistan in Africa will be good for French neoconial interests (even though Hollande insists this is all about "peace"); good for AFRICOM; a boost for those

Jihadis Formerly Known as NATO Rebels; and certainly good for the never-ending Global War on Terror (GWOT), duly renamed "kinetic military operations".

Django, unchained, would be totally at home. As for the Oscar for Best Song, it goes to the Bush-Obama continuum: There's no business like terror business. With French subtitles, *bien sur*.