



COTE D'IVOIRE FLASH NOTE

Implications of the Ménaka Helicopter Crash

*The deaths of 13 French paratroopers during a military operation in northern Mali last week prompted some sensationalist reporting by the wire services. This in turn generated some breathless sell-side commentary, including the **suggestion that France is in the process of withdrawing its troops from the beleaguered Sahelian nation.***

The following assessment was produced in response to a client's request for elucidation.

1) Mali is not being abandoned – though this week's huge setback will undoubtedly exact a significant toll on political support for Opération Barkhane mission back in France. In fact, **the mission is in the process of expanding** its base¹ on the outskirts of Gao, only months after creating a forward-base in Gossi (Timbuktu province).

Turning to the Bloomberg piece², "a shambles" seems a rather harsh characterization of Barkhane's admittedly **uphill campaign to contain the highly mobile and shape-shifting jihadist groups**³ that have sprung up in the province of Mopti and, in particular, the Ménaka area⁴ (in the province of Gao).

2) We are anything but apologists for France⁵, but on this occasion we are convinced they're getting a bum rap. The reports of banners clamouring, '*La France, dégage*' are no exaggeration - but they tell only part of the story. In fact, last month's huge demonstration⁶ featured an almost ecumenical array of vociferous demands, including, « *Minusma Dégage ; Barkhane dégage ; On a tout compris* » and « *Minusma est à la base du terrorisme pour bénéficier de l'argent de l'ONU* »⁷.

In other words, the protests reflected **general conflict fatigue, rather than specific antipathy towards France.**

3) The inconvenient truth is that Mali⁸ **is perilously close to becoming a failed state**, with every organ of government crippled by decades of corruption⁹. And Wahabist fundamentalism had taken root¹⁰ in this historically tolerant society long before December 2011, when the Islamist movements launched their jihad disguised as a Tuareg separatist campaign. As was demonstrated by the ease with which the insurgents overran the northern two-thirds of the country, the **Malian army had been hollowed out by years of politicization, cronyism and gross mismanagement.**

¹ The additional infrastructure includes walled (as opposed to tented) barracks, a new power plant and a fifth bore-hole.

² See "*French Flag Burns in Mali Where Islamists Overran Exhausted Army*", by [Bloomberg](#); posted 2019-11-27 07:18:06.409 GMT

³ By contrast, France's decisive intervention to liberate the northern two-thirds of Mali from formal occupation by three Islamist groups, was largely conducted through a series of pitched battles.

⁴ Given its proximity to the point where Mali's borders with Burkina Faso and Niger converge, the area is often referred to as the *région des trois frontières*.

⁵ As will be recalled we have always argued that Paris was deeply implicated in both the 2002 coup and subsequent decade-long partition in Côte d'Ivoire.

⁶ Held in Sévaré, on the eve of a visit to the region by Prime minister Boubou Cissé, the march ended at the headquarters of MINUSMA (the UN's stabilization mission), where a petition calling for the withdrawal of foreign actors was delivered.

⁷ This idiotic notion finds a comical echo in Salif Keita's equally preposterous claim that '*France is financing ... the jihadists.*'

⁸ The Republic occupies an area almost equal to the combined size of Texas, California and New York.

⁹ As late as 2011, Boeing 737s laden with cocaine shipped from Maracaibo, Venezuela would land in northern Mali where, the precious cargo would be unloaded under the protective supervision of the Malian army and transferred to SUVs, for trans-shipment across the Sahara, in convoys escorted by members of AQIM.

¹⁰ A significant contributor was the fact that, with his political support dwindling the corrupt President Amadou Toumani Traoré (2002-12), had turned to the conservative Haut conseil islamique au Mali, led by the fundamentalist Imam Mahmoud Dicko. The Faustian bargain was analogous to the 2007 embrace of Boko Haram by Sen. Ali Modou Sheriff (then aspiring Governor of Borno state), and indeed, the strategic alliance that Sudanese strongman Omar al-Bashir entered with the National Islamic Front (led by Hassan al-Turabi), upon seizing power in 1989.

4) Although Operation Barkhane's mission has included a significant military training component, **the national army is nowhere near ready to shoulder responsibility for preserving Mali's territorial integrity.** This was made brutally clear earlier this month, when almost 100 soldiers were killed in successive jihadi attacks against army outposts - in Boukèssy and Mondoro (on the border with Burkina Faso) and Indélimane (east of Gao).

As such, **Opération Barkhane can be said to constitute the cement holding the Malian state together**¹¹. Were it to be withdrawn, the consequences would be immediate and devastating – with shock-waves guaranteed to engulf contiguous West African states.

5) Keenly aware of these vicarious vulnerabilities, the French authorities will go to inordinate lengths to contain the Islamist threat in the buffer-zone of Mali/Burkina Faso. From the stand-point of Paris, **ending the Barkhane mission would amount to surrendering its vast economic interests in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal.**

Short of a military disaster on the scale of the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, **we do not see this happening.**

¹¹ Although regional governments make frequent allusion to the role of the Sahelian G-5 group, the collective defence force still has hardly any operational capability, almost six years after it was announced by the governments of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

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