

The key priority for Mali is ensuring that African forces are ready to take over when French troops leave the country.

Blog Admin

*The French military operation in Mali has regained control of much of the country from Islamic militants. **Jeff Gilmour** provides an overview of the military situation and identifies a number of potential problems which must still be overcome. The crucial issue is likely to be ensuring that the African forces which take over from departing French troops are properly trained and avoid the logistical issues which have plagued other operations, such as the MONUSCO peace-keeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.*



Since a military coup toppled the Malian government in March 2012, Northern Mali has been controlled by a group called al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).^[1] Initially joining forces with the **Tuareg**, they soon took charge over Tuareg groups and inflicted a brutal jihadist regime on northern Mali's moderate Muslim population. AQIM and their various jihadist affiliates were heavily armed and equipped and the badly trained Malian army forces proved no match for them. As a result AQIM overran the northern Malian city of Gao and the fabled town of Timbuktu, with its vast historical treasures. The north-east of Mali was no longer controlled from Bamako, the capital.

From the beginning of 2013, the situation in this region changed dramatically. With the support of the UN, the 15 nation West African bloc **ECOWAS** stated they would assist Mali by sending in 3,300 troops, although it was expected to be late 2013 before such a coordinated force could be trained and ready to mount an offensive against the insurgents. Strategies were dramatically altered when AQIM and their supporters started moving South towards the town of Mopti and the capital in early January 2013. Based on the concerns raised by the Malian government, France sent 3,300 troops to the region and to date have recaptured Timbuktu and Gao, and are still advancing northward to Kidal. The French **reported** that 1,600 troops from other African countries had joined their operations, such as Chad, Nigeria and Togo.

There are, however, a number of basic questions which should be addressed before northern Mali is controlled again by the Malian government. First, when the French forces depart Mali, it will need to be determined whether the Malian Army and the projected 5,500 troops from ECOWAS in support will be able to tackle AQIM and their supporters, who are able to move freely throughout the Maghreb in Niger, Algeria, Mauritania and Libya. Moreover, Tuaregs in the region have never trusted the Malian army due to human rights abuses, and a lack of discipline and training. Mali's army has a history of political aggressiveness, chaotic command structures and resistance to Western military training methods. The top US commander in Africa, General Carter Ham, recently **criticised** a \$500 million training programme to train the Malian army as a badly flawed effort, on the basis that it was too focused on



Mosque in Timbuktu, Mali (Credit: Emilio Labrador, CC BY 2.0)

tactics and equipment, and did not place enough emphasis on democratic values.

Second, on 10 December 2012 soldiers arrested Mali's Prime Minister, Cheick Modibo Diarra, who eventually announced his resignation. This was the second time in a year that Mali has removed a civilian government. One year beforehand Malian junior officers also overthrew an elected government. On the surface, civilians are in control of the country, but many outsiders would argue that the strings of government continue to be pulled by the army. It is questionable whether a democratically elected government can govern the country, or whether officers in the Malian army would again seize control of power in Bamako. At the present time it would seem that the Malian army has significant influence over the future leader of the country following new elections.

Finally, a recent conference in Addis Ababa outlined plans to raise funds for both the military mission in Mali once French troops depart the country, and also for the purposes of distributing humanitarian aid to the Malian population. Some \$455 million was pledged by countries for the [African-led International Support Mission to Mali](#). The US pledged \$96 million and the European Union \$67.5 million. Japan pledged \$120 million for humanitarian aid alone.

It will be interesting to see how effective a 5,500 member ECOWAS force will be in countering the AQIM insurgents in the north-east of Mali, once the French troops depart the country. Many critics would argue that increased training for African troops is required and adequate military equipment is needed to cover a vast territory the size of France. The US could provide intelligence information and drones to track down and destroy insurgent camps located throughout the remote desert sites. Other nations could assist ECOWAS forces with airlift assistance and logistical support.

With 15 nations taking part in the ECOWAS force, it will be important for the command structure to be properly organised and for coordination to be maintained among the various African nations contributing to the insurgency operations. One UN military support operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo recently came under [heavy criticism](#) in similar circumstances. The peacekeeping mission, termed [MONUSCO](#), numbers 18,000 troops from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Uruguay, Egypt, Nepal and South Africa at a cost of \$1.4 billion a year to operate, but suffers from substantial logistical problems. In a 2011 report, Human Rights Watch stated that MONUSCO forces have a serious shortage of well-trained and equipped peacekeepers, intelligence analysts, interpreters, helicopters and military assets such as fire support.

It will be critical to ensure that the same logistical difficulties which have plagued the MONUSCO operation do not arise with the ECOWAS force in Mali, after the French troops have departed the country.

[1] A splinter group called the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) also operates with AQIM.

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