



Insight

Much Ado About Mali

OCTOBER 26, 2012

Co-Authored by Megan Gregory

Few could have predicted that the land-locked West African country of Mali would figure into Monday's Presidential debate. In his opening remarks, Republican challenger Mitt Romney remarked that northern Mali has been taken over by individuals associated with al Qaeda. Together with the attack on U.S. interests in Benghazi, Libya, and other incidents, Romney said events in Mali are proof that "radical violent extremism ... [is] certainly not on the run."

Less than a year ago, Mali was stable and democratic. Things unraveled quickly when ethnic Tuaregs loyal to Moammar Qadhafi in Libya returned to Mali after the colonel's fall. They brought along heavy weapons and escalated their low-level insurgency in northern Mali. In the country's capital of Bamako, elements of the military ousted Mali's president, citing his government's insufficient response to the rebellion in the north.

Then the Tuareg rebellion was hijacked by insurgents associated with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). They implemented a brutal system of Sharia law in northern Mali, replete with stonings and amputations. Ancient monuments in Timbuktu were defaced. More than 1.5 million Malians fled their homes as refugees or internally displaced persons. Weapons trafficking, drug trafficking, and kidnappings are on the rise, and porous borders mean the conflict could destabilize neighboring countries.

Observers warn that northern Mali is quickly becoming the “Afghanistan of West Africa,” a region where human rights are trampled and al Qaeda operates freely. Any suggestion that the AQIM branch of al Qaeda doesn’t threaten American interests has been disproven by the attack in Benghazi, which has been linked to the group. .

American military leaders have wisely ruled out sending in U.S. ground troops, yet working directly with the Malian interim government isn’t a good option either. U.S. law forbids assistance to countries where a democratically elected government has been ousted by a military coup, and the junta is eyed skeptically by many Malians.

Reports indicate the U.S. and France may be preparing drone strikes against targets in Mali. Because they limit U.S. casualties and don’t require local government cooperation, drone strikes seem to be President Obama’s preferred tactic in the war on terror. Drones alone will not liberate northern Mali from the grip of al Qaeda sympathizers, however.

To that end, an unlikely model holds promise. To combat the rise of Somali extremists, known as al-Shabab, the U.S. is supporting an African Union (AU) military force comprised of soldiers from Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and elsewhere. The U.S. is helping to train and finance their mission, which last month succeeded in dislodging al-Shabab from its stronghold in Kismayo, Somalia.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has stepped forward to propose a similar mission in Mali. Earlier this month, the UN Security Council unanimously approved a French resolution authorizing the use of force to end the rebellion and giving the UN Secretary General 45 days to develop a detailed plan for the ECOWAS deployment, including the composition of the proposed force and its’ financing.

The political situation in Mali has complicated the process and led to delays in mobilizing ECOWAS. Some have been wary of getting involved before democracy is restored, but precious time already has been lost. Back in July, the head of U.S. Africa Command General Carter Ham [lamented](#) that the U.S. “missed an opportunity to deal with AQIM when they were weak.”

The U.S. and our allies should work toward a restoration of democracy in Mali, but we should not let that hinder us from partnering with African countries to defeat the radical Islamists in Mali's north. We should provide financial and logistical support, share intelligence, and help train the ECOWAS forces. We should continue efforts to help Mali's neighbors deal with the influx of refugees and the threat of terrorist infiltration. Drone strikes should be conducted against high-value targets, but must be part of a broader strategy.

France has historical and cultural ties to Mali and has taken a leadership role in addressing the crisis. Yet the French-led intervention in Libya proved what President Obama himself repeated during Monday's debate: "America remains the one indispensable nation."

One of the lessons from the Benghazi attack should be to start taking AQIM seriously. America should seize the opportunity to help ECOWAS deal a setback to AQIM in Mali.