In and Out of Africa

France hopes to drive Islamist rebels out of Mali—and then go home. That may be wishful thinking

BY ALEX PERRY/BAMAKO

Not here to stay

A French soldier, on a limited mission in Mali to defeat a group of radical Islamists, wears a death's head dust mask while on patrol near Niamey.

Photograph by Issouf Sanogo
them out of the country, and declared Shi'ite. Suddenly, a vast territory on Europe's southern fringes was controlled by an Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Initially, the Islamists seemed content to stay in Mali's north, smashing up ancient Sufi shrines in the storied city of Timbuktu and amputating thieves' hands. But when the Islamists began advancing south on Jan. 10, the transitional civilian government of Mali pleaded with the country's former colonial ruler for help. Paris was bombing within hours. "The decision I made was necessary because if it hadn't been made, it would have been too late to make later," said French President François Hollande on Jan. 16. "Mali would have been conquered by terrorists."

**Africanistan**

France—[and the U.S., Canada and Britain]—which are assisting with transport planes and intelligence—is adamant that the Mali mission will not result in the emergence of a new Western quagmire: Africanistan, as the scenario is nicknamed. In the second half of 2012, Hollande led efforts to organize an African intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), West Africa's regional authority. In December those talks led to a U.N. Security Council resolution that authorized ECOWAS to intervene. But the dysfunction of ECOWAS—whose members include some of the least reliable governments in the world—prompted the Security Council to give the planned 3,300-strong African force until September just to get to Mali. That left Paris to step into the breach.

Nonetheless, France argues that its bombs do not blow a hole in the U.N.-backed plan but rather accelerate it. The Obama Administration also wants Western intervention to be short-lived. "In the near term, it's a French project with significant airlift from us and very significant intelligence work," says Tommy Vietor, spokesman for the National Security Council. "We'll also help them with military planning because we want to make sure that this effort has a durability insofar as its transitions to a Malian lead and an ECOWAS lead, because the French don't want to be there forever."

France's intervention has embarrassed seven ECOWAS nations—Togo, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Benin and Ghana—and Chad into sending 1,000 soldiers to Bamako and promising 4,500 more. Meanwhile, France's military may find it increasingly hard to locate targets. Residents of the city of Gao, which is still held by the rebels, tell Time some Islamists there have fled into the Sahara, which is home to networks of underground caves. At the same time, witnesses in Timbuktu say hundreds of militiants there have chosen to stay, shave their beards and blend in with the general population. Also, West Africa's arriving troops inspire little confidence. The Nigerians—two of whom were killed on Jan. 19, when Islamists from a Boko Haram splinter group attacked their convoy on route to Mali—and the Ghanaians speak English; the others speak French. Few are trained in desert war, and some lack transportation. Guinea delayed its contingent over worries about what it would eat. Already, France seems to be recalculating Fabius' prediction of a quick handover. "France will stay as long as possible for the Malian army to reclaim control of the entire country and eradicate any Islamist zones of control or influence," says a French Defense official who is not authorized to speak on the record.

Mali's Islamists are likely hoping that it is a very long time indeed. "The way the jihadi movement operates is to compel us to intervene in their environment," says Jean-Pierre Filiu, an expert on the Sahel at the Paris Institute of Political Sciences. "They want us on the ground."

French soldiers have killed and died in Africa in the past, most notably in France's brutal war against Algerian independence fighters in the 1950s and '60s during which France learned that long counterinsurgencies are to be avoided. The question in Mali is not whether France learned that lesson but whether it can live it. Less than a month after its troops arrived, Paris is already searching for a way out. —With reporting by Alan Roswell/Niamey, Bruce Cumley and Vivienne Walt/Paris and Massimo Calabresi/Washington