Viewpoints
No. 17

Mali: The Time for Dithering is Over

David Ottaway
Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center

Since Tuareg nationalists and al-Qaeda seized control of northern Mali in February 2012, the world has been dithering about what to do. Neither the United States nor Algeria, two potentially key actors in the unfolding drama, has decided on its role yet. Mali's neighbors, the African Union, and the UN Security Council have not wanted to take any risky action and have found ways to put off a military response in the slim hope of finding a political solution.

January 2013

Middle East Program

Wilson Center

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Since Tuareg nationalists and al-Qaeda seized control of northern Mali in February 2012, the world has been dithering about what to do. Mali's neighbors, the African Union, and the UN Security Council have not wanted to take any risky action. All found ways to put off a military response in the slim hope of finding a political solution.

The Obama administration was no exception. It was calling first for new elections in Mali to reestablish the legitimacy of the central government now run by a U.S.-trained officer who led renegade troops in a coup that toppled the civilian government there in March 2012. With half the country in the hands of Islamists seeking secession and the remainder in political turmoil, holding successful elections always seemed a very long shot and a good excuse to postpone a decision.

The administration, citing a congressional ban on U.S. military aid in case of military coups, had been arguing that its hands were tied. However, President Obama has the authority to engage al-Qaeda wherever and whenever he so determines—anywhere in the world that al-Qaeda presents a threat to U.S. interests.

Now the time for dithering is over. U.S. interests are being threatened. On January 16, an al-Qaeda splinter group took hostage 134 foreign workers while seizing a gas installation in southeastern Algeria. The Algerian army took back the facility after a bloody four-day siege, but, in the process, 38 of the foreigners, including three Americans, were killed. So were 29 of the attackers who had planned to transport some of the hostages to northern Mali and blow up the gas plant, which processes about 10 percent of Algeria's gas exports. The State Department said on January 22 that seven other U.S. citizens working at the facility had survived.

The main U.S. interest in Algeria is the Texas-based oil company Anadarko, which is the most important foreign one operating there. It has a production-sharing agreement with the Algerian state company SONATRACH and produces 350,000 barrels a day from a huge deposit in the central Sahara Desert discovered back in the mid-1990s. To date, Anadarko has had no trouble with radical Islamists, but it has facilities just as vulnerable as the one seized about 25 miles from In Aménas on January 16.

Why has the crisis in Mali surprised everyone? Mainly because the scenario devised by Mali, its neighbors, and the international community has been overtaken by Islamist radicals bent on taking advantage of all the dithering to dash southward, perhaps hoping to seize the capital, Bamako. Success would give them an entire country, not just the isolated northern desert, as a base of operations to expand their activities throughout West and North Africa.

It is just this prospect that provoked France, the former colonial power in Mali to rush more than 2,000 troops there to halt the Islamists' drive toward Bamako. The French action has ended much, but not all, of the dithering, provoking the dispatch of some African contingents to prepare for a counteroffensive.

However, neither the United States nor Algeria, two potentially key actors in the unfolding drama, has decided on its role yet. This is despite the fact that Mali has provoked the most intense and extensive high-level dialogue between the two governments in decades.

The original French and African plan for dealing with the Islamist radicals and their Malian Tuareg allies, who declared an independent state ("Azawad") in April 2012, was always somewhat fanciful. It called for the formation of a multi-national West African force of 3,300 troops to help the now debilitated Malian army retake a territory the size of France. The UN Security Council gave its final blessings to the plan in December 2012 without committing funds or other support.

France, the former colonial power in most of West Africa, still has bases in several countries there and was a main promoter of the scheme. It was always expected to provide the main external support for the African intervention force, but other European Union nations have offered hundreds of officers to help train it as well. The U.S. role was to be limited to some logistical airlift support and providing intelligence.

Nobody seemed to be in a rush. Training was to begin this spring, and the offensive to retake the north was scheduled to be launched sometime next fall. Behind the scenes, U.S. officials were deeply skeptical about the ability of this novice West African force to cope with the military challenge presented by a similar number of highly motived Islamists who had plundered Libyan arsenals in the wake of Muammar Qaddafi's downfall. The failure of the Malian army to put up any serious resistance only served to reinforce American doubts.

Yet another obstacle was the refusal of Algeria, with the biggest military having the most experience in fighting Islamists, to sanction any military intervention. The Algerians have been particularly dead set against any role for France, which it had fought for eight years to win its independence. Instead, they had been promoting a political settlement, holding talks with leaders of Ansar Dine ("Defenders of Religion"), and hoping to split the Malian Tuaregs and local Islamists from the hardcore al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), dominated by Algerian Islamists.

The Obama administration had spent an inordinate amount of time and energy seeking to convince Algeria to take the military lead in northern Mali. The commander of the U.S. Africa Command, General Carter F. Ham, was in Algiers on his fourth visit in late September discussing options for resolving the crisis there. He was followed a few weeks later by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who pressed Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to commit

Algerian forces to help retake the north. The two countries opened up a "strategic dialogue" for the first time to develop a closer overall relationship.

The Algerians had been arguing for a political solution partly because they were fearful of a blowback on them from their own radical Islamists who provide much of the leadership and the bulk of fighters belonging to AQIM, the dominant faction now ruling northern Mali.

Ironically, the blowback has started even though Algeria has no "boots on the ground" in Mali. The splinter al-Qaeda group that seized the Sahara gas facility near In Aménas on the Libyan border is led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an "Algerian Afghan," a one-eyed, hardened veteran of the Afghanistan war. He said the action was in retaliation for Algeria allowing French planes to pass through Algerian air space on the way to Mali. The hostages would only be released if France withdrew its troops from Mali and ended its counter-offensive to retake the North.

So now both Algeria and the United States must decide whether to stop their dithering.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Viewpoints Series

Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule
Viewpoints No. 1 (April 2012)
By David Ottaway

Fostering the Next Generation
Viewpoints No. 2 (April 2012)
By Moushira Khattab

Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections
Viewpoints No. 3 (May 2012)
By David Ottaway

Syrian Refugees: Lessons from Other Conflicts and Possible Policies
Viewpoints No. 4 (updated August 2012)
By Rochelle A. Davis

Morocco's Islamists: In Power Without Power
Viewpoints No. 5 (August 2012)
By David Ottaway

The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?
Viewpoints No. 6 (August 2012)
By Roberto Toscano, Moushira Khattab, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, and Daniel Brumberg

Iran is Reversing its Population Policy
Viewpoints No. 7 (August 2012)
By Farzaneh Roudi

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women
Viewpoints No. 8 (October 2012)
By Hanin Ghaddar

The Uncertain Fate of U.S.-Egyptian Relations
Viewpoints No. 9 (November 2012)
By David Ottaway

Edited by Kendra Heideman and Mona Youssef
Designed by Kendra Heideman

Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars