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## Principles for a Mali-first security strategy for Canada

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*All scenarios are still possible, including another military coup and further social unrest in the capital, which threatens to undermine the transitional institutions and create a power vacuum that could allow religious extremism and terrorist violence to spread in Mali and beyond.... [French Foreign Minister] Laurent Fabius stat[ed] several times that military intervention in northern Mali is inevitable and that France would support ECOWAS although it would not deploy French soldiers on the ground. (ICG 2012)*

### Introduction

Media reports indicate Canadian Parliamentarians will have the opportunity to debate the merits of Canada's military and other assistance to the UN-sanctioned intervention in Mali. The cautious approach of the Canadian government to date is welcome: send a heavy lift transport plane to assist the French-led military mission, but emphasize non-military Canadian contributions going forward.

Parliamentarians can best contribute to the Prime Minister's call for broad public support for Canada's actions in Mali by affirming guiding principles, against which specific initiatives can be tested.

Reasons for Parliament to adopt this approach:

- The situation is complex and fluid, requiring constant reassessment of the threats Mali is facing and a corresponding recalibration of responses.
- The expertise and intimate knowledge of Mali possessed by Canada's foreign policy, aid, defence, and intelligence officials will be most effectively employed in determining Canada's options and gathering together the resources for practical interventions.
- The Canadian government's position will be stronger if it needs to respond to allies' requests for assistance that may, in Canada's judgment, not be in the interests of Mali's long-term stability.

While more specifically tailored to the current circumstances in Mali, the principles proposed below are in keeping with the values recently stated by the Prime Minister: "respect for freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law...[while seeking] to re-establish security and democracy for the people of Mali in a manner consistent with international law" (Government of Canada 2013).

### Understand Mali first

*The destabilization of Mali and southern Algeria is a complex political and social process that does not have only one cause. But a changing ecology forced by climate change is a major contributor to the region's problems.... The weakness of the Mali government likely is related to the drought years of the past decade, during which hundreds of thousands of Malians were forced to emigrate to other countries and the agricultural productivity and tax base of the more fertile south was devastated. This economic decline at the center made it easier for the rebel Tuareg of the north to declare their Azawad. There are several factions in the north, some of them Berber-nationalist and relatively secular, but the best fighters seem to be Ghali's Ansar Dine, and their movement south last Thursday helped provoke the French intervention.* (Cole 2013)

Two important realities must be understood about Mali: it is poor, and it has a long-running civil war with the Tuaregs in the north.

Even before the 2012 coups and military loss of control of the north (see ICG 2012) Mali was experiencing food insecurity caused by drought and other factors affecting much of West Africa. Mali has a population of about 15 million, spread over a large, sparsely inhabited land mass. Eighty per cent of Malians are involved in agriculture and approximately 70 per cent are illiterate (CIA 2013).

When an international crisis erupts into the headlines the focus inevitably is on the immediate military threat and response. But Mali's current troubles did not suddenly emerge after the Christmas holidays (Rogers 2013). The presence of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other jihadi groups in the north of the country is not the only or even the primary cause of instability in Mali.

A long history of colonial exploitation by France was followed by post-independence political and security uncertainty, recent military coups, and the loss of control of the north by the central government in 2012 (see ICG 2012). Mali is in the midst of a civil war that must be resolved so that its territory can no longer be controlled and exploited by AQIM and other jihadists.

## **A Mali-first security strategy**

First and foremost, these realities about Mali—rather than Canada's own self-defined interests or those of its NATO allies—must be in Canada's strategic sights.

Support by Canada for the UN-sanctioned international intervention in Mali should not be motivated in the first instance by protecting Canadian mining or other interests in Mali or neighbouring countries (see McDiarmid 2013, Jordan 2013). Neither should it be about somehow protecting Canada's extensive development investment in Mali; CBC News (2013) reported that \$110 million was invested in the last fiscal year before most aid was suspended after the first coup in Mali in March 2012.

As we are still learning from Canada's extensive military engagement in Afghanistan and its more recent but limited air support operations in Libya, battling terrorists and autocrats under the authority of a UN Security Council resolution does not guarantee success or sustainable political stability in fragile or weak states. Neither Afghanistan nor Libya has yet achieved sustainable security; indeed, military "successes" have had significant negative repercussions for those states and their immediate neighbours. Today's situation in Mali is at least partly a result of the blowback from the NATO-led air mission in Libya.

Canadian Parliamentarians and the Canadian public have the opportunity to draw on the lessons from recent Canadian expeditionary missions and bring those insights to bear on decisions relating to Canadian engagement in Mali.

To begin, Canada's actions in Mali should not be characterized as being part of an anti-terrorist mission. Instead we should see Mali's current challenges as the culmination of political, military, and ethnic breakdown in Mali, which AQIM and jihadi fighters have exploited. Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups have a clear strategy for drawing western militaries into debilitating fights in inhospitable terrain, using asymmetric tactics to then degrade and exhaust the resources of its adversaries. Why let them set the rules for engagement when alternative frameworks are available to restore security in Mali and the broader Sahel region?

*It is no wonder that extreme distortions of Islam take root in such hopelessness and betrayal. From the Boko Haram jihadis of north-east Nigeria to Mokhtar's Algerian Salafis to the al-Shabaab fanatics of Somalia, the false prophets of violence gain sway in the absence of faith – faith that there is a better way, faith that westerners care about more than merely our own safety and comfort. From out of this arc of suffering a great cry goes up, but we barely hear it. (The Observer 2013)*

## **Principles to guide Canada's contributions to Mali**

Canada, then, needs to independently assess the current threats to Mali and judge where opportunities exist to help Mali become more stable and secure over time. An effective Mali-first security strategy for Canada will be guided by the following principles, in order of priority:

- 1. Provide basic humanitarian assistance (water, food, shelter, medical aid) to vulnerable civilians, including both internally displaced persons and refugees taking shelter in neighbouring countries.**

*Mali's chronic political instability is due in large part to a critical competition for diminishing resources, for productive land and scarce water. Persistent drought and endemic malnutrition, brought about in part by climate change, kill more children than any Islamist insurgency ever has. (The Observer 2013)*

The Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace has described the difficult humanitarian situation that existed before the French military intervention in mid-January: “The UN estimates the current number of internally displaced persons at 230,000 while there are an additional 150,000 refugees in neighbouring countries” (Ndiaye 2013; see also Clark 2013). These numbers have swelled since mid-January. A humanitarian corridor into the north needs to be opened and kept open.

Prime Minister Harper has said that “Canada will continue to provide humanitarian aid and development assistance to this region to help alleviate the worsening humanitarian conditions in the region” (Government of Canada 2013). Canada announced an initial \$13 million contribution for humanitarian aid to Mali on January 29.

Royal Canadian Air Force heavy lift aircraft, currently deployed to assist the France-led military mission in Mali, also could be used to provide humanitarian assistance to sustain the most vulnerable citizens in Mali and in neighbouring countries.

Beyond immediate humanitarian assistance, reconstruction aid will be needed to rebuild infrastructure, schools, clinics, and government buildings in urban areas. Pastoralists in the countryside who lost animals to the jihadists will need new herds.

**2. Support political processes that will re-establish in Mali a participatory and enduring democratic culture and institutions that are responsive to citizens' primary needs.**

*The jihadis are successful today in part because of the perennial weakness of the Malian state, a failed political process in Mali resulting from two military coups in 2012, and deep dissatisfaction among Malians with regard to how politics have been practiced and resources allocated. Long-term stability in Mali will turn on rebuilding the political process in Mali* (Straus and Brottem 2013).

In concert with others, Canada can provide diplomatic and civil society support to the broken political process in Mali. Mali must reform its military and the relationship between the civil and military authorities. Canadian diplomatic and aid officials, Canadian Forces, and Canadian organizations such as the Pearson Centre have extensive recent experience working in Mali on precisely these issues.

A legitimate government in Bamako that is supported by the people of Mali is a prerequisite to a negotiated peace with Malian insurgents, primarily Tuaregs, in the north. As the International Crisis Group (2012) notes, “it is necessary to restore the political, institutional, security and military foundations of the state in order to gradually regain the three northern regions.”

**3. Provide diplomatic and other support to resolve longstanding tensions between people in the north and south of Mali; only such a resolution can ensure Mali's continued territorial integrity and offer a defence against terrorist or jihadist incursions.**

*A big fear among analysts ... is that Mali will be seen through a “war on terror” prism, sidelining the fundamental issue of how to reconcile north and south.* (Tran 2013)

Difficult and longstanding political problems in Mali created the opening for terrorists. These problems, not just the more recent terrorist threat, must be addressed by Canada and the international community.

Mali government negotiations with Tuaregs, mediated by regional neighbours, have been on-and-off. More work is needed to keep talks going, backed by economic and other incentives to maintain stable peace in the north. Some Tuareg militant groups have publicly signalled their willingness to reject ties to AQIM and re-enter talks with Bamako. This is a welcome opportunity which should not be squandered.

*It is the population's resentment towards the central government over the marginalisation of the northern territories, which has helped Islamists gain support there. The chances of finding a solution to combatting Islamic extremism in northern Mali would have been significantly better had the Malian government looked at ways of collaborating with the Tuaregs. The only viable long-term solution is cooperation and economic development for the region.* (Rogers 2013)

Canada's experience as a federated state with distinct regions and indigenous peoples, imperfect though it may be, could provide pointers on how to reform Mali's governing structures to accommodate the aspirations of its disparate people and geographic regions.

**4. Press Mali and other military forces to make protection of vulnerable civilians their primary mission, displaying the highest respect for human rights and international humanitarian law.**

*Oxfam calls on all military forces in the country, including French and Malian troops already engaged in combat, armed groups in northern Mali, and regional troops yet to be deployed, to respect international human rights and humanitarian law. This includes ensuring all necessary measures are taken to minimise harm to civilians, as outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 2085, adopted in December 2012. (Oxfam 2013)*

The current reported successes of French military forces, working with the Malian military in defeating or dislodging AQIM and other insurgent forces in some urban areas in central and northern Mali, is a welcome but not definitive development. In the vast countryside AQIM has established bases and supply lines that will permit asymmetric attacks to continue well into the future.

The deployment of African troops to Mali under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also is welcome. The problems in Mali are seen as security threats for all of West Africa, potentially destabilizing neighbouring states while exacerbating the refugee crisis.

As a general principle Canada should support policies and provide assistance that encourages and enables regional and sub-regional bodies such as the African Union and ECOWAS to directly engage in peace operations in their own territories □ assuming of course that the mission is properly authorized and implemented. UN Security Council Resolution 2085 authorizes the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA).

This force not only speaks to the aspiration to find "African solutions to African problems," but can offer real advantages. Neighbours know the problems better and are potentially more attuned to cultural and other dynamics. Still, ECOWAS troops going to Mali will need a great deal of financial and technical assistance.

The Mali military is reportedly engaging in human rights violations and targeted killing of civilians, particularly people identified as Tuaregs. Not only are these actions morally reprehensible and contrary to international law, but such behaviour deepens the alienation of local populations and makes the tasks of re-establishing democracy and negotiating south-north peace that much more difficult.

Direct Canadian Forces military contributions to the international military mission in Mali will evolve. Canada should make support to the Mali military mission contingent on the highest respect for and implementation of international human rights and humanitarian law by France, Mali, ECOWAS, and others who may join the mission.

We know of only one firm Canadian military deployment to date: a Royal Canadian Air Force C-17 heavy transport aircraft was dispatched to shuttle military equipment from France to Mali. The initial one-week term has been extended. Canadian special forces also are reported to be in the capital, Bamako, to protect Canadian assets, which are understood to be Canada's embassy and

remaining personnel serving there. The Prime Minister has stated that Canadian Forces will not be directly engaged in combat operations in Mali.

**5. Address the problem of illegally circulating small arms and light weapons in Mali and its neighbours, and implement as soon as possible a program of disarmament, demobilization, and rehabilitation (DDR) of fighters on all sides of the conflict.**

Controlling and reducing the number of small arms and light weapons in Mali and the broader Sahel region should be a pressing priority for Canada and other international actors in Mali. The failure to secure weapons stockpiles during and after the UN-sanctioned mission in Libya should serve as a lesson in Mali.

ECOWAS has enacted a “Convention on Small Arms, Light Weapons, their ammunition and other associated material.” This legally binding sub-regional instrument can provide the framework by which Mali and other ECOWAS member states can attack this menacing reality. Canadian police and military expertise in weapons stockpile management and control of guns in civilian possession could provide an important contribution to Mali’s long term stability.

Peace agreements often fail if combatants are not disarmed, properly demobilized and then reintegrated into the social and economic fabric of their societies. DDR programs have been defined and implemented after peace agreements were reached in many countries affected by armed violence. Again, Canada could provide leadership to define this need and plan for implementation in the medium- and longer-terms.

## **Radicalization in the Sahel and climate change**

*The destabilization of Mali and southern Algeria is a complex political and social process that does not have only one cause. But a changing ecology forced by climate change is a major contributor to the region’s problems.* (Cole 2013)

Governments faced with an immediate violent security threat may overlook systemic causes of violent conflict. The impact of climate change on the Sahel and Sahara in northern Africa has been identified as a deeper but probably less easily traceable cause of instability in Mali. The current challenges in Mali should be addressed with a view to creating sustainable peace in the longer term. This will include addressing the causes and impact of human-induced climate change.

## **Conclusion**

Guided by a principled response Canada can make substantial contributions to sustainable social and political stability in Mali, which in turn will provide a bulwark against terrorist or jihadist elements and serve the longer-term interests of Canada and the international community.

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Project Ploughshares works with churches, governments, and civil society, in Canada and abroad, to advance policies and actions that prevent war and armed violence and build peace. Founded in 1976, Project Ploughshares is the peace centre of The Canadian Council of Churches, sponsored by nine Canadian denominations, and affiliated with the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Conrad Grebel University college, University of Waterloo.

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