

France-Qatar tensions rise over Mali war, Tunisia

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Tensions between France and Qatar are rising, with accusations that the petro-monarchy is financing and arming separatists and Islamist militants linked to Al Qaeda in Mali, and more broadly spreading Islamic fundamentalism in Africa.

France worked closely with Qatar to oust Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. It is also currently working with Doha, as well as Riyadh and Ankara, in waging a sectarian war to overthrow Syria's president Bashar al-Assad and isolate Iran. Now, however, blowback has developed, as Qatar's policies cut across France's geo-strategic and commercial interests in Mali and Tunisia, which are at the centre of French plans to recolonise its former North and West African empire.

Qatar prime minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem Al-Thani opposed French intervention in Mali, calling instead for dialogue.

The head of France's ruling Socialist Party (PS), Harlem Désir, denounced what he called "a form of indulgence" by Qatar of "terrorist groups who occupied the northern Mali." His remarks were followed by a visit of Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to Doha, to discuss Mali with Al Thani.

A Ministry of Defence statement noted pointedly that Qatar is "a privileged client of France" in weapons purchases, having purchased "orders totalled 450 million euros to 200 million euros" since 2007. The ministry also noted that from February 16 to March 7, a joint military exercise would be staged in Qatar—Falcon Gulf 2013—involving 1,300 French soldiers and the same number of Qataris.

The French press has accused Qatar of wanting to see northern Mali secede, just as it supported the secession of South Sudan from Sudan. This would allow Qatar to forge close ties with the new nation—which is suspected to be rich in oil and gas—and thus to extend its influence

into West and sub-Saharan Africa.

Last June, the weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* published an article, "Our friend Qatar is financing Mali's Islamists". It cited French military intelligence sources claiming that Qatar was financially supporting various groups: the Tuareg rebels of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawas (MNLA), Ansar El Dine, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and its splinter group the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) via Qatar's Red Crescent Society, among others.

Roland Marchal, an expert on sub-Saharan Africa, suggested that Qatari Special Forces had entered Northern Mali to train recruits of Ansar El Dine, part of Al Qaeda—a charge also made in *L'Express*. Qatar pursued a similar strategy in Libya. In Tunisia and Egypt, the al-Thani monarchy financed the Muslim Brotherhood's political parties in 2011 and 2012, as part of its broader strategy of bringing Sunni-based Islamist governments to power to crush opposition in the Arab working class, target the Shiite regime in Iran, and bolster its own position against Saudi Arabia.

Tunisia's Islamist-led government that replaced France's long-time client, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, is now furious at Paris's campaign to discredit it and secure either a shift towards the opposition parties or the formation of a national unity government. France was angered by Tunis's refusal to formally back France's intervention in Mali, or to allow French military planes to fly over its air space. Presidential spokesman Adnan Manser expressed concern that the conflict would threaten neighbouring countries, including Tunisia.

Tensions increased further after reports emerged that the terrorists who carried out the attack on the gas plant in southern Algeria, apparently in retaliation for French

war in Mali, had crossed into Tunisia, which also borders on Libya and Algeria. Large caches of weapons not usually found in Tunisia—RPGs, bombs and Kalashnikovs—were discovered in Medenine.

The assassination earlier this month of Chokri Belaid, the leader of the secular opposition Popular Front party, prompted then-prime minister Hamadi Jebali from the Islamist Ennahda party to accuse Al Qaeda-linked militants of carrying out the assassination and accumulating weapons in order to establish an Islamic state.

French interior minister Manuel Valls denounced the killing as an attack on “the values of Tunisia’s Jasmine revolution”. He added, “There is an Islamic fascism rising everywhere, but this obscurantism must, of course, be condemned because it denies the democracy for which the Libyan, Tunisian and Egyptian people have fought”.

Valls also called for France to support pseudo-left opposition parties in stabilising Tunisia and bringing working class opposition under control.

His remarks prompted a demonstration by Ennahda supporters, shouting slogans and carrying banners saying, “France get out!” and “Enough, France! Tunisia will never again be a French colony”. Valls’s intervention was so naked that the spokesperson for the pseudo-left Tunisian Popular Front, Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party president Hama Hammami, was forced to declare: “As the Popular Front we are against France, US or any Arab country interfering with our internal affairs.”

France’s interest in its former colonial territories in North Africa and the Sahel is fuelled by their rich natural resources—particularly oil, gas, uranium, gold and other precious minerals—and the rise of the United States and China in an area that France sees as its own backyard.

Then-president Jacques Chirac initially sought to counter Washington’s Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), promulgated in 2001, whereby US military forces would train troops from Mali, Chad, Mauretania and Niger, using the pretext of the “war on terror” announced after the September 11 terrorist attacks. This was later expanded to include Algeria, Mauretania, Morocco, Senegal, Nigeria and Tunisia under the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI). Libya, Sudan and Somalia had already been identified as

potential targets.

The PSI and TSCTI were followed in 2007 by the establishment of AFRICOM at EUCOM’s base in Stuttgart, as no African country would host it. It took control of the TSCTI. Chirac had wanted to enlist Germany’s support, inviting Germany to the Franco-African summit in 2007, but Angela Merkel declined to antagonise Washington.

The rise of China was a major factor in French president Nicolas Sarkozy’s rejoining NATO’s integrated military command structure in 2009 and signing an agreement with Britain in 2010 to integrate the two countries’ military forces. France’s role would be to serve as Washington’s lieutenant in North Africa and the Sahel, and share in the spoils of its plans to restructure the region.

Sarkozy sought to bolster France’s declining economic position by courting the Qatari Emir, selling Doha 80 Airbuses for its Qatar Airlines, supplying it with up to 80 percent of its arms, and encouraging Qatar’s Sovereign Wealth Fund to buy up US\$70 billion of French assets.

France passed a special law exempting the Emir and other Qatari investors who bought up prime French real estate from tax. He even offered Doha membership in its International Organisation of Francophony (OIF)—sanctioning French-language schools in the Gulf, the Maghreb and Africa subject to Qatari administration.



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