

Mali war spilling into Burkina Faso, Niger

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Four and a half years after the January 2013 invasion of Mali by a US-backed French invasion force, the war is spiraling toward a larger regional conflict, prompting border closures by neighboring governments, and spurring escalations by the Western governments.

Mali's border areas are experiencing "a significant expansion of violent extremist and terrorist activities, including coordinated cross-border attacks against security posts and ransacking of border settlements," the United Nations top official for West Africa said Thursday.

Additionally, opposition groups staged protests over the weekend in Bamako, Mali's capital, rallying thousands of demonstrators in the name of blocking proposed legal changes that would transfer emergency powers to the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

Last Monday, eight Malian troops were ambushed and killed traveling between Gao and Menaka. On Wednesday, Burkina Faso armed forces clashed with heavily armed militants along the Burkina-Mali border. On Friday, Mauritania declared its northeastern border a closed, militarized area, announcing that "any individual circulating or transiting in this part of the national territory will be treated as a military target."

On July 8, JNIM attacked a French Army base near the town of Tessalit, killing at least three French soldiers. On July 9, JNIM fighters attacked a police station in Mobti province. In March, Mali's main Islamist factions, Ansar Dine, Al-Mourabitoun, the Massina factions and Al Qaida announced their merger into a new formation, Nusrat-ul-Islam, under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghaly.

An Al Qaida branch in Mali known as the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) attacked a Nigerian garrison near the village of Tsawah along the Mali-Niger border in June.

French President Emmanuel Macron traveled to Timbuktu at the beginning of July to discuss plans to expand the "G5 Sahel" multinational army, an imperialist proxy coalition established in February 2014, consisting of forces from the governments of Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. On July 2, Macron called on the G5 coalition to contribute 5,000 soldiers in support of French military activities against "terrorists, thugs and murderers."

"This force is first going to secure the borders, particularly in the areas where terrorist groups have developed," French Foreign Minister Yves Le Drian told *Le Monde*.

"It doesn't look like France will be pulling out of Mali anytime soon," France 24 noted in response to the announcement.

Complementing expanding French military operations the German parliament voted in January to expand troop deployments in Mali from 350 to 1,000, making Mali the German military's largest overseas mission.

The immediate causes of the Mali war flowed from the fallout from the 2011 US-NATO war against Libya. Beginning in January 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg ethnic militia, launched an insurrection against the central government and established control over portions of northern Mali. In March 2012, a coup d'état led by government soldiers declaring themselves the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CNRDR), removed President Amadou Toure from power. Rebel militia groups seized control of Malian cities of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal in wake of the coup.

From January 2013, Paris responded with repeated waves of troop deployments, with backing from Washington. The 2013 invasion, "Operation Serval," served as the spearhead for a major expansion of French militarism across the country's former colonial holdings in West Africa.

In exchange for French "assistance" in stabilizing northern Mali, Paris demanded and received basing rights for its troops throughout the country. Previous Malian governments had been among the few regimes in Francophone Africa to resist such arrangements, limiting French military activities to small-scale training of local forces. Prior to 2013, French combat troops had been absent from Malian territory since their withdrawal following the country's formal independence in 1960.

As part of "Operation Barkhane," the successor to "Serval," some 6,000 French ground troops, hundreds of armored vehicles, war planes, attack helicopters, and drones are now deployed throughout the Sahel. Additional German and French troops deployed under European Union flags in

February 2014, for the official purpose of training of Malian units.

The American and European ruling elites are determined to tighten their grip over the Sahel, which is home to massive natural resource deposits, including uranium and numerous precious metals, and is speculated to have the largest untapped petroleum reserves in Africa.

Mali's northern Taoudeni basin has been known to contain large gas and petroleum reserves since the 1970s. In 2011, the French firm Total claimed to have found "the El Dorado of petroleum reserves" in the northern desert region. A 2015 US geological analysis found that the Taoudeni Basin contains "160 million barrels of conventional oil, 1,880 billion cubic feet of conventional gas, 602 million barrels of shale oil, and 6,395 billion cubic feet of shale gas."

Involvement by French, German and other European Union (EU) forces in the Sahel is part of "a major new direction in European security policy," according to the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

For the European powers, the Sahel represents "a second front in the war on terror," that is "building alongside a growing number of multinationals hoping to extract oil and gas reserves of Mali and Mauritania, and strong French military presence," according to Environmental Justice Atlas. In addition to seizing control over the continent's resources, and asserting the interests of the dominant European banks and corporations, the European powers view the militarization of the Sahel as a means to suppress the flood of refugees northward toward the Mediterranean.

These policies are aimed at reasserting the colonial order established by world imperialism during the 19th and 20th centuries. Throughout the period of "decolonization" from the 1960s onward, the economies and societies of West Africa were subordinated to the needs of French imperialism through an array of mechanisms, including control over African currency reserves and raw materials, monopoly rights for French firms in all key sectors of the economy, and permanent military and police basing arrangements on African soil.

Dozens of coups d'état have been engineered from Paris against African governments, beginning with the assassination of Togo's head of state, Sylvanus Olympio in 1963, who made the fatal mistake of attempting to transition Togo's economy to its own national currency. Malian President Modiba Keita met a similar fate after seeking to leave the French currency zone in June 1962.

In 1975 and again in 1989, French military officers organized the overthrow of Chadian Presidents. In 2003, French troops toppled Central African Republic (CAR) President Ange-Felix Patasse, placing in power General Francois Bozize, after Patasse sought to expel France's

military presence from the CAR. At present, nearly 2,000 French troops are operating in Central African Republic as part of "peacekeeping mission" alongside African Union troops.

More recently, in 2009, Paris organized a coup against the Madagascar government of Marc Ravalomanana, after he sought business deals with rival imperialist interests at the expense of French corporations.

"France established military bases in Africa during the colonial period, and maintained a military presence in Africa after the 'flag independence' of its former colonies in the 1960s," Gary Busch wrote in an article for Pambazuka News this week.

"These agreements allowed France to have pre-deployed troops and police in bases across Africa; in other words, French army and gendarme units present permanently and by rotation in bases and military facilities in Africa, run entirely by the French. The Colonial Pact was much more than an agreement to station soldiers across Africa. It bound the economies of Africa to the control of France," Busch noted.

Notwithstanding the incessant rhetoric about "fighting terrorism," the thousands of Western soldiers invading Africa are sent primarily to secure strategic interests. The stage is being set for a ferocious antagonistic struggle between the major powers for control over the continent. The coming to power of the Trump administration, with its ultra-nationalist "America First" agenda, is intensifying the inter-imperialist tensions and fueling conflicts in every sub-region of Africa.

This week saw Western media issuing ominous warnings about the dangers of piracy and terrorism in the Gulf of Guinea, Niger Delta, and the Lake Chad Basin. Some 5.2 million have already been displaced by the Western-backed Chadian-led invasion of northern Nigeria, justified in the name of "fighting" Boko Haram.

The expansion of the Mali war is an advanced expression of the tendencies toward war and social breakdown at work throughout Africa and worldwide. Two and half decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the supposed "End of History," Africa's governments are tottering in the face of war, famine and disease. The only response of Africa's national elites is further war preparations and deeper integration into the corporate, political and military establishments of North American and Western Europe.



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