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Has the Campaign in the Maghreb and in West Africa Reached a New Level?

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France's military intervention in the campaign underway in Mali is connected to the recent hostage attack in southern Algeria by the Masked Battalion, a faction that split off from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and is led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a long-time Algerian activist who fought alongside al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the 1980s. After ten months in which global jihadist elements succeeded in taking over the north of Mali and instituting *sharia* law, on the model of the Taliban in Afghanistan, France decided to send troops to Mali to assist the local army in obstructing the Islamists' movement southward, on their way to conquering the cities of Kona and Bamako, the capital. The purpose of the military effort, which initially received only lukewarm support from other EU countries, was to encourage the mobilization of other African and Western elements to provide active military support and prevent the direct threat to the economic and political interests of France and other countries posed by the spread of global jihadist elements in western and northern Africa.

However, France's action in Mali was a catalyst for the deadly terrorist attack on the Ain Amenas gas plant in southern Algeria. The modus operandi chosen by the terrorists deviated from the organization's familiar repertoire, which specialized in criminal activity and kidnapping Western citizens and demanding ransom for their release. This frontal attack on a sensitive and explosive gas plant, in which more than thirty men armed with numerous weapons, explosives, and explosive belts took hundreds of hostages, intended to achieve a number of objectives. First, it challenged the sovereignty of the Algerian government and dealt a serious blow to a major industry that is important to the national revenue. Second, it presented a complex security challenge to the Algerian government's counterterrorism policy against al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. Third, it was an attempt to prevent active support by Algeria or the participation of Algerian soldiers alongside the

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foreign African and Western troops fighting with the weak Malian army to remove global jihadist elements from the north of the country. Fourth, the kidnapping of many foreign hostages was designed both to acquire bargaining chips and deter the Western countries whose citizens were being held hostage from supporting the French action and the Malian army.

The Algerian government, loyal to its tough policy in the war on terror, rejected the demands to release terrorists imprisoned in Algeria. After four days, it ended the incident with two waves of attack by special forces. The result was the death of the attackers (who apparently numbered between thirty-two and forty) and several dozen hostages, including at least some two dozen foreign nationals, out of hundreds of hostages who were in the plant during the attack.¹

While the Algerian affair has reached its operational end, the local military effort in Mali continues, supported by some two thousand French soldiers and an aerial force, with the goal of removing global jihadist elements from the north of the country. Following the French action and on the basis of an emergency meeting of the Economic Community of West African States that took place recently in the Ivory Coast, African states, including Nigeria and Togo – whose vanguard forces have already arrived in Mali – as well as Chad, Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Guinea, have promised to send soldiers to help the Malian army. In northern Mali they face a coalition of three Salafist jihadi organizations, including Ansar al-Din, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), and elements from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Ansar al-Din was established in late 2011 by a Tuareg mercenary who left the NMLA (the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) because of differences with the separatist movement's senior leadership and their lack of response to his desire to receive a leadership position. Several hundred Tuareg fighters who earned much experience in terrorism and guerilla fighting in the war in Libya have joined his organization. Ansar al-Din has a large number of sophisticated weapons that were captured or bought from Qaddafi's arsenal. The group has adopted the Salafist jihadist approach and has worked to impose *sharia* law in the north of Mali with the goal of impose it in other parts of the country as well. Working alongside this group are members of MOJWA, which was established in January 2012 by natives of Africa who also left al-Qaeda in the Maghreb due to internal sectarian disputes and who share the same world view. Members of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, who fled Algeria because of pressure from Algerian security forces, have joined in operations.

In spite of intervention by France and its allies, it appears that the campaign to liberate Mali from global jihadist elements is just beginning. The attempt to remove these organizations from the north of Mali is likely to lead to a bloody campaign throughout the country, and possibly beyond. France's entry into the fighting in Mali may expand or

may even, despite their reservations, involve other NATO member countries in a long and bloody military campaign such as the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, which featured involvement by the United States and its allies, including France. Along with support for Algeria from major Western countries, particularly the United States and Great Britain, for refusing to surrender to terror, and even before the full details of the operation were known, the deadly results of the hostage-taking incident led to international criticism over the way in which the hostage rescue was handled.

It remains an open question whether Algeria's tough stance toward the terrorist attack will prevent similar incidents in the future, or whether, along with the fighting developing in Mali, it will actually open a Pandora's box in the region that could spill over into Europe as well and result in reprisals by al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and its partners in global jihad. Furthermore, the fighting by global jihadist elements in the border areas of states with a problem of governance and large Muslim populations offers a lifeline for the battered organization of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda, and a source of rejuvenation for the global jihadist camp. Therefore, al-Qaeda's leader will likely seek to exploit the events in Algeria and Mali to fish in these troubled waters and encourage his affiliates to wage jihad to defend the occupied lands of Islam while removing the local rulers who collaborate with their Western crusader patrons.

¹These were the figures publicly released at the time of this writing.