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TIME TO CLARIFY OBJECTIVES IN MALI

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The French satirical television show *Les Guignols* sums up the mood in France three weeks into this unexpected campaign: the French president François Hollande has invented “la guerre molle” (the soft war). Indeed several observers were expecting an Afghan style conflict with bloody encounters between the rebel guerrilla forces and elite French troops and coffins being flown back to Paris. Nothing of the sort has happened. So either the rebels have shaved their beards and melted into the civilian population (the fifth column syndrome is useful here) or they have fled into the desert sanctuaries and are just bidding their time before engaging in guerrilla warfare. The French military command sounds triumphalist but journalists embedded with the French army note that many officers are sounding, in private, somewhat more cautious.

François Hollande must now explain what the objectives of France (and its allies?) are in Mali. Stopping the jihadists advance towards the capital Bamako, the reason for France’s decision to intervene at short notice just over two weeks ago, has been achieved. Reconquering the northern has been achieved for the most part. Fighting “terrorism” is an altogether different matter as it could draw France into a quagmire the like of which is well illustrated by Afghanistan. Indeed the expression jihadists or Al Qaeda in the Arab Maghreb (AQIM) cover a multitude of distinct political groups whose aims are different. Neither AQIM nor the brand owner al Qaeda possess a single brain, card carrying members and a precise strategy. They are groups whose boundaries, aims, financing and modus operandi locally fade into many shades of grey.

France should set itself two objectives - to avoid at all cost that the black soldiers from the south -who make up the bulk of Mali’s army- do not indulge in reprisals against the northern Tuaregs or Arabs. Acts of this kind have already been reported since French troops arrived in Mali and Human Rights Watch and other NGOs have publicly expressed their concern and pointed to specific cases in Ségou in the centre of Mali. Mali’s army has engaged in what French historians call barbaric acts when the Tuaregs of Mali rebelled, in 1963-64, just after independence from France in 1960 and again in 1990. After the rebels conquered Gao and Timbuktu ten months ago, tens of thousands of Malians from the north who were living in Bamako escaped to

neighbouring countries were they often live in misery in makeshift camps. If French troops fail to stop such acts in the reconquered towns, France will forfeit the moral credit it has gained so far and much need political capital.

France must offer a political solution to what is a political problem. A return to the status quo ante would be disastrous. That will be much tougher: indeed Mali's arid north has been starved of central government investment and international aid, its population marginalised under both left-wing government in the 1960s and the military regimes that followed. Though investment did increase with the transition to "democracy" in the 1990s western governments and institutions have been at fault in their long running acceptance and promotion of the "procedural" version of democracy adopted by Mali upper and middle class - a fault repeated in scores of other African and Middle eastern countries. Although "democracy" in the 1990s brought more investment to the north, it was neither socially nor regionally inclusive. Here as in Rwanda and Iraq, not to mention Afghanistan a few years ago, progress towards democracy has been overhyped. Governments in Bamako were adept at exploiting the fights between Arab and Tuareg groups to better divide them.

The lines of fracture between northern and southern Mali are old, deep and complex. Some groups within the different rebel forces have already expressed their desire to return to the negotiating table. This all requires spelling out how a really representative leadership can be established in Bamako. Ruling elites in Bamako tend to be corrupt and hardly seem to care for their southern black brothers much more than the rebellious northerners. If France avoids falling into these twin traps, if it reaches out to Mali's neighbours countries, not least Algeria, and the US to build a more solid road map to lasting peace in this unhappy country, it will be able to claim to have helped usher in a period of greater peace in Mali and the Sahel region.