

France Becomes Regional Gendarme in Mali

By [Dominique Moisi](#)

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While hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Paris against the right of homosexual couples to marry and adopt children, French troops were arriving in Mali to stop a coalition of Islamist and rebel forces from taking control of its capital, Bamako, and creating in the Sahel a sanctuary for terrorists.

These are trying times for French President Francois Hollande. Besieged economically at home, where his popularity is at its lowest since his election last year, can he regain credibility, if not support, as supreme commander of French forces?

Once upon a time, "I intervene, therefore I am" might as well have been a French motto, particularly in Africa. But while French national identity is intimately bound up with France's international standing — how it is perceived in the world — enthusiasm for intervention has receded. The benefits have become more dubious, while the costs and risks have grown increasingly evident.

If France has again become a regional gendarme by default, it is largely for three reasons. American enthusiasm for intervention in Africa has greatly diminished since the operation in Somalia in 1992 and 1993, and more globally following the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. European interest in military intervention in Africa is as low as ever. As for the region's governments, it would be an understatement to say they are not yet ready militarily to take their fate into their own hands.

While France is not alone — manifestations of support have come from its Western and African partners, as well as from the Middle East — it will bear the primary responsibility and the risks. For Islamic fundamentalists, France is now the "Great Satan."

Indeed, the conflict in Mali is taking place geographically in Africa, but in many ways its causes and ramifications lie in the Middle East. When France intervened in an African country in the past, there was no risk of terrorist attacks on its territory or on its citizens elsewhere in the world. That is no longer the case.

It is too early to say what will happen in Mali or the Sahel or, for that matter, in France itself. For the moment, the French are standing overwhelmingly behind Hollande. They would have criticized him had he remained passive while Bamako fell into the hands of terrorists. Yet this support may be fragile and could collapse if something goes wrong on the ground — or worse, in France.

Before the intervention, Mali was not a French priority. Rising unemployment at home seemed to be a more urgent task than addressing instability in Africa. While the French public agrees that Mali cannot be allowed to become a haven for terrorists the way Afghanistan did in the late 1990s, attitudes toward intervention have evolved in recent decades. In the early 1980s, after a particularly bloody terrorist attack on French and U.S. forces in Lebanon, France's tolerance for military casualties seemed much higher than that of the United States. But this has changed. The French now find themselves on the front line at a time when they have much less appetite for it.

Moreover, budget restrictions have severely constrained French military capabilities. French and British military intervention was successful in Libya in 2011 at least in part as a result of U.S. military procurement and support.

Of course, from a French perspective, the U.S. role is somewhat ironic. In the years after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Americans always had to be on the front line. They had to battle the enemy abroad to avoid having to battle him at home, in the parlance of the time, while the European allies were perceived as the cleaning staff. But imperial fatigue after Iraq and Afghanistan has left its imprint. Americans are starting to enjoy — probably too much for their allies — President Barack Obama's description of the U.S. role in Libya: "leading from behind."

For Hollande, war in Mali is both an opportunity and a risk. If former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whom he defeated in May 2012, was widely regarded as "too presidential," Hollande has given the impression of not being presidential enough. His fall from public grace — too statist and fiscally intrusive for the right, but too moderate and socially democratic for the true left — was more rapid than that of any president of the Fifth Republic. Of course, with unemployment rising every month, it is difficult to remain popular for long.

As the supreme commander of an army at war, Hollande can now try to reinvent himself. But successive presidents since Jacques Chirac have failed to reconcile the French with politics. France's citizens have tended to expect too much from their state, and now they may be expecting too little from politics and politicians at a time when deep divisions on fundamental economic and social issues run not only between the traditional right and left but also within both camps.

Will foreign intervention reunite the French? Will war in Africa be the defining moment of Hollande's presidency? Will he be remembered as the French Harry Truman, a discreet, uncharismatic man who, when faced with urgent and dramatic circumstances, ended up doing the right things for lack of a better alternative?

This is a portentous moment both for Mali and for security in the Sahel and Europe. It is no less significant for Hollande and France.

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