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## **Hollande in Mali: The hardest part lies ahead**

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In flying to Mali, a visit made possible by the eviction of jihadist rebels from the cities of the north, François Hollande has probably thought of a cruel precedent. May 1, 2003, on the deck of the nuclear aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, President George Bush announced the end of “major operations” in Iraq, six weeks after its invasion by U.S. troops. Behind the president, a banner celebrating a “mission accomplished”. Twenty-three days later, a decree of the provisional administrator Paul Bremer resulted in the dissolution of the Iraqi armed forces and security services. A strategic mistake that would contribute to plunging the country into a nightmare from which it is still struggling to emerge a decade later, and to exhaust the United States.

On 15 September 2011, after the fall of Tripoli, the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron visited Benghazi, cradle of the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi. The Franco-British intervention had saved the city from bloodshed a few months earlier. At the time, Libya was not out of the woods. It still is not.

We must acknowledge: the French mission in Mali has barely begun, and sits on foundations strictly contrary to what was expected. The rebel offensive in early January forced Paris to deploy its troops on the ground, whereas it initially wanted its role to be limited to helping an African peacekeeping force. Operations were preceded by a very theoretical return to constitutional order, ten months after the military coup of Captain Amadou Sanogo, March 22, 2012. A normalization policy should have been concluded in April at the very latest with a presidential election.

The unfolding of events is a terrible indicator of the state of Mali. Start with the army, “a group of civil servants” living more from trafficking than from their salary, according to the former foreign minister of Mali Soumeylou Boubeye Maiga. It will take time before Malian troops are ready to defend their country and stand up to the rebels who retreated without a fight from Gao and Timbuktu. As for the return to constitutional order, the regaining of control of the major cities of the North makes this possible for the entire country, but the reprisals that Malian soldiers are charged with conducting against suspected collaborators of the jihadists may complicate matters politically.

Another complicating point is that the UN resolution adopted in December 2012 and providing for the deployment of African troops is adamant about the origin of the crisis: the demands for autonomy, if not independence, for the Tuareg. Bamako is invited to rapidly implement a “credible framework” to meet “longstanding concerns of northerners.” Are future Malian authorities ready for that? Will they have a mandate in this area?

By his presence in Mali, the French president kicks off an uncertain process: the reconstruction of a state. Precedents such as Iraq and Libya speak volumes about the magnitude of the task.

***Le Monde* (Editorial)**

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**P.S.**

\* Editorial, Le Monde, Feb. 2, 2013. Translation by Roger Annis, with help from Google.

\* <http://www.rogerannis.com/three-important-articles-describing-mali-and-the-foreign-intervention/>