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Behind the French & U.S. attack in Mali

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On Feb. 1, *The New York Times* published a major article by Adam Nossiter and Neil MacFarquhar entitled “Algeria Sowed Seeds of Hostage Crisis as It Nurtured Warlord.” The warlord in question is Iyad Ag Ghali, who heads Ansar Dine, one of the three Islamic groups that *The Times* says threatened to capture the Malian capital, Bamako, in early January. The involvement of radical Islamists provided the excuse for the Jan. 11 French military intervention, which is, without a doubt, an important escalation in the imperialists’ new “Scramble for Africa.”

Nossiter and MacFarquhar explain that the Algerian government nurtured Ag Ghali in the hope that Ansar Dine, which advocated an Islamic state but not a breakaway state, could supplant the battle for self-determination of the secular Tuareg organizations fighting in the northern regions of Mali and Niger.

The Tuareg people traditionally have claimed territory not only in Mali and Niger but in the border regions of Algeria, as well. The Algerian government feared that a victory for the Tuareg would unleash the pent-up anger of oppressed peoples inside Algeria itself.

Like the United States, which helped to create the Taliban to fight pro-Soviet forces in Afghanistan—and Pakistan, which works to maintain dependent Islamic radical “players” in the Pashtun tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan—so Algerian elites supported Ansar Dine as part of a strategy to suppress more threatening opposition forces like the secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) or that creature of their own recent civil war, al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Instead, their game plan is now subordinate to the goals of the direct military intervention of France, the United States, Britain, and Canada, all of whom see the Sahara-Sahel as key to protecting their substantial economic and political interests.

Algeria’s dirty tricks, illuminating as they are about the way that elites intrigue to hold onto power, are really only a sideshow to the main operation—that is, the effort of the U.S. and the old colonizers of Europe to successfully compete with China and each other for Africa’s extraordinary petroleum and mineral wealth in a period of deep capitalist economic crisis of incredible duration. According to an article by Patrick Smith in the *Financial Times* of June 3, 2010, “the Great Game being played out in Africa’s mines and on its sea routes is no less dramatic than the great rivalries over Afghanistan two centuries ago.”

Africa holds at least 10% of the world’s oil reserves, and greater reserves are likely. China buys a third of its oil from Africa, and the U.S. expects to import 25% of its oil from the West African seaboard by 2015. Africa also appears to hold the largest reserves of rare earth metals outside of China.

The French military intervention, which centered on air attacks supported by U.S. logistics, was ostensibly launched to free northern Mali from the brutality of the imposition of a crude sharia law by Islamic militants from al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb. Skepticism about the humanitarianism of France’s assault, however, is warranted.

If France—Mali's old colonial master and one of the main brokers for European investment, loans, and "aid" to Mali—were actually motivated by the interests of the workers, farmers, traders, and herders of the Konna, Gao, Timbuktu areas, it would be reasonable to assume that these peoples would not be among the poorest on the planet. Before, during, and after this war, the majority of Malians will continue to try to live on less than \$1 a day. France's actual interests are clearly more mercenary.

As the former colonizer of much of Central and West Africa, France's economic stake in the region is considerable. French uranium mines in the bordering country of Niger have for 40 years supplied the lion's share of the fuel for their nuclear power industry, and that industry produces 75% of the country's electricity. The global economic crisis has pushed other capitalist countries to try to get a piece of the action long dominated by France. China and India have now thrown their hat in the ring in Niger and will undoubtedly jump to participate in Malian mining developments.

U.S. interests in the Sahara-Sahel are multiple but center on petroleum from Nigeria, phosphates from Morocco, and natural gas from Algeria. In Washington's strategic thinking, the availability and security of these resources are tied to developments in the Sahel as a whole. Washington's already substantial Trans-Saharan Security Initiative was boosted on Dec. 25, when Obama announced that Washington would be sending troops to 35 African countries. On Jan. 29, Niger announced that it had agreed to host a U.S. drone base, expanding the already significant drone operations Washington runs out of East Africa.

The profits from France's mines in Niger have been the target of the MNJ, the Niger Movement for Justice. The MNJ is a mostly Tuareg group that has been demanding a share of the revenues and an environmental cleanup. Kidal, one of the northern Malian towns recently taken by French forces, and the heart of Tuareg spiritual life, is at the center of a uranium-prospecting project given a 2007 go-ahead by the Malian government of over 20,000 square kilometers. Oklo Resources was due, as late as last October, to start drilling in May 2013. Malian uranium reserves have been estimated at 5200 tons.

The Malian government, which in the early 1990s was pressured by international financial institutions to agree to mining regulations highly favorable to foreign investors, abandoned a 1991 agreement to share power with the nomadic people that inhabit the uranium-rich areas. Subsequent government policy, developed under economic and political pressure from European and U.S. institutions, focused on integrating a small layer of Tuaregs into the military and other government organizations rather than tackling the huge disparity in resources that colonialism had bequeathed to the north and the south. When the stick was required, they responded with direct brutality or gave backhanded support to informal militias composed of other ethnic groups in the north, such as the Songhai, who do not support a Tuareg-led government.

French colonialism, of course, set in motion these modern-day ethnic divisions. The occupiers focused on resource extraction and development in the south of Mali and recruited for government service primarily from the Bambara and other southern people. The colonial government then sent them north to implement policies that shrunk the pastoral commons on which various nomadic peoples survived. Contemporary mining concessions, security measures demanded as part of the global "War on Terror," and severe drought have further exacerbated the shrinkage, forcing more of the Tuareg to turn to black market operations or to migrate to an increasingly impoverished south to vie for very scarce jobs.

"Jobless growth" is the phrase used to describe the current African economic "boom." Policies imposed on Mali by the IMF and the World Bank for 40 years have exacted a terrible price in the more developed south, as well. Neoliberal schemes have led to the privatizations of the Malian

railway and cotton enterprises, and encouraged corporate land acquisitions and genetically modified seed experiments that threaten food sovereignty and the livelihood of small peasants. Today, Mali faces one of the largest food shortfalls in years.

The demands of world capitalism have left Mali divided, impoverished, dependent, and ripe for further plunder. The recent military coup, sparked by an ethnic rebellion, was led by an officer trained by the United States, and it was dependent for survival on the intervention of the French. It was, in a real sense, the sad outcome of 70 years of colonization, 40 years of IMF and World Bank intervention in the interest of non-African elites, and repeated imperialist efforts to head off genuine insurgency by nurturing hand-picked groups of Islamic extremists in Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

However, the 2011 upsurges in Tunisia, Egypt, and the Western Sahara, to say nothing of the 2012 militant fight back of the South African miners of Marikana, suggest that resistance is brewing against the dictates of global capital on the continent. Activists in the Americas can contribute to that process by demanding that France, Canada, and the U.S. get out of the Sahara-Sahel now.

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