

What is the relationship between international organisations in the Malian civil war?

In this essay I will analyse the ways in which international organisations responded to the current civil war in Mali. I will critically examine the relationships between these organisations and how they fit within dominant African or Western perspectives.

One prominent reading of the civil war is to see it as a pretext for an imperialist project led by France. For example the World Peace Council statement on Mali made numerous references to imperialism,(WPC Secretariat, 2013) and these same references can be found amongst other comments too.(WFTU, 2013; Mezayev, 2013) It's true that France has historically had relations with West Africa which can undeniably be called colonial,(Conklin, 1997, pp.3–5) however there needs to be more careful scrutiny of the motives for French intervention today.

According to Kusnir(1999, p.315), Mali has significant gold reserves. Gold production amounts to around 40,000 kilograms a year(T J Brown et al., 2013, p.27) and makes it the 8th largest producer in the world. References have been made to potential reserves of oil and other minerals in Northern Mali,(R. Teichmann, 2013) but as of yet there is very little commercial exploitation of these resources. Mali's agricultural and livestock resources are mostly consumed internally to feed the population. Mali's exports amount to only \$2.5 billion a year and it counts amongst the poorest countries in the world.(Central Intelligence Agency, 2013) Any attempt to exploit its resources would require a sustained investment in infrastructure and there is very little profitable incentive for France to do this.

Next we have to see the utility of Mali as a strategic territory in West Africa. It borders on Algeria, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, Guinea, Senegal and Mauritania and acts as a gateway between these states. The presence of French troops in Mali allows France to reclaim the region as part of its sphere of influence and assert its dominance there. This is important in the context of Libya ending its support for the region and China gaining influence on the continent with generous aid and trade programs.(Wenping, 2007)

There are also some genuinely humanitarian reasons for intervention. A long stalemate between the government and the rebels would allow warlords and bandits to thrive. The cost of armaments and munitions and the destruction of infrastructure would have a devastating effect on the economy and consequently the civilian population. After 1 year of conflict there are now 227,000 new internally displaced people in Mali,(Albuja et al., 2013, p.12) and this number will increase as the war continues. Therefore from the French perspective a swift military victory would ensure stability and avert a potentially catastrophic situation. However, this is too simple as it ignores multiple factors which already contributed towards a humanitarian emergency before the civil war began. Northern Mali faces an environmental and agricultural crisis brought about due to desertification and soil erosion.(Benjaminsen, 2008, pp.825 – 826) This is exacerbated by the Malian government which in the past used a form of 'internal colonialism'(Lecocq, 2010, p.115) against Northern Mali; dismissing its cultural heritage and forcing its population to convert from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles. Bad governance also has a damaging effect, corruption is a serious problem amongst the political elite(Labelle, 2012) and its democracy is “neither socially nor regionally inclusive”(Beaumont, 2013a). The general level of poverty and deprivation in the country is another factor, Mali ranks 183rd on the Human Development Index which makes it the 6th least developed country in the world.(Malik, 2013, p.143)

These factors all come together to form a humanitarian problem on their own, and they also form some of the hidden causes behind the civil war. For example the relative poverty of Northern Mali

can be given as one of the reasons for the Tuareg rebellion there. Corruption and poverty were also cited by officers in the military as justifications for the coup of 2012.(Hagberg & Körling, 2012, p.118)

There have been some novel ways of solving these problems, for example Mali will give away its top-level internet domains for free in the hope that this will stimulate investment in the country. (Hirsch, 2013b) This assumes development as the real solution to instability and armed conflict.

Looking on a more structural level I can look at the juridical aspects of the French intervention. It was legally justified by the UN Security Council which gave its assent in resolutions 2071,(2012a) 2085(2012b) and 2100.(2013) These resolutions set out clear limits to the French action and gave it some legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. The intervention received token support from some NATO countries but was not adopted as a full NATO action.(Rasmussen, 2013) Despite the clean legal credentials of the intervention there is a black mark on its record, the accidental killing of civilians(Amnesty International, 2013, pp.6–7) and execution of prisoners of war.(Human Rights Watch, 2013)

One approach to this is to say that although civilian deaths are reprehensible they are an understandable feature of any war, even a humanitarian one. The criticism aimed at the French state was that while it was quick to condemn the actions of rebels in their attacks on sites of cultural heritage;(AFP, 2012) it was considerably slower to condemn the actions of its allies in attacks on the civilian population. It was not neutral and this is a major failing of a humanitarian intervention.

How successful was the intervention? By what criteria should we measure effectiveness? In the short-term stability and order has been restored to the country. The threat of the military has been temporarily neutralised by granting an amnesty to the putschists.(Champeaux, 2012) Most French troops plan to withdraw by 2014, leaving Mali's national sovereignty more or less intact. There was one retaliation in the bombing of the French embassy in Libya, but as of yet the war has not been brought back onto French territory. I can look to a similar style of 'light intervention' in the Ivory Coast.(Beaumont, 2013b) It had international backing, France made a short tactical intervention, forced a regime change and withdrew in a matter of months. This is very different from the interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan which developed 'mission creep' and were dragged into a long low-intensity conflict.(Jervis, 2003) An important aspect of these interventions is that they recognised that conflict does not exist in isolation and that postwar reconstruction is a necessary step to preventing it from occurring again. The real humanitarian resolution of the conflict in Mali will be to deal with the conditions of poverty and corruption which caused it in the first place.

What is the role of 'la Francophonie' in all this? It has been more notable for its non-role, the organisation has not taken the lead in garnering international support for the French intervention. Perhaps 'la Francophonie' is unnecessary because there is already enough support.

An alternative approach to the situation is to downplay the role of France and instead point to co-operation between African states in solving the Malian civil war. Institutions to look at here are the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which both promoted the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA).

The African Union has a commitment to defending “the national unity and territorial integrity of the Republic of Mali”(Peace and Security Council, 2012) and this is applied in reality as firm support for the national government of Mali against the separatist rebels.(Ping, 2012) Continuing this policy it would also firmly support the national government of Mali against a perceived French invasion. This is not the case because the African Union has been supportive of the French intervention, (Gberie, 2013) however its backing of AFISMA is an implicit way of counterbalancing French influence.

The African Union's support for the government of Mali is not unconditional. As part of its policy (charter on democracy elections and governance) it does not support military coups, and in line with this it suspended Mali's membership of the Union in response to the military coup of March 21, 2012. (Hicks, 2012) This suspension along with targeted sanctions against the members of the military government (France 24, 2012) was an aggressive act against the representatives of a state with a view to forcing a regime change to a civilian government. These actions were hardly in line with the African Union's declared respect for national sovereignty and represent a contradiction in its aims. ECOWAS joined in the sanctions and also faced similar criticism from within Mali, with some people arguing that its actions were a violation of national sovereignty. (Traore et al., 2012) The military government was unconstitutional, so in removing it they were acting in accordance with the law.

Algeria also has a stake in the conflict, it was accused of covertly funding Islamic militias in Northern Mali so as to counterbalance the influence of the secular Tuareg nationalists. (Keenan, 2012) The broad strategy of French, Malian and AFISMA forces has been to push upwards from Southern Mali, which has the effect of driving rebels north into Algerian territory. (Glazebrook, 2013) Algeria sees this as a security threat, its fears were realised when Islamists took an Algerian gas plant in January 2013 and started a hostage crisis. (Anon, 2013a, p.7)

What I have shown here is that it's not just France which is intervening in Mali, and that the discourse of pan-african solidarity actually masks the interests of organisations and states with their own agendas. Now I will look at the relationship between AFISMA and French troops in Mali.

The general picture is that the Malian army is under-equipped, as a BBC report states, they

“only carry out patrols on days where the French Operation Serval gives them fuel for their patrol vehicles” (Smith, 2013)

Aside from a lack of fuel that same BBC report also mentions that the Malian army's equipment is defective or out of date. From video footage shot by the French army I see that the AFISMA troops have a similar problem. Soldiers from Chad during the assault on Gao have no helmets or body armour and are armed only with pistols or AK-series assault rifles, (Anon, 2013b) though soldiers from Niger (Anon, 2013b) and Togo (Anon, 2013c) appear considerably better protected. This should be compared with the French soldiers who are dressed in full protective clothing and equipped with the latest modern weaponry. If the Malian and AFISMA armies are dependent on the French army for resources then this creates an unequal relationship, one which could become more problematic once French troops start to leave the country. An European Union Training Mission (EUTM) was being introduced to try to solve this problem, (European Council, 2013) but it does risk replacing a dependence on the French army with a dependence on the EUTM. Given what I have outlined above the Malian army does not need training, it needs equipment and so far the EUTM has limited itself to providing only logistical support.

This situation could change with Operation Gustav, the movement by French forces out into the desert to capture rebel hideouts and supply caches. This is a shift in territory from until recently when the conflict was limited to fighting in urban areas and clearing out cities, territory which is suited to the French army. (Mari, 2013, pp.30–31) Fighting in the desert is much more suited to the Malian and AFISMA forces whose light infantry and jeeps can cover more ground than the tanks and armoured trucks in the French column. Such a change will help the Malian army to reassert itself in relation to the French forces.

I should also consider the status of non-state actors in the conflict. The dynamics of the UN or the African Union are completely different here with regards to non-state actors. The separatist rebels declared Azawad to be an independent state on the 6th April 2012. (Acherif, 2012) This was during

the period of military government, which made their case more legally acceptable. The military government of Mali breached the constitution, putting in question the legality of the government and hence the legitimacy of the Malian state. This created a dichotomy between Mali as a 'rogue state' and Azawad as a newly-independent nation. The Azawad declaration of independence was made in French, which shows that the rebels were seeking French recognition. Ultimately however no country came forward to recognise Azawad and without this support its claim to statehood was dismissed by the African Union and ECOWAS. This is in part because there was a consensus between the western and non-aligned countries that Azawad should stay under Malian control. It would be naïve to assume that this consensus is due to common interests, instead I would describe it as a coincidence that both positions see a need for a unified Malian state. Western countries on one hand have an imperial interest in Mali, meanwhile African and non-aligned countries want Mali's whole territory to be defended in order to maintain its independence. Again, this dichotomy is also too simple as there is some convergence between the two positions; France not being entirely imperialist and ECOWAS countries acting in their own interests to contain the instability in Mali.

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA) makes appeals to the UN, African Union and ECOWAS but their demands are highly localised,(Acherif, 2013) they want the territory of Azawad to gain political autonomy. In this way they only use the international system as a means to an end and do not see themselves as transnational actors.

The Islamic militias on the other hand have a much more transnational outlook, operating across national boundaries in Algeria, Niger and Mali. Their aim is to establish “a pan-Sahelian caliphate”(Smith, 2009, p.62) across the territory of the Islamic Maghreb and more broadly in West Africa. By taking on the Al-Qaeda brand and their variant of political Islam they associate themselves with a global struggle for Islamic Jihad. They also participate in multinational supply networks such as the cocaine trade.(Hirsch, 2013a) However, they are not a completely homogenised product of globalisation as their religion draws upon local customs and adapts to the local environment. Furthermore, both Islamic militias and the secular NMLA fight amongst themselves, each appealing to different ethnic and tribal divisions in Azawad.

In conclusion there is a complex interplay of organisations and institutions operating in Mali. We cannot read the situation only within the frame of 'French imperialism' or 'pan-African solidarity' or 'Islamic resistance'. A realist perspective is needed to truly understand the conflict, however an intersection with constructivism is also necessary. I realise this is a contradictory theoretical position, but for me the meaning of the conflict is both social and real. It serves my intentions to expose the narratives framing conflict as social constructions which mask the realist power politics behind them.

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