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ARTIFICIAL PEARLS, REAL SWINE: AFRICAN “STATES” CONFRONT POST-LIBYA ISLAMISTS

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IN MALI, THE DOMINO THEORY IS REAL

Daniel Larison

[*The American Conservative*, Jan. 23, 2013](#)

As the French military intervention in Mali nears the end of its second week, French and Malian forces have begun making slow advances into the territory controlled by several different Islamist and separatist groups. What began a year ago as a Tuareg secessionist rebellion fuelled by weapons and mercenaries returning from Libya expanded into a larger war Jan. 11, when France attacked advancing Islamist forces that were moving towards Mali’s capital, Bamako. Unlike most previous Western interventions over the last two decades, France is here supporting the internationally recognized government of Mali, and its intervention has so far been welcomed by most Malians as necessary for

the defense of their country. Unfortunately, French intervention now likely would not have been necessary had it not been for the intervention in Libya in 2011 that the last French president demanded and the U.S. backed. Had Western governments foreseen the possible consequences of toppling one government two years ago, there might be no need to rescue another one from disaster now.

France says it will continue fighting until the Malian government's control over its northern territory is restored and Islamist groups are defeated, which promises to be a protracted, open-ended commitment for a nation that was already weary of its role in Afghanistan and unable to wage the war in Libya without substantial American help. The U.S. role in the conflict remains a minimal one, confined so far to intelligence assistance and logistical support. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) does pose a real security threat to North and West Africa, and it could pose a threat to Europe, but the threat to the U.S. from AQIM is minimal, if it exists at all. The U.S. has far less at stake in this fight than France or the countries in the region, so it is appropriate that they bear the costs of countering that threat.

The Libyan war did not create Mali's internal divisions, which have existed since independence, but the destabilizing effects of changing one regime in the region exacerbated many of the country's political weaknesses. As a result, the country was effectively cut in half, its democratically-elected president was overthrown in a coup, and hundreds of thousands of its people have been forced to become refugees. Adding to the embarrassment of Western interventionists, up until then Mali had been something of the poster child for successful democratization and development in Africa. Now it is in danger of being reduced to an even more misleading caricature as "another Afghanistan" or "another Somalia." But thinking in these terms is bound to fail. Mali's predicament has to be understood on its own terms.

Despite broad French and Malian support for French intervention, it is far from obvious that President Hollande's decision was a wise or well-considered one. One of the few prominent French opponents of that decision, Dominique de Villepin, voiced his doubts shortly after the intervention began:

In Mali, none of the conditions for success are met. We will fight blindfolded absent a clear objective for the war. Stopping the southward advance of the jihadists, and retaking the north, eradicating AQIM bases are all different wars. We will fight alone absent a reliable Malian partner. With the overthrow of the president in March and the prime minister in December, the collapse of the divided Malian army, and the overall state failure, on whom can we depend? We will fight in a void absent strong regional support. ECOWAS is in the rear and Algeria has signaled its reluctance.

Like Sarkozy's decision to use force in Libya, Hollande's decision to go to war in Mali has been a popular one and a much-needed political boost for his ailing government, but that popularity will disappear if French involvement becomes prolonged and costly. Unless Hollande limits French objectives to those that are realistic and obtainable, he will find that de Villepin was as prescient in his warnings about war in Mali as he was when he admonished the U.S. against invading Iraq.

As far as America is concerned, there is no compelling national interest that obliges the U.S. to become more involved in the conflict in Mali. One lesson of the Libyan war is that the U.S. shouldn't join wars of choice that our allies insist on fighting. Americans should remember that one of the reasons the French are fighting in Mali is that our government agreed to support the last French-backed military adventure in Africa. What other countries in the region would suffer serious unintended consequences from doing the same thing in Mali? How many other countries have to be wrecked before American leaders acknowledge that their interventionist remedies often do more harm than good?

The Libyan intervention's consequences in Mali tell a cautionary tale about the disaster that unnecessary war can unleash on an entire region, but most of the Obama administration's opponents in the U.S. refuse to understand this. Instead of seeing Mali's current woes as a warning against going to war too quickly, hawkish interventionists are already crafting a fantasy story that this is a result of excessive American passivity. This virtually guarantees that Republican hawks will keep attacking the administration for "inaction" when they could instead be trying to hold it accountable for its past recklessness in using force. Absent a credible opposition, the administration will keep receiving the benefit of the doubt from the public on foreign policy, even when it isn't deserved.

If the U.S. learned anything from the Libyan war experience, it ought to be that our government should be far more cautious about resorting to force and much less willing to dismiss the importance of regional stability when considering how to respond to a brutal and abusive regime. Unfortunately, the bias in favor of (military) action in U.S. foreign-policy discourse makes it virtually impossible for these lessons to take hold.

AL-QAEDA'S SOFT POWER STRATEGY IN YEMEN

Daniel Green

[Washington Institute](#), Jan.24, 2013

Learning from jihadist mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has become adept at aligning with local political movements and building popular support in Yemen. In doing so, it has morphed into an insurgency while retaining its roots as a terrorist group. To counter the group's political, legal, and social-welfare efforts in areas outside the capital, the Yemeni and U.S. governments must supplement their counterterrorism campaign by expanding services to the provinces in a decentralized fashion.

Since its founding in January 2009, AQAP has repeatedly attacked the United States and its interests. Washington has responded by significantly expanding its drone strikes in Yemen and bolstering the government's ability to fight AQAP itself through additional military aid and training.

When the Arab Spring began to sweep the region in 2011, a political crisis emerged in Yemen between then president Ali Saleh, who had ruled for over thirty years, and opponents who criticized the regime's corruption, lack of services, and leadership. As the crisis unfolded, Yemeni security forces became involved in political struggles in Sana, with many units moving from the south to the capital. Sensing a vacuum, AQAP launched a series of raids throughout the south that year, using conventional tactics to overrun large swathes of territory, including many districts and a provincial capital.

After seizing control of various southern Yemeni towns and districts, AQAP moved beyond its terrorist focus, adopting the characteristics of an insurgency and holding territory in order to create a nascent government. Its ability to do so was based not only on its enhanced military capabilities and the departure of government security forces, but also on its effective community engagement strategy.

Capitalizing on longstanding southern grievances regarding insufficient education, healthcare, security, rule of law, political representation, and economic development, AQAP sought to replicate the central government's functions throughout the region. Its political agents established a form of stability based on Islamic law, convening regular meetings with community leaders, solving local problems, and attempting to replace chaotic tribal feuds with a more ordered and religiously inspired justice system. This effort included mitigating tribal conflicts, protecting weaker tribes from stronger rivals, and creating opportunities for some ambitious locals, including weaker tribal factions, to rise beyond their social position and seize power in their communities. AQAP also provided humanitarian

assistance such as fresh water and food for the indigent, basic healthcare, and educational opportunities (albeit only Quranic teachings).

Many of these efforts appealed to the population, not only because they were better than what the local government had provided, but also because many tribal sheiks had previously been discredited for not living up to their responsibilities. Additionally, Quran-based engagement was highly appealing to communities in which that book was often the only text residents knew.

Al-Qaeda's strategy in Yemen reflects many of the lessons it learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it frequently alienated locals through the brutality of its rule. In addition, Yemeni tribal structures are far stronger than in those two countries, and tribal leaders are much more adept at governing their traditional areas of control. AQAP has therefore pursued a softer approach not simply because it wants to, but because it must, since the tribes have far greater power than it currently wields.

AQAP has also been effective at joining its cause with local political movements in Yemen, as it did in Iraq with Sunni Arab nationalists. To date, it has aligned its interests with southern elements seeking greater autonomy from the central government or complete independence from Yemen (though it is probably not working with the longstanding Southern Mobility Movement).

Finally, al-Qaeda does not have as strong a foreign character in Yemen as it did in previous conflicts. This reduces Washington and Sana's ability to separate the population from the terrorist group by using national pride, ethnic/tribal differences, or simple xenophobia to rebuff AQAP's advances.

Last year, in response to AQAP's gains, the Yemeni military launched widespread operations against the group's forces in the south. Although these efforts were largely successful in pushing AQAP out of areas it overran in 2011, the group continues to pose a threat. Having retreated to its traditional safe havens in the interior, al-Qaeda has since undertaken a concerted assassination campaign against Yemeni security, military, and intelligence officials as it reconstitutes its forces.

In addition, the group still commands sympathy and influence in the south. To be sure, AQAP eventually reverted to harsh rule in many communities once it consolidated power there, alienating many locals and spurring the exodus of thousands from areas under its sway. Yet many others remain sympathetic to the group, not just for religious or culturally conservative reasons, but also out of a general feeling that al-Qaeda, with all its imperfections, is still a better alternative than the Yemeni government.

Although relief efforts for war refugees did much to improve Sana's image among southerners, only a sustained governance and development initiative -- one highly synchronized with military clearing and holding operations against AQAP -- will consolidate support for the central government. Yet this sort of initiative will not come naturally to Sana or Washington. The lack of such efforts following last year's clearing operations is already undermining popular support, creating another opportunity for a chastened but resilient AQAP to leverage the south against the central government. The group is already adapting its community engagement strategy by apologizing for the excesses of its recent rule and making overtures to key local leaders to lay the groundwork for reasserting control.

Thus far, most U.S. efforts against AQAP have been limited to counterterrorism operations, which are unable to address the fundamental issues prompting Yemenis to either tolerate the group's presence or actively support its goals. In fact, the heavy reliance on sometimes-inaccurate drone strikes has allowed AQAP to take advantage of U.S. and Yemeni mistakes and further bolster its support among the population.....

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NIGERIA - WHERE EVERY PROBLEM IS TOO HARD TO FIX

Gwyne Dyer

[The New Zealand Herald](#), Jan 2, 2013

It is not known if the word "dysfunctional" was invented specifically to describe the Nigerian state - several other candidates also come to mind - but the word certainly fills the bill. The political institutions of Africa's biggest country are incapable of dealing with even the smallest challenge. Indeed, they often make matters worse.

Consider, for example, the way that the Nigerian Government has dealt with the Islamist terrorists of Boko Haram. Or rather, how it has failed to deal with them. Boko Haram (the phrase means "Western education is sinful") began as a loony but not very dangerous group in the northern state of Bornu who rejected everything that they perceived as "Western" science. In a BBC interview in 2009 its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, claimed that the concept of a spherical Earth is against Islamic teaching. He also denied that rain came from water evaporated by the sun.

Bornu is a very poor state, however, and his preaching gave him enough of a following among the poor and ignorant to make him a political threat to the established order. So hundreds of his followers were killed in a huge military and police attack on the movement in 2009, and Mohammed Yusuf himself was murdered while in police custody. That was what triggered Boko Haram's terrorist campaign.

Its attacks grew rapidly: by early last year Boko Haram had killed 700 people in dozens of attacks against military, police, government and media organisations and against the Christian minorities living in northern Nigeria. So last March Nigeria's President, Goodluck Jonathan, promised that the security forces would end the insurgency by June. But the death toll just kept climbing.

In September, an official told the Guardian newspaper, "There is no sense that the Government has a real grip. The situation is not remotely under control." Last week alone, six people died in an attack on a church on Christmas Day, seven were killed in Maiduguri, the capital of Bornu state, on December 27 and 15 Christians were abducted and murdered, mostly by slitting their throats, in a town near Maiduguri on December 28.

President Jonathan's response was to visit a Christian church on Sunday and congratulate the security forces on preventing many more attacks during Christmas week: "Although we still recorded some incidents, the extent of attacks which [Boko Haram] planned was not allowed to be executed." If this is what success looks like, Nigeria is in very deep trouble.

Part of the reason is the "security forces", which are corrupt, incompetent, and brutal. In the murderous rampages that are their common response to Boko Haram's attacks, they have probably killed more innocent people than the terrorists, and have certainly stolen more property.

But it is the Government that raises, trains and pays these security forces, and even in a continent where many countries have problems with the professionalism of the army and police, Nigeria's are in a class by themselves. That is ultimately because its politicians are also in a class by themselves. There are some honest and serious men and women among them, but as a group they are spectacularly cynical and self-serving.

One reason is Nigeria's oil: 100 million Nigerians, two-thirds of the population, live on less than a dollar a day, but there is a lot of oil money around to steal, and politics is the best way to steal it. Another is the country's tribal, regional and religious divisions, which are extreme even by African standards. In the mainly Muslim north, 70 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line; in the mostly Christian south, only half do.

Now add a ruthless Islamist terrorist group to the mix, and stir. Boko Haram's support does not just come from a tiny minority of religious fanatics and from grieving and angry people turned against the Government by the brutality of the security forces. It also comes from a huge pool of unemployed and demoralised young men who have no hope of doing anything meaningful with their lives.

Democracy has not transformed politics dramatically anywhere in Nigeria, but the deficit is worst in the north, where the traditional rulers protected their power by making alliances with politicians who appealed to the population's Islamic sentiments.

That's why all the northern states introduced sharia law around the turn of the century: to stave off popular demands for more far-reaching reforms.

But that solution is now failing, for the cynical politicians who became Islamist merely for tactical reasons are being outflanked by genuine fanatics who reject not only science and religious freedom but democracy itself.

Nigeria only has an Islamist terrorist problem at the moment, mostly centred in the north and with sporadic attacks in the Christian-majority parts of the country. But it may be heading down the road recently taken by Mali, in which Islamist extremists seize control of the north of the country and divide it in two. And lots of people in the south wouldn't mind a bit. Just seal the new border and forget about the north.

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ON TOPIC

'Darker Sides': The Vast Islamist Sanctuary of 'Sahelistan': Paul Hyacinthe Mben, Jan Puhl and Thilo Thielke, *Der Spiegel*, Jan 28, 2013—France is advancing quickly against the Islamists in northern Mali, having already made it to Timbuktu. But the Sahel offers a vast sanctuary for the extremists, complete with training camps, lawlessness and plenty of ways to make money.

Connecting the Dots in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya: Abukar Arman, *The Commentator*, Jan. 7 2013—Just as the temperature of 'security threat' slowly declines in Somalia, it rises in other parts of East Africa. Elements of mainly political, religious, and clan/ethnic nature continue to shift and create new volatile conditions. Though not entirely interdependent these conditions could create a ripple effect across different borders. It is a high anxiety period in the region – especially the area that I would refer to as the triangle of threat: Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya.

The Mali Blowback: Patrick J. Buchanan, *American Conservative*, Jan. 18, 2013—“For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction” is Newton’s third law of physics. Its counterpart in geopolitics is “blowback,” when military action in one sphere produces an unintended and undesirable consequence in another. September 11, 2001, was blowback.

Mali and the al-Qaeda Trap: Paul Rogers, *Real Clear World*, Jan. 25, 2013—A series of events and statements in the early weeks of 2013 suggests that the "war on terror" declared in 2001 is entering a new phase. The escalation of war in northern Mali and the siege of the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria, followed by the sudden advice from several European governments that their citizens in Benghazi should leave immediately, all focus security attention on northern Africa. At the same time, there are signs of an increase in Islamist influence among the opposition forces in Syria's ongoing war, and of an intensified bombing campaign against government and Shi'a sites in Iraq.

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