

# Early Lessons From France's Operation Serval In Mali

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and  
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Since January 11, French forces have been heavily committed in Mali, fighting the West African version of al Qaeda that threatened to expand its control over the whole country. In this landlocked country, with lines of communication extending thousands of kilometers, and in punishing heat, the French army has managed to break the backbone of al Qaeda in its mountain sanctuary. It must now secure the main towns and hand over security responsibilities to Malian and African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) troops.

This article will explain how and why the French army intervened so quickly, and what lessons we have learned.

*During France's Operation Serval, right, launched in January against al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the West African nation of Mali, legionnaires of the 2nd Foreign Legion Parachute Regiment search for jihadists in a rock-strewn valley of the Ifoghas mountain range. Top right, a 155 mm truck-mounted CAESAR howitzer pounds insurgent positions in the Ifoghas.*



ECPAD/Sirpa Air et Sirpa Terre

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### **The Road to Intervention**

France has a peculiar position in sub-Saharan Africa. Strong political, diplomatic, economic and strategic ties between France and its African partners have resulted in a large expatriate French community, which has been the objective of many noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs) in the past. The sight of French troops securing airports and rescuing civilians has become familiar to anyone experiencing political turmoil in Africa. Operation Serval, however, is quite different from a traditional NEO.

Mali began to spiral out of control in January 2012. A secular Tuareg independence movement called the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, with an Islamic offspring led by Tuareg rebel forces, managed to take control of the main towns north of the Niger River. Soon, local and Algerian jihadists of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb joined them. During the first half of 2012, they extended their harsh rule over half of Mali. They imposed strict Shariah law, destroyed local Sufi shrines and displaced more than 400,000 people.

Interim Malian President Dioncounda Traoré was as hampered as his predecessor, Amadou Toumani Touré, who had been ousted by a coup d'état in March



Brig. Gen. Bernard Barrera (right), commanding officer of the Serval Brigade, briefs French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian on the ground situation in Mali. Operation Serval, unprecedented in scope, volume and nature, was composed of three phases—block, drive back and clear.



2012. The international community watched helplessly, with U.N. Resolution 2085 calling for an African-led force to help the Malian army restore the territorial integrity of its country under civilian rule.

Opinions differ as to the validity of such a concept, but one thing was certain: It would take time. On January 8, however, the jihadists moved in large columns of pickups south of the Niger River toward Bamako, the Malian capital, and took the city of Konna on January 10. Nothing stood between them and the capital. Swift action was necessary to prevent them from taking over the entire country. This was when France stepped into the fight.

### France's Dual-Stage Quick Reaction: Pre-deployed Troops in Africa and a Quick Reaction Force Brigade in France

The first blow came from a Special Forces aviation unit stationed in the neighboring country of Burkina Faso that destroyed a column of pickups on January 11. French elements from Chad, the Ivory Coast and Senegal were sent in a contingency effort to secure Bamako, thus forming the first battle group. Three weeks later, a whole brigade seized

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the Malian towns of Timbuktu and Gao, combining ground movements, airdrops and air assaults.

In March, with the help of Chadian troops, French airborne and armored units began clearing the terrorist sanctuary in the Ifoghas mountains. They are now ensuring that vital cities and infrastructures can withstand attacks by terrorists, who have vanished into the countryside in order to regroup and attack with near-suicidal determination. Some engagements finish within hand grenade and pistol range.

### Lessons Learned

This operation is unprecedented in scope, volume and nature, and bears little resemblance to those conducted in Afghanistan. The first reports are still being studied, and few lessons can be fully and formally analyzed from them, but many previous lessons learned have been fully implemented in Mali. For the sake of clarity, we will look at these issues following the standard NATO staff functional numerical order, which derives from the World War I French staff "bureau" system.

■ *Personnel.* The French army has been an all-volunteer force since 2001. All of its units have combat and deployment experience either in combat operations or brief missions in Africa, Afghanistan, the Middle East or the Balkans. Troops have developed an expeditionary mentality and a culture of make-do, called *système D* (derived from *débrouille*, meaning "resourcefulness").

The freedom of action given by French political leaders enabled a cohesive force of 4,000 soldiers to be deployed without cutting or contorting units to remain below an arbitrary troop cap.

■ *Intelligence.* French and allied intelligence assets have been following known terrorist groups in the North African Sahel region for years, tracking their connections with al

Qaeda and monitoring hijacker activity. Since January, joint intelligence collectors—including satellites, naval maritime patrol aircraft, U.S. Air Force unmanned aerial vehicles, and the U.S. Army’s human intelligence and signals intelligence units—have focused on Mali. This cooperation proved crucial in providing targets for the first air strikes that paved the way for ground troops to advance along the Niger River. It also helped pinpoint defensive positions in the Ifoghas mountains before the assault.

■ *Operations.* Operation Serval consisted of three phases: block, drive back and clear. The first battle group blocked and drove the jihadists away from Gao and Timbuktu under continuous air cover, following special operations forces, which secured the most important objectives. AFISMA units, in turn, relieved them.

The brigade reached its full operational capacity in early February and started clearing jihadist sanctuaries in the Ifoghas mountains and around Gao. The first objective, with the help of 1,500 Chadian troops, was secured under appalling conditions against a fanatical enemy. The jihadists, however, seemed to understand that they stood no chance in pitched battle, even in a remote mountain sanctuary. They resorted to hit-and-run tactics around Gao and in Timbuktu, saving their manpower and prolonging insecurity.

■ *Logistics.* In terms of supply, allied contributions helped bridge the major French gap in strategic and tactical transport aircraft at the beginning of Operation Serval. Given the huge distances between units, all classes of supply needed to be managed cautiously. The new French joint logistics system showed its limitations during this test, but Army logisticians worked around the clock and managed to move mountains.

Concerning maintenance, the reliability of legacy armored vehicles, such as the *Engin de Reconnaissance à Canon de 90* (armored cars), *Vehicule de l’Avant Blindé* (personnel carriers) and *AMX-10RC* (light tanks), was tested by distance, with good results. The brand-new *vehicule de combat d’infanterie* (infantry fighting vehicle) made its combat debut in Gao after a 3,000-kilometer road march from the seaport of debarkation in Senegal. In this theater, strategic mobility was essential, and wheeled vehicles were particularly suited to the task.

In addition, from individual kits to forward-deployed lifesaving modules, medical equipment has considerably improved because of lessons learned in Afghanistan. Doc-

tors and medics were integrated into every company in order to treat the wounded as soon as possible.

■ *Planning, command and control* (*Mission Command at its best*). A contingency plan in support of AFISMA was drafted in 2012, but it was never implemented. Fortunately, the G5 of the French land forces command recently revised its standing contingency deployment plan called *Guépard*, French for “cheetah,” with a mechanized brigade on high readiness backed by an airborne emergency element. These units reacted accordingly and were in-country within three weeks. The three phases of the operation were clear right from the start and gave enough latitude to tactical commanders. Initiative at the tactical level was the key to success.

■ *Signals.* The huge dimensions of the Malian theater are well beyond the theoretical area of operations for a single brigade. The broadband global area network and other satellite communications systems proved indispensable but are not in the standard army inventory and cannot be used on the move. Plans are under way to develop this capacity at the company level.

■ *Training.* Training in Africa and lessons learned in combat in various theaters, including Afghanistan, gave French troops an edge. The French Combined Arms Center issued a provisional doctrine on desert warfare in conjunction with a “lessons learned” booklet on Tuareg rebels in January. The effort gave rise to crucial decisions in equipment modifications and supply choices.

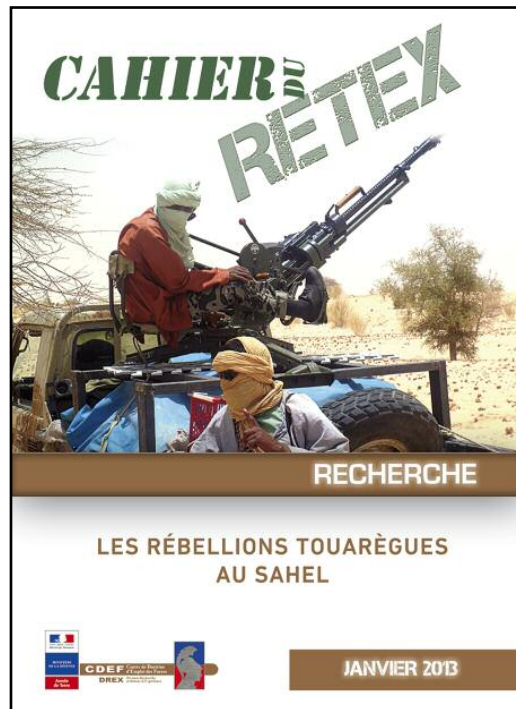
■ *Civil-Military Cooperation.* The long-standing presence of French advisors in Mali was interrupted by the coup d’état in March 2012. Operation Serval enables the resumption of military cooperation with a solid understanding of the operational environment. The chal-

lenge will be for the Malian army to restore human and territorial integrity to Mali.

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Operation Serval was unprecedented in its speed, number of troops and distances involved. It showed the determination, ruggedness and resourcefulness of French troops living and fighting in austere conditions. It also showed that a “light footprint” strategy cannot be used everywhere. In Mali, boots on the ground were necessary to successfully close with and destroy such a fanatical enemy.

The next phase will see the hand over of routine operations to European Union-trained Malian troops, helped by AFISMA and French units for an undetermined period of time. But that, as Rudyard Kipling said, is another story. ★



French Army forces in Mali used a lessons-learned booklet about the Tuareg insurgency issued in early January by the French Army Combined Arms Center.