

FRANCE IN AFRICA—SETTING UP FOR THE LONG HAUL

By George F. Ward

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French President François Hollande is given a pineapple by well-wishers in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Thursday, July 17, 2014. The French president had begun a three-day trip through West Africa, with stops in Ivory Coast, Niger, and Chad. (Source: AP Photo/Sevi Herve Gbekide.)

Ambassador (ret.) George F. Ward is editor of IDA's Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses. He is a former U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Namibia.

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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The New Security Architecture

The new French security architecture, which was announced just before Hollande's visit and solidified during the trip, will enable France to respond more effectively to multiple threats. The effort is named "[Operation Barkhan](#)," after a crescent-shaped dune in the desert. As announced by French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves le Drian, the operation will be implemented in partnership with five countries—Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. The last will host Operation Barkhan's headquarters. One thousand of the operation's 3,000 French troops will remain in northern Mali. The French operation in Mali, "Serval," will be closed out, with President Hollande, perhaps hyperbolically, stating that its mission has been "[perfectly accomplished](#)." In addition to ground forces, [Operation Barkhan](#) will have at its disposal fixed- and rotary-winged aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Chad and Niger will host fighter aircraft, and Niger will have UAVs as well.

France's Military Presence in Africa

France has long maintained sizable military deployments in its former African colonies. Over time, these commitments came to be seen as symbols of the French way of doing business in Africa, known as *françafrique*. They were resented by many Africans and were a burden on the French treasury. It was in the interest of both France and Africa to wind them down. In 2008, Hollande's predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, [declared](#) in Cape Town: "France would not indefinitely maintain armed forces in Africa." By then, French plans to close bases and reduce forces, leaving only a foothold in Djibouti, were under way. This process came to a sudden halt in January 2013, when Islamic fundamentalist militias broke out of their safe haven in northern Mali and threatened that country's capital.

France's swift intervention with 4,000 troops saved the day, blunting the fundamentalists' advance and subsequently breaking their hold on the population centers of northern Mali. Soon after its initial successes in Mali, France began seeking a way out. Hollande came close to declaring victory in [his speech](#) in Bamako, Mali's capital, on September 19, 2013: "We have won this war; we have chased out the terrorists; we have secured the north . . ." Despite Hollande's assertion, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other groups, albeit reduced in numbers and military potential, remained in the northern part of Mali. Under the circumstances, France was able to reduce but not eliminate its military presence in Mali.

Mali—A Problem, but Also a Symptom

France's problem in disengaging in Mali has at least three salient aspects. First, as Laurent De Castelli points out in a [recent article](#), the forces of AQIM were defeated, but the seed of a future resurgence survived. The smuggling and trafficking activities of AQIM and other Islamist groups have helped them penetrate deeply into the society and culture of northern

Mali, in several cases forming alliances with Tuareg groups. In some cases, these alliances have been strengthened by “familial solidarities”—Islamist leaders taking wives from Tuareg tribes. Constant pressure by French ground and air forces has been needed to prevent an Islamist resurgence.

Second, hoped-for alternatives to the French presence have not emerged. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) had reached [less than three-quarters](#) of its planned troop strength more than one year after its authorization by the UN Security Council. In terms of military potential, MINUSMA can garrison towns and cities, but lacks the mobility and aviation capabilities needed to operate in the deserts and mountains of northern Mali. Likewise, the Malian army, after some marginal improvements, demonstrated its lack of capability when it [lost 50 soldiers](#) in an engagement with Tuareg rebels at Kidal on May 17, 2014.

Third, Hollande is aware that the Islamist threat to the subregion will not be eliminated as long as Libya offers a sanctuary to AQIM and other groups. The French President emphasized this aspect during his trip, when [he said](#), “There are threats, notably from Libya. Military hardware has accumulated there, and without a doubt, terrorists are seeking refuge there.” Thus, the situation in Mali is a problem in itself, but also a symptom of a larger threat.

The Nigerian Connection

Another powerful rationale for France’s regional approach to combating extremism is the increasing realization that this conflict has more than one front line. In addition to the Libyan sanctuary, AQIM, and associated groups in the north, the region must contend with Boko Haram, a uniquely Nigerian extremist organization that is now taking actions and forging alliances across national boundaries. France’s interests are directly at stake because Niger, the source of yellow cake uranium that provides [25 percent of France’s electricity](#), is sandwiched between Mali and Nigeria.

National interest was therefore doubtless a major factor in President Hollande’s convening of the [Paris Summit for Security in Nigeria](#) in the wake of the kidnapping of the Chibok girls by Boko Haram. The May 17 meeting produced little concrete action, but it did achieve agreement that Boko Haram is a regional threat that demands regional cooperation. At the summit, President Hollande [made this point](#) directly: “Boko Haram is a major threat for all of western Africa and now central Africa with proven links to AQIM and other terrorist organizations.”

Conclusion

France is leading the way in constructing a bulwark against terrorism in West Africa. It is thereby protecting its national interests in a key region of the continent. One hopes that “Operation Barkhan” will prove effective not just as a French operation, but also in attracting the cooperation of the United States, Britain, and others.

The French strategy is bold and not without risks. Niger and Chad, the two countries most crucial in terms of basing arrangements, are currently stable, but each has a long history of political and military turbulence. Maintaining the coalition supporting Operation Barkhan and its basing and access arrangements will be challenging, requiring constant attention and skilled management by France.

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FRELIMO and RENAMO fought a decades-long civil war that ended in 1992, but renewed clashes between RENAMO and the government in recent years have [threatened](#) the peace. As highlighted in the October 24, 2013, [edition](#) of *Africa Watch*, Mozambique has experienced a spike in political violence over the past two years between RENAMO and the government. Under the increasingly hardline leadership of Dhlakama, RENAMO fighters—who were never disarmed and demobilized after the war and [reportedly](#) number under 1,000—have clashed repeatedly with government forces. These skirmishes have led to [dozens](#) of deaths and [fears](#) of a relapse into civil war. This violence has also alarmed international companies operating in the country—as evidenced by Rio Tinto’s [suspension](#) of coal exports last July, which threatens to curtail Mozambique’s surging economic growth (the economy is currently forecasted to [grow](#) by 8.3 percent this year).

RENAMO remains the second largest political bloc in parliament, but its support has dropped significantly since the 1990s. RENAMO’s grievances against the government revolve broadly around a lack of access to state-based patronage networks and its failure to benefit from Mozambique’s rapid economic growth, which has been fueled by natural resource exploitation. Last year, Dhlakama [protested](#) that RENAMO “remains purely and simply excluded from the use of the riches that are the fruit of the peace which it helped to win and maintain during the past 20 years.” RENAMO’s specific grievances include unjust electoral laws that favor FRELIMO and a lack of high-level integration of RENAMO war veterans into the military.

Dhlakama’s recalcitrance, violent tactics, and boycotting of local elections in November 2013 have had a significant impact on the political landscape in Mozambique. RENAMO’s slumping popularity and disengagement from the political process gave political space and life to an [alternative](#) opposition party, the MDM [Movimento Democrático de Moçambique]. [Formed by Daviz Simango in 2009](#), the MDM performed well in last year’s municipal elections, [winning](#) in three of the country’s four largest cities and polling above 40 percent in Maputo, the capital.

After a number of unsuccessful rounds of negotiations between the government and RENAMO over the past year, recent breakthroughs have been made on a number of fronts. In February, an agreement was [secured](#) on reshaping the composition of the electoral commission. According to *Africa Confidential*, the July peace deal—which benefited from the presence of international observers from South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Italy, Portugal, and the United States—[includes](#) provisions for disarming and reintegrating RENAMO fighters into civilian life and into the military, as well as for the political neutrality of both the armed forces and the state as a whole. It is not clear whether the deal will provide RENAMO with access to state patronage resources or whether Dhlakama will be given a formal title.

It appears MDM's rise in popularity, FRELIMO's electoral maneuvering, and RENAMO's change of [tactics](#) away from election boycotts have all contributed to this recent progress on a deal between FRELIMO and RENAMO in the lead-up to elections. Because a split of the opposition vote between the MDM and RENAMO would benefit FRELIMO, the ruling party has been more willing to concede to RENAMO demands during negotiations and [reportedly wanted](#) Dhlakama and RENAMO to reengage and run in upcoming polls to divide the opposition vote. This strategy, of course, would not be possible if Dhlakama and RENAMO had decided against changing their hardline tactics and reversing their self-imposed exile from electoral politics. Progress toward a peace deal in Mozambique decreases the risk of electoral violence in October. That said, barring a unity coalition between the MDM and RENAMO, which seems [unlikely](#), an agreement is also likely to help the ruling party maintain and consolidate its political power.

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