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NIGER, JANUARY 2013: So Far so Good

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French military intervention in Mali has been welcomed by most of ECOWAS members –excepting neighboring Mauritania– and many countries of West Africa are sending troops to participate in the fight to recover the north of Mali. Niger, Burkina Faso, Togo, Senegal and Ivory Coast are sending 500 soldiers each, while 650 will come from Benin and another 2.000 are foreseen from Chad. Whether Nigeria can offer much is not known. Despite its high qualification and great equipment, the country is currently facing three centers of tension, including open guerilla warfare within its own borders. Thus, only 18,000 of Nigeria’s 80,000 troops are fully operative and they are, in any case, not really at ease in French speaking countries.

According to their direct or indirect support to military intervention in Mali, countries are aware that they might have to face, sooner or later, the blowback effect of such engagement. How such blowback might happen is anybody’s guess but fears of it are real, particularly after Algeria gas-field raid on January 16th.

One country which is very much in the front line is Niger. Like Mali, Niger has suffered decades of Tuareg rebellion, political instability, corruption and illicit trafficking of drugs, arms and individuals –senior officials in both countries being suspected of collusion with some of these illegal activities, not least negotiating ransoms with hostages taken by some of the Islamists groups. Both suffer from poverty and high rates of unemployment, illiteracy and fast population growth. Unlike Mali, though, democratically elected president Mahamadou Issoufou is engaged to assure stability in this region of the Sahel. Niger has cooperated with a number of Western funded security programs, becoming the centerpiece of the international preventive strategy to weaken Islamist terrorism in the Sahel.

At a national level, following last rebellion, Niger has also striven to include Tuareg in the public and private sectors –especially in the mining and transport sectors, the army and the central administration– and policies have been oriented to their integration. The Prime Minister Brigi Riffini and one of the key advisers to the president advisor Rhissa Ag Boula are both Tuareg.

After the overthrow of former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Nigerien authorities worked all along the border in an attempt to disarm Libyan returnees –all to little avail as highly sophisticated weapons and Tuareg fighters who formed part of Libyan Armed Forces returned over the region in recent months.

Now, Niger is officially hosting and estimated 50.000 Malian refugees and many thousands more are expected to arrive over next months. The porosity of the border with Mali will most probably add to the continuing problems of drought, illicit traffic and high youth unemployment in the country.

It comes to no surprise that the government of Niger has given its full support to French-led military intervention. Its priority is to prevent the crisis in Mali from spilling over its shared border. President Mahamadou Issoufou has declared: “If the problem is not fixed in Mali, it will gain Niger sooner or later”. With a vast and very difficult to control desert area that accounts for 80% of the country’s surface, infiltrations of Islamist terrorists are the worst fear of central government in Niamey. From 2008 to 2011, 15 individuals have been kidnapped in Niger allegedly by AQMI and 4 of them are still kept as hostages. Historically, Nigeriens, 90% of whom are Muslim, have like their neighbors in northwestern Africa practiced a moderate form of Islam. Nevertheless, communications and movement of supporters of Boko Haram, MUJAO, AQMI and other affiliated Islamic radical groups are allegedly being intercepted every week.

Stuck as it is geographically between unstable southern Libya and Nigeria, where the Islamist Boko Haram operates with growing impunity, it has become obvious that Niger’s stability is seriously threatened by the crisis engulfing neighboring Mali. Besides, their unconditional support of military intervention in Mali will sooner or later have repercussions for Niger. It is not by chance that last October 5 Nigerien aid workers were kidnapped by MUJAO.

The official position has not changed: “Our country [Niger] should not be held away from the overall movement to stop the forces of terror”, specified the president of National Assembly Hama Amadou, “it is an internal security issue”. In consequence, 500 soldiers have already been sent to Mali and many more are being recruited and trained by European experts in training camps near the capital. In Niamey, the economic driving engine of the country, the breeze of war can be felt: French schools and institutions have been closed, security forces keep mosque lectures under surveillance, and local police patrol units constantly watch the city’s main crossroads and avenues.

The war in Mali is threatening Niger more than any other country. If the fighting in Mali gets out of control and Niger falls prey to the type of open warfare its neighbor is confronting, this will broaden the arc of crisis which stretches today from Mauritania to Sudan, dragging the Sahel further into chronic instability. As seen from quiet Niamey today, government efforts are fully engaged in avoiding such a dramatic outcome. However, as what we are witnessing is yet another open-ended war, so are, unfortunately, its unpredictable consequences.