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The French Intervention in Mali

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Mali: Where Penance, R2P and Power Intersect for France

In January of 2013, France discovered a proverbial “needle in the haystack”; the haystack representing half-a-million square miles of Saharan sand, and the needle signifying a rarity in international politics: reconciliation. Now more than a month into their intervention in Mali, French forces have successfully repelled armed jihadist groups and retaken northern cities (French intervention in Mali, 2013). Yet, while France basks in the angelic light of its “saviour” status, beneath the veneer of the present, lurk the demons of the past. Decades ago, France developed an interventionist policy for Africa. Known as “francafrique”, Paris “propped up client regimes...in order to maintain its political and business interests” (Crumley, 2010: 2). In 1994 “francafrique” led to French support of the Hutu regime in Rwanda “with large weapons shipments”, “the training of the militias”, “and French soldiers involved in frontline combat” (McGreal, 2007: 4). This essay will first offer a brief recount of France’s involvement in the Rwandan genocide to pinpoint “francafriques” sins. Secondly, the essay will consider “responsibility to protect” (R2P); the key component providing France legal means to its Malian campaign. Finally, the essay will argue that the internal conflict in Mali, combined with R2P, presented France with an opportunity that reinforces the realist concept of national interest, not obligatory assistance, as the driving force behind humanitarian intervention. A victory in Mali will allow France to achieve political penance for “francafrique” while simultaneously obtaining renewed power on the international stage by challenging the US’ monopoly on humanitarian intervention.

Firstly, we must retrace our steps to the jungles of Rwanda in April 1994, where the bloodstained culmination of “francafrique” transpired. Since 1990, the Rwandan Civil War had been raging between the Hutu government and Tutsi rebels, notably the Rwandan Patriotic Front (Aguzzi, 2012: 1). The assassination of Rwandan President (and Hutu) Juvenal Habyarimana merely served as the spark that would ignite the inferno. “Accusing the RPF of the attack, the Rwandan government instigated a systematic and well planned massacre of Tutsis...” (Aguzzi, 2012: 2). Furthermore, in terms of French involvement, forty-two years after the implementation of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, “French president Francois Mitterand did not hesitate to help the Rwandan regime” in what was from 1990 onwards described as a war “against a rebel invasion” and subsequently deemed a threat to “Francophone interests in Central Africa” (Kroslak, 2007: 2-3). Building on this point further, Kroslak writes that when the civil war broke out in 1990, “France became Rwanda’s most important ally, both politically and militarily” (2007: 3). According to Kroslak:

“France was indeed very well informed about the deteriorating situation in Rwanda prior to and during the genocide. It was heavily involved on the ground and maintained good relations with the elites that eventually committed the genocide” (Kroslak, 2007: 4).

Under the doctrine of “francafrique”, in protecting its interests, Paris was willing to do whatever necessary to stem the growing tide of Anglo-American influence in the region; the English-speaking RPF epitomized such influence. When the killings started in 1994, French support did not waver “even as the bodies piled up in the streets” (McGreal, 2007: 3). McGreal (2007: 6) goes on further to say that “Paris engineered the delivery of millions of dollars’ worth of weapons to the Hutu regime”, held emergency meetings between Francois Mitterand and Hutu official Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza (who would later be convicted of genocide), and sent troops during the infamous Operation Turquoise to create a “safe zone in the western parts of Rwanda still under Hutu control.” The commander of the

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operation, General Jean-Claude Lafourcade, later acknowledged that the established safe zone was only formed to “deny the RPF total victory and international recognition” (Ibid). Thus, “francafrique”, according to Wallis, explains why “the politicians and military of a nation with a history of creative genius, invention, and civilizing zeal chose to form an alliance with a genocidal regime” (Wallis, 2006: 6). The blood of 800,000 Rwandans marked fresh stains on French hands already bloodied by years of colonial rule, further alienating Paris.

Correspondingly, seven years after the horrific events of 1994, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty published a report entitled *The Responsibility to Protect* (R2P) aimed at “building a new consensus around the principles that should govern the protection of endangered peoples” (Bellamy and Wheeler in Baylis et al. 2011: 521). Prior to R2P, the world had seen Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo, and Afghanistan; subsequent disputes swiftly emerged between the counter-restrictionists/moral proponents of intervention and the restrictionists/realists who abhorred it. In its “Basic Principles”, R2P clearly lays out the two core disputes that emerged from the arguments: the issue of state sovereignty and the justification of intervention. In regards to state sovereignty, the report declares that “state sovereignty implies responsibility, and the primary responsibility for the protection of its people lies with the state itself” (ICISS, 2001: XI). As for the justification of intervention, the report affirms that should any state find itself in a situation wherein said state is incapable of protecting its population or is in fact harming its civilian populace, “the principle of non-intervention yields to the international responsibility to protect” (Ibid). Reaffirmed by the UNSC with Resolution 1674, R2P, according to Bellamy, produces “a broad continuum of measures aimed first and foremost at preventing genocide and mass atrocities” (Bellamy, 2008). As for France’s intervention in Mali, R2P creates a legal basis for Paris’ actions; the inability of the Malian government to protect its people from Tuareg fighters/jihadist groups in the north legitimizes, in combination with interim President Dioncounda Traoré’s plea for international support, France’s deployment of military forces in a sovereign state.

At this point, we turn to the issue of the intervention itself. Set out in UNSC Resolution 2085, France has agreed to help interim President Traoré “prevent an Islamist takeover in his country” (Winter, 2013: 1). Yet it would appear the “war on terror” in Mali has provided France with a unique possibility. Had France intervened during any of the previous Tuareg insurrections, “francafrique” would be alive and well. Paris would have committed resources and troops in suppressing an internal aggressor bred from a popular minority movement for self-autonomy; the Tuareg in northern Mali would have simply resembled the RPF in Rwanda. Instead, the “war on terror” scenario has provided France with the occasion to put the final nail in the coffin of “francafrique” by defeating jihadist groups considered domestically in Mali, and regionally in ECOWAS, to be external aggressors “hailing from Algeria and beyond” (The Economist, 2013). Therefore, the atypical internal situation in Mali, in combination with the legitimizing tool of R2P, has presented France with an opportunity to achieve political penance for “francafrique” and Rwanda. It is in France’s national interest to exorcise the demons of the past and to move forward in improved relations with African states; Mali would be an excellent starting point. However, in drawing this conclusion one must acknowledge the realist idea it incorporates: “states do not intervene for [genuine] humanitarian purposes” (Bellamy and Wheeler in Baylis et al. 2011: 514).

Similarly, the humanitarian motives behind France’s intervention also come into question when one takes into account the challenge that the Malian campaign poses to the US’ monopoly on humanitarian intervention. Five of the six major humanitarian interventions in the past two decades prior to Mali have been either led by the US or have seen the US as the largest contributor; these include Iraq in 1992, Somalia in 1992, Afghanistan in 2001, the Iraq War in 2003, and the NATO Libyan mission in 2011 (Bellamy and Wheeler in Baylis et al. 2011: 515). For instance, regarding the NATO mission in Libya, Weiss writes, “NATO allies still depended on American precision munitions, refueling aircraft, and reconnaissance” (Weiss, 2012). However, the French intervention in Mali has reminded the world that the US is not the only nation with a military force capable of strategic, rapid, and effective deployment. A victory in Mali would grant France a valuable “bargaining chip” for future political maneuvers across the African continent. Collectively with the issue of re-stabilization, successful peace-building in Mali could promote the “Tricolour” as an alternative option to the “Stars and Stripes” for nations descending into instability; the hegemonic “police force” thus is challenged by the, albeit nascent, community watch amongst the Francophone bloc. The French intervention therefore offers Paris renewed power on the international stage by asserting its strength in the anarchic global arena, an arena previously dominated by the very Anglo-American influence France perceived as a threat to its interests abroad in 1994. Again, the realist emphasis on how “strategies of intervention are more likely to

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be guided by calculations of national interest” is evident (Bellamy and Wheeler in Baylis et al. 2011: 514). Furthermore states “are selective about when they choose to intervene” (Bellamy and Wheeler in Baylis et al. 2011: 514). Selectivity certainly seems evident considering the lack of French support in eastern DR Congo (a consequence of the Rwandan genocide), Somalia, or the Central African Republic, all of whom are currently facing substantial internal conflict.

In conclusion, the intrastate war in Mali presented France with an unparalleled opportunity to bury “francAfrique” while also gaining invaluable power and influence on the international stage by challenging the US’ monopoly on humanitarian intervention. The “war on terror” provided a “textbook case” for necessary participation, while R2P granted France the legitimizing piece of the puzzle. Collectively these examples illustrate the realist perspective that the “humanitarian” in humanitarian intervention represents a questionable façade states utilize in pursuing their national interests. As interim President Traoré stated, France is “determined to go all the way side by side with Mali” (Rice, 2013). And all the way, France will reap the political benefits.

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