

The Continentalist: Who Will Fight Europe's Proxy Wars?

By [Richard Gowan](#), 06 Aug 2012

Is the European Union about to engage in a proxy war in the Sahara? In late-July, European foreign ministers directed EU officials to come up with “concrete proposals” for supporting an African stabilization force in Mali. There’s no doubt that Mali needs stabilizing: Islamist separatists with links to al-Qaida have seized the north of the country, and the south has been in political turmoil since a coup in March.

What can the EU do to contain and resolve these problems? European officials have been worried about Islamism in the Sahel for some time, in part because insurgents have seized a string of European hostages in the vast, poorly governed territories that span several of the region’s countries. French special forces have raided al-Qaida bases on Mali’s border with Mauritania. Now the EU is deploying a 50-person military and civilian advisory mission, [EUCAP Sahel](#), to help Niger address terrorist threats.

While EUCAP Sahel is meant to extend its work to Mauritania and Mali, the situation in the latter country potentially requires a much more robust response. To make matters worse, the mess in Mali is just one of a disturbing set of civil wars and state failures on Europe’s southern flank, stretching from the Sahel as far as Somalia and Yemen.

And while European policymakers and publics have traditionally paid little heed to events in the region, except during the most extreme humanitarian crises such as that in Darfur, the deteriorating situation in Syria threatens to unleash even worse chaos in Europe’s near abroad.

As I argued [in a report for the European Council on Foreign Relations \(ECFR\)](#) published in June, this bout of instability in North Africa and the Middle East poses significant threats to the EU’s security, even if it has been overshadowed by the union’s ongoing debt crisis. If Islamist cells take root in Mali or Syria, they may be future bases for attacks on European targets -- [and, U.S. officials fear, American ones.](#)

Managing these threats will be a European strategic priority for the foreseeable future, but because of budgetary constraints, it will have to be done cheaply. As the EU offer of support for an African deployment to Mali implies, the best option may be to help others take the lead.

In the case of Mali, that means working with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has experience in interventions in cases such as Liberia. In Syria, meanwhile, the EU has thrown its weight behind the Arab League and the United Nations. As I argue in my recent ECFR report, “Europe may have to rely on the U.N. and African and Arab soldiers and diplomats to contain the current wave of crises.”

This may sound like a rather desperate strategy. Indeed, while European officials may support an African intervention in Mali, they have found working with ECOWAS on the specifics difficult. ECOWAS initially suggested a small force of 3,000 troops, but then inflated the number to 11,000. Meanwhile, the U.N. has proved unable to pacify Syria, as Kofi Annan admitted on resigning as the organization’s envoy to Damascus this week, despite frequent EU statements of support.

To some cynical European observers, therefore, investing in other organizations' efforts to manage today's crises in North Africa and the Middle East is a wasted effort. Yet in some places it works. One unexpected, if still incomplete, success has been Somalia. The African Union has had troops in that unfortunate country since 2007, with funding from the EU and the U.S., and with logistical support provided, since 2009, by the U.N.

The AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) failed to make much impact in its early years, struggling to hold onto parts of the capital under pressure from Islamist forces, even as EU and AU officials bickered over how to manage European funds. Yet over the past year, the mission has been reinforced and has begun to win battles against the Islamists, in large part due to increasingly substantial tranches of EU funding. [In the words of Edward Burke](#), a European security expert, "The EU's first 'proxy war' is going well."

This isn't the only case where the EU has done well to keep its distance. When the Libyan war ended with the fall of Tripoli in August 2011, [there were calls from American and European security experts](#) for the EU and U.N. to deploy peacekeepers. France and Italy, jockeying for influence over Libya's post-Gadhafi authorities, both considered sending paramilitary police to help keep order. But the Libyans, who didn't want foreign forces on their soil, only agreed to accept a small U.N. civilian mission.

Notably, [as my colleague Emily O'Brien noted](#) in a recent article for World Politics Review, this mission has been a quiet success, helping the Libyans hold credible elections and navigate the first phase of reconstruction. Libya's stability is not assured, and the south of the country has been destabilized by tribal conflicts. But this would probably have been the case even if a European peacekeeping force had deployed to Libya -- such an operation would probably have concentrated on major population centers, rather than putting soldiers at risk to calm more remote parts of the country.

So there is a good case for European strategists to invest more, not less, in the work of organizations such as the AU, the U.N. and ECOWAS, and Mali will be another important test of this principle. It will be interesting to see what concrete proposals the EU offers to back up the proposed stabilization force. As I argued in my ECFR paper this June, the EU can offer organizations like ECOWAS and the U.N. assets ranging from drones and satellite intelligence to a rapid deployment of engineers to help build bases (although there will be far more of these assets available after NATO exits Afghanistan).

The EU may not attempt anything that bold in Mali, but the crisis there is an opportunity to show that European powers are still serious about security in their neighborhood, and especially serious about helping partner organizations tackle common threats.

But Mali is not the only place where the EU needs to prove this point. As I will argue in my next Continentalist column, European officials could soon find themselves negotiating with the U.S., the U.N., the Arab League and possibly even Russia about how to stabilize Syria as the regime of President Bashar al-Assad collapses. Which raises a hard question a lot of EU officials might prefer to avoid: What role could Europe play in a stabilization force for Syria?

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