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ALGERIA, THE SAHEL, AND THE CURRENT MALI CRISIS

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Long lasting traditional cross-border relations exist between Algerian and Malian local ethnic groups, most of them Tuaregs. The Tuareg territories are interconnected and the closeness of communities is rooted in the particular geopolitical context where the huge distance of the Adragh of Ifoghas region from urban centers and from economic and industrial activities plays a role of dangerously isolating a region that has been captured by foreign actors with their own agenda¹.

Trans-border regions (in fact, no-borders) have always been torn between a Saharan identity encouraged by Libya, and alternative Arab and African identities often promoted by other foreign actors. At the periphery of national territories, crisis

areas have long solidified struggles for influence between North African states to their respective Southern African states or to their neighbors, replicating the traditional asymmetry embedded in North-South relations.

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Algeria’s complex relationship in the Sahel in general, and with Mali in particular, is also rooted in the role that Algiers is thought to have played in supporting rebellions of Tuaregs, both in Mali and Niger, at the time in apparent competition with Muammar Kaddafi.

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Algeria showed muscle and determination to action in the recent hostages crisis, an unanticipated crisis that underlies the key role and implication of its policies and strategies in the region.

Along the post-colonial period, a deep-rooted centre-periphery pattern emerged where the Sahel plays the role of backyard for the North African countries, mainly Algeria and Libya. The disparities between Maghreb partners involved, force the countries of the Sahel to exploit the rivalries between the countries in the North and to play them off each other in order to oppose their contradictory, divergent, and competing claims. This results in fluctuating geopolitical alliances, depending each State’s evolving interests.

In each of these countries, the central governments, thousands of kilometers away from the desert border region, struggle to assert their sovereignty. This is why they are

1. The distance between Tinzwatin (Mali) and Algiers is 2,400 km, while it is 520 km between Tinzwatin and Tamanrasset (Algeria).

forced to cooperate with itinerant communities that find themselves in “nationalized” territories of different countries. One of these territories at the crossroad of the North-African sphere of influence is the Tuareg area, now in trouble.

Historical mistrust between governments in the region

The state of play of Algeria-Mali relationships varied along history, overlapping with the regional economic and political security context and the raise of inter-State common concern.

Malian northern populations are well aware that they need Algerian products to survive. The north-south traffic of food goes back to the 60s (the prices in Algeria being traditionally lower than in Mali thanks to the government subsidies) and allows maintaining a degree of food security in the deprived region of Kidal.

On the ground, this has created a huge volume of cross bor-

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der illicit trade flows and a strong proximity among the populations of both countries. Government officials are often involved with illegal networks, garrisons sell some of the goods sent to them, and Algerian local officials in Tamanrasset are leading the petrol contraband between southern Algeria and Northern Mali. More often customs officers and military guards are part of the same social and family networks, and everybody knows each other.

In a land where the expanding desert pushes back frontiers and where unmonitored areas provide sanctuaries for all manner of illicit practices and criminal activities, limited regional security cooperation is a result of limited trust between the two countries. Algeria believes Mali to be the “weak link of the chain” and uncommitted to the fight against Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Algiers questions the trustworthiness of the Malian government vis-à-vis the widening AQIM networks and the Malians’ ability to share and protect intelligence needed for regional cooperation. Algeria particularly resents Mali’s willingness to facilitate ransom payments to AQIM to free European hostages, a practice that Algeria strongly opposes. This builds on widely held impressions that by infiltrating earlier Algerian-based terrorist groups the Algerian intelligence service, the *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (DRS), allegedly drove Algerian jihadists to the Sahel.

Sahel governments also suspect that Algeria is seeking to dominate its neighbors by asserting control over counterterrorism operations, lucrative smuggling routes, and zones of the Sahel that may hold natural resources (like the Taoudeni Basin where SONATRACH explores oil resources). Fearing a coup in late December 2010, President Amadou Toumani Touré replaced military officers in northern Mali considered to be under Algerian influence.

There has been a hope for a revival of trust when Souley-mou Boubeye Maïga was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in April 2011. Being known to have privileged relations with the Algerian authorities, the former intelligence services Chief paid his first official visit to Algeria in order to re-boost the bilateral security ties and restore the mutual confidence. But the March 2012 coup in Bamako put an early end to his initiative and stopped any prospect of improvement in Algeria-Mali cooperation.

The Tuareg factor

The Tuareg irredentism is at the core of Algeria-Mali relations and represents a transnational challenge. The Tuareg area extends through both national lands and is the place where state borders, nomadic routes and ungoverned areas overlap, as the result of a combination of political, economic, ethnic and social networks and alliances that proliferate in the absence of the state. In a context where political borders do not match with the traditional areas of nomadic activities, the Algerian treatment of the Tuareg issue was always motivated by the fear of contagious effect on Algerian Tuaregs.

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Algeria served as a mediator in the peace accords in Mali in 1991 and 2006 and brought a precarious end to previous Tuareg uprisings. Many former rebels offered their services to fight against AQIM and joined the controversial specialised armed unit settled by the 2006 Algiers agreement, which were supposed to maintain security in northern Mali².

2. In February 2008, more than 500 Tuareg rebels surrendered their arms in a conflict with the government of Mali, at a ceremony in Kidal, in accordance with the stipulations of the Algiers Agreements that the Tuaregs should no longer claim their region as an autonomous entity.

Algeria's prominent role in the conflict

In March 2012, Algeria condemned the military coup in Bamako. However, the government stayed silent as usual, apart from occasional statements of concern about Mali's growing instability. This attitude can be interpreted as a cautious reaction to the kidnapping in April of seven Algerian diplomats in the Malian town of Gao, carried out by the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).

Algiers' cautiousness could be attributed to worries related to domestic affairs: the legislative elections held on 10 May, and increased speculations about elite competition over who will take over the presidency in 2014. Internal power struggles could have been jeopardizing Algiers' commitment to act regionally thus weakening its position as a regional leader and crippling its diplomatic power.

It is only in June 2012 that Algerian officials started to state their preference on a "political solution through dialogue". ECOWAS's proposal for a military intervention, supported by the African Union, France and the United States, did not include Algeria. This suggests that the Algerian authorities were unwilling to get involved in filling the political vacuum created by the fall of Kaddafi.

Algiers' opposition to any regional armed involvement is also part of its Constitution, which forbids its forces taking part in military action outside its own territory. Algeria has been continually invoking this constitutional principle, thus justifying why the Popular National Army has not previously crossed into Mali to eradicate AQIM, even when invited to do so by its Sahel neighbors. Yet the Algeria-led Committee of the Operational Joint General Staff (CEMOC) has been created in April 2010 in Tamanrasset for precisely this purpose i.e. to take legal and operational action on the neighbors' soil.

However, on December 20, 2011, five days before a Malian Tuareg, Iyad ag Ghaly, had announced the establishment of a new jihadist group called Ansar eddine in northern Mali Algerian army forces crossed into Mali. Malian military personnel were reportedly training together with Algerian military counterparts in the Kidal Region, but Algeria officially withdrew its military advisors from Mali at the end of 2011, when the conflict was clearly about to begin.

Algeria knows it has a role in this crisis, given its status as the region's military power, as intermediary or mediator in many previous crises in northern Mali, and as the original home of AQIM. After pushing southwards the former GSPC across the border into Mali in 2003, it is out of the question for Algiers to negotiate with AQIM –swiftly storming the In Amenas Gas platform taken by terrorists is a clear sign of this uncompromising, tough attitude.

Northern Mali has become the shelter of AQIM *katibas*, and more recently the fertile ground for other newly created non-Algerian groups (MUJWA and *Ansar al-Sharia*³). The only remaining interlocutor that Algiers could consider is Ansar eddine, yet a radical islamist group that never hid its preference for Sharia law enforcement.

In spring 2012 Algeria showed its interest for a political solution in Mali. It first opted for talks with the two Tuareg movements, despite the Algerian official position excluding any negotiations with violent islamist movements. In July 2012, Bouteflika discretely received envoys from Ansar eddine, MNLA, and even from the MUJWA (the kidnapper of Algerian diplomats in Gao). A few days later, the National Movement of the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) excluded publicly the mediation of Algiers and accused the Algerian government of expelling some injured Tuaregs who were seeking a shelter in southern Algeria, and of infiltrating the MNLA with intelligence agents from the DRS. The Algerian authorities never recognised officially any meeting with the three movements.

In October 2012, another delegation of Ansar eddine visited Algiers and was led by Amada ag Bibi (a.k.a «the man

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of Algiers») and ag Awissa, the right-hand man of Iyad ag Ghaly⁴. The same month the Algerian government sent to Ansar eddine's controlled Kidal a humanitarian convoy and three military vehicles. Another convoy reached Gao under the control of MUJWA. Both islamist organizations were responsible of the distribution of food to local populations.

A threatening new geopolitical framework

At a time when northern Mali has fallen into an open armed conflict and Libya is in an uncertain transition, Algeria appeared unwilling to play the hegemonic status that a pivotal nation in the region should endorse.

The deteriorating security situation, which resulted from a power vacuum within the old geopolitical framework, has

3. The Jamaat Tawhid wa'l-Jihad fi Garbi Afriqiya (MUJWA) created in December 2011 supposedly after a split within AQIM, emerged when it claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of three European aid workers from a Sahrawi refugee camp in Tindouf (Algeria) in October 2011. It is allegedly guided by a Mauritanian, Hamada Ould Muhammad Kheirou (a.k.a. Abu Qumqum). Ansar al-Sharia was created on 9 December 2012 in Gao, and most of the new group's leaders hail from the Timbuktu Berabish tribe are close to Ansar eddine spokesman, Sanad Ould Bouamama.

4. For more details on Ansar eddine's men, see Laurence Aïda Ammour, « Understanding the Algerian Regional Diplomacy Machinery: the Case of Mali Crisis », *Europe's World*, 6 December 2012.

direct repercussions – both domestic and transnational – on the entire Maghreb and Sahel regions. After the Libyan crisis, whose shock waves traveled well beyond the Sahara-Sahel territory, Algeria showed difficulties to live up to its reputation of sound counterterrorism expertise. Its ability to contain terrorism in the region seems contradicted by a continued security crisis in the zone, evidenced by many attacks on Algerian security forces: in Tamanrasset (30 June 2010 and March 2012, demonstrating a strong operational capability in a highly militarized city, being the home of the Algerian Army's 6th division), in Ouargla (June 2012), and the abduction on April 5, 2012 of six Algerian diplomats and the killing of the consul in September 2012 by the MUJWA, and finally the recent hostage crisis in the vast gas plant of Tigantourine. Like its Sahel neighbors, the Algerian government proved incapable of exerting a tight control over its entire territory.

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hand, any engagement between Algerian troops and Mali's Tuareg could also draw in the Niger and Algeria Tuaregs. Unrest could even spread to southern Libya, where the local Tuaregs are under considerable pressure in the post-Kaddafi situation.

Algeria's preference for negotiating with Ansar eddine resulted in an unexpected switch from Iyad ag-Ghaly: in November 2012 he declared to cut ties with terrorism, smuggling and foreign radical groups. This statement did not prevent Ansar eddine to continue destroying ancient sacred shrines in Timbuktu in December 2012, after having already proved vandalism of the city Sufi holy places in Spring and Summer 2012.

The gradual imposition by Algiers of Iyad ag-Ghaly as a legitimate interlocutor had made him an unavoidable actor in the conflict-resolution plan, to such an extent that even the ECOWAS representative finally accepted to hold talks with him in Ouagadougou in November 2012. After Iyad ag-Ghaly announced he was giving up to implement the *Sharia* law throughout Mali (but in Kidal), some Malian and Western observers were still suspicious about this sudden shift. In the meantime, the MNLA was put aside from further negotiations although on July 15, 2012 it publicly recanted its separatist stance in light of territorial losses to Islamist fighters. The Tuareg secessionist movement recently retrieved its voice in the mediation talks through an agreement signed with Ansar eddine on 21 December 2012 under the auspices of Algiers who considered it to be a milestone on the road to the political settlement of Mali cri-

sis⁵. But, previous to the current French intervention, many thought that the late inclusion of MNLA in the agreement only served to justify the involvement of Ansar eddine as a credible counterpart and to soften criticism and suspicion about the reliability of the radical Salafi group. In fact, after Iyad ag-Ghaly officially revoked his offer to end hostilities on January 4, 2013, Ansar eddine took part to the jihadist offensive toward southern Mali and the storming of Konna and Diabaly.

Who benefits?

The UN secretary general's recent report (29 November 2012) urging caution and asking the possibility of dialogue not to be ruled out, gives a chance to the Algerian diplomatic strategy. On the other hand, west African officials, who condemned the UN for being "out of touch" over its lack of urgency in taking action in Mali, are now pushing the Mali government to cut an autonomy deal with Tuaregs in exchange for their joining the fight against jihadi combatants and other al-Qaeda affiliated gangs⁶.

At a certain point, Algeria succeeded in finding an opportunity to regain its traditional role as regional power-broker and mediator in any Tuareg conflict. The temptation of using Ansar eddine as a proxy in Northern Mali, gave Algeria the chance to provide an apparent peacemaker foreign policy, and retrieve a consistent leadership after decades of diplomatic decline.

Many jihadist groups on the ground have strengthened their hold on the northern part of Mali and prepared themselves for the military confrontation with the African forces, but not so much for the full French intervention they are witnessing now. On November 28, 2012, AQIM announced the creation of a 6th brigade called "Yussef ben Tachfin", made up mainly of Tuaregs residing in northern Mali. It is led by El Kairouani Abu Abdelhamid al-Kidali, a local Tuareg member of al-Ansar brigade, led by Abdelkrim al-Targui. Such a new ethnic distribution agreement reflects the need to contain growing resentment by non-Algerians after they were denied leadership positions⁷. It is also an alarming sign that locally rooted jihadist katibas are under consolidation and will be more difficult to chase away. Moreover, concerns are raising about the extension of jihadism in West Africa after Oumar Ould Hamaha (formerly the operational commander of Ansar eddine and presently

5. The agreement officially commits to "secure areas under [MNLA and Ansar eddine] authority, through the establishment of security forces composed of elements from their respective groups."

6. In December 2012 however, UN Security Council adopted a resolution authorizing for an initial period of one year the deployment of the international support mission in Mali under African leadership (MISMA) in charge of assisting the Malian authorities to recover the northern areas of the country.

7. In October 2012, foreign jihadists from Sudan, Chad, Libya, France, and Western Sahara were said to arrive in Northern Mali. Members of the Nigerian Boko Haram are also part of the ongoing fights against the French-Malian troops.

the spokesperson of MUJWA) declared: *"We want to enlarge our zone of operation throughout the entire Sahara, going from Niger through to Chad and Burkina Faso."*⁸

Many questions still remain unanswered:

- Will the Algerian strategy of dividing radical groups be able to prevent the worsening of an already fragile humanitarian situation and to eradicate hardliners, extremists and criminal elements that are expanding in northern Mali?
- Will the full intervention going on be able to stop the proliferation of new jihadist cells that are entrenching themselves among sub-saharan communities?
- Given its counterterrorism expertise, and its long inflexible positioning toward violent islamists, how will Algeria manage to keep the door open to a dialogue with Ansar eddine?
- How will the crisis in Tigantourine's gas platform and its bloody end play out into the whole Algerian positioning in this increasingly uncertain environment?

Algeria showed muscle and determination to action in the recent hostages crisis, an unanticipated crisis that underlies the key role and implication of its policies and strategies in the region. The international community, ECOWAS and Mali's transitional authorities will probably ask how Algiers can contribute to the future development of the crisis. Whatever the current intervention brings out to the appeasement of the region, Algeria's diplomacy, if not its army, will certainly be kept busy in the months, if not years, to come.

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8. This statement comes after Mokhtar Belmokhtar, formerly head of an AQIM cell and kidnapper operating in Mali's lawless north, declared to leave the al Qaeda franchise and to set-up his own katiba "Al Mouakaoun bi Dam" (The Signatories with blood).