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From Tripoli to Timbuktu

The conflict in Mali and trans-Saharan security concerns

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The aftermath of the Arab spring not only saw a difficult regime transition in Tunisia and Libya but contributed to the revival of old and new security challenges in the Maghreb and the Sahel. The secessionist conflict that broke out in 2012 in northern Mali, followed by a military coup in Bamako and the French intervention a year later, is paradigmatic of how the fallout effects of the Libyan civil war and the difficult political transitions in Tripoli and Tunis affected the internal stability of neighbouring countries.

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The region lying on the southern borders of Libya and Algeria was still a porous no man's land well before the fall of Gaddafi. In the last decade the trafficking of narcotics, arms and humans along the trans-Saharan routes became a major business and a cause for concern along with the endemic rebellions of the people of the desert. However, the situation escalated with the inflow of arms and armed men that followed the disbanding of Gaddafi's army and security forces. The presence of more than a thousand militias¹ makes Libya an ideal haven for international jihadism. Although many of these armed groups are employed as police forces by the government, the extent of the threat posed by both former Gaddafi's loyalists and Islamist armed groups - the latter mainly concentrated in the East of the country - is not clear.

The Arab spring opened a new window of opportunity for Salafi movements that were repressed or marginalised under the regimes of Ben Ali and Gaddafi. In Tunisia, Salafi organisations have become rapidly popular among young and poor people thanks to their social welfare approach in poor neighbours and isolated communities, helping with schooling and medical care, providing mediation in local conflict and in administrative and social issues. The groups promoting this kind of approach, based on the Islamic principle of dawa (missionary work), avoid to make references to the armed struggle, at least inside the country. However, they do not preclude mobilizing their networks abroad for those willing to fight wherever the Islamic law is considered to be in danger. Thus, many Tunisian jihadists, along with fellows from the neighbouring countries, have enrolled in the armed groups operating in Syria, Mali or across the Algerian border.²

The wide desert territory stretching across the borders between Libya, Algeria and Mali offers many locations for training camps and logistic bases both for local guerrilla and jihadist groups. The Algerian Salafi Group Salafist pour la Predication et le Combat (GSPG) knew it well. It broke away from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) towards the end of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s (which pitted the secular military regime of Algiers against the Islamist guerrillas). After being chased out of Algeria, the group based itself in the Sahel and re-branded itself in the mid 2000s as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) - its affiliation apparently being recognized by Al-Qaeda's leader al-Zawahiri.³ In northern Mali, AQIM allied with other Islamist groups. Among them Ansar al-Din which emerged thanks to its connections with local smugglers and traffickers and the MUJAO (Mouvement pour le Tawhîd et du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest), a splinter group of AQIM that claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of Italian and Spanish aid workers in 2011 and get involved in the kidnapping of a group of Algerian diplomats in April 2012.⁴

However, it was the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA), currently led by the former Libyan army colonel Ag Mohamed Najem, that reignited the hostilities in Mali, declaring the independence of Azawad (north-eastern Mali) in January 2012. Since the country's independence from France in 1960, northern Mali has often been neglected by Bamako. The economic divide also corresponds to the ethnic division between the southern, sedentary, dark-skinned groups and the northern Arab and Tuareg nomads. The MNLA thus resumed the fight in what is a long history of Tuareg rebellions. The last to have taken place, between 2006-2009, expressed also the internal conflicts inside Tuareg society, since many Malian army brigades deployed against the rebels were composed and led by Tuaregs loyal to Bamako.⁵

Nevertheless, two decades of regular presidential elections made Mali an island of democratic stability in northern Africa, despite its multi-ethnic demography and its poor economy which ranked it at 182 out of 186 countries in 2012 in the Human Development Index.⁶ Thus, the military coup that ousted Amadou Toumani Toure in March 2012, only a month before the end of his presidential term, was met with surprise by the international

community. The government military debacle in the north was not the only reason behind the coup. Another reason was the dissatisfaction of Malians, and especially the army, with the political and economic establishment in Bamako. Many politicians and businessmen linked to the Touré government were accused of contributing to the weakening of the integrity of the state due to their tolerance or active participation in the illegal traffickings in the north - notably the cocaine smuggling that flourished in the recent years.⁷

Finally, the Malian crisis became a priority in the international agenda when the rebels menaced Bamako. Moreover, following the break of the tactical alliance between the Tuareg independentist movement and the Islamists, the latter unseated the MNLA and took full control of the northern provinces, where they imposed a strict Islamic law. In April 2012, a government of transition was established in Bamako, following the mediation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and, in December, Resolution 2085 by the UN Security Council⁸ paved the way to the French military intervention.

The Serval Operation,⁹ in which the French air force and 4,000 ground troops were deployed, can be seen as a antecedent of the intervention in Libya. However, differently from the NATO operation in Libya, Paris led the African International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) relying on its own logistics and bases in the region and without the support of other western allies. By the end of March, the authority of the central government was restored in all the northern cities and the leader of AQIM Abdelhamid Abou Zeid was reported killed.¹⁰ A UN peacekeeping mission of 12,600 troops, provided mainly by the ECOWAS countries, will be deployed in June, while 1,000 French soldiers remain in the region, in charge of counter-terrorism operations against the last Islamists hideouts.¹¹

Specific issues of national concern are at stake for France in the Sahel region. Jihadist activism poses a direct threat to the uranium extracting facilities in Niger, the fourth major uranium producer in the world.¹² The French state-controlled Areva is the major stakeholder of the companies running the extracting facilities - all located in the north-west of the country, not far from the Algerian and Malian borders.¹³ After the launch of the operation Serval, France sent special forces to protect the sites in Niger that were already targeted by AQIM in the past. AQIM had explicitly declared war on France¹⁴ and fifteen French citizen are still kept hostage by Islamist groups in western Africa.¹⁵

The jihadist threat to the energy resources in the region materialised dramatically in January, when militants of the AQIM splinter group the "Battalion of Blood" stormed the Tigantourine gas facility, near Amenas in Algeria, taking the workers of the site as hostages. The crisis ended with the intervention of the Algerian special forces, resulting in the death of thirty-seven foreigners and one Algerian hostage and the killing of twenty-nine militants.¹⁶ What happened in Amenas questioned the safety of the Algerian sites and aroused criticism about Algiers' crisis management, since the governments of the foreign captives were not consulted before the special forces operation.

Algeria's major oil and gas resources are located in the Saharan region, and many gas fields, like Tigantourine, are situated along the border with Libya.¹⁷ AQIM, the major heir of the Algerian jihadist movement of the 1990s, had still targeted the country before the conflict in Mali. Between 2007 and 2008 three suicide bombings resulted in more than five-hundreds deaths. Since then, the Algerian regime opted for a no-negotiation approach.¹⁸ This stance, besides being a tough response to jihadist and Salafi movements, may also be considered an implicit message to internal opposition groups.

Though the 2011 wave of Arabian protests did not affect the stability of Bouteflika's regime, Algiers was pressed to lift at least the state of emergency, in force since 1991. However, the cross-border jihadist threat and the resurgence of internal Salafi groups can be exploited by Algiers to reassert the regime's grip on society, notably through the powerful

Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS). The offensive during the Amenas hostage crisis was guided by Athmane Tartage, one of the most influential figures and candidate for the post of chief of the DRS, and many observers fear that the methods employed against the Islamist militants could be used to suppress internal dissent as well.¹⁹

A major surveillance of the Saharan borders, the presence of a multinational peace force in northern Mali and France's counter-terrorist activities seem to be the premises on which to transform the Sahara from a safe terror haven to a trap for jihadist groups. AQIM has been disbanded along with its smuggling networks and logistic support. Furthermore, after the unsuccessful alliance between the MLNA and the jihadists is broken, the Tuareg movement might distance itself from the Islamist movement in the region, favouring different approaches to further its claims to local governments and the international community.²⁰

However, many of the militants having fled northern Mali may have easily found refuge in Libya or in other neighbouring countries, protected by the local Salafi organisations. The attacks against the French embassy in Tripoli on April 23rd is a clear warning that the war in Mali may be over but the roots of the conflict are still there. In the end, much of the stability and security of the region depend on the delicate regime transitions in Libya and Tunisia, on the degree of social legitimacy enjoyed by their new institutions and on what kind of political Islam will conquer the hearts and the minds of Maghrebi populations.

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