

The Malian crisis seen from Algeria (engl)

Thomas Serres, in: Pambazuka News – Issue 582: Algeria is a key player in the Sahel, perhaps now more than ever. The crises in Libya and Mali will likely bolster the geopolitical rent that has benefited the Algerian regime since 11 September 2001.

The military blitz by rebels in Northern Mali is far from inconsequential for its Algerian neighbour. The hypothetical secession of the Azawad (in the northern half of Mali) is not viewed favourably in Algeria, to say the least. In addition to the threat of instability across the country's southern border, the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) made the pragmatic choice to form a short-lived alliance with jihadists from Ansaar Eddine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) during their offensive. Due to Algeria's own recent history with terrorism, this relationship was viewed with great suspicion. The success of the Tuareg rebels and their allies also has important implications given the upcoming legislative elections in Algeria that will prepare the succession of the Raïs Bouteflika. Western powers have called upon Algeria to support their efforts in solving this crisis, rendering them increasingly dependent on the cooperation of the regime, whose stability has become a priority. Perhaps most importantly, this situation serves to reinforce a nationalist rhetoric in Algeria that is based on a fear of division and anarchy, stemming from the civil war.

ALGERIA AND THE SAHELO-SAHARIAN SPACE

The Sahelo-Saharan space is crucial in Algeria's regional strategy for three reasons. First, the country's authorities seek to gain legitimacy from their long experience with counter-terrorism. Second, Algeria played a key role in implementing various forms of international cooperation in order to confront security issues in the region. Third, this cross-border space is notoriously rich in natural resources, and is thus much coveted by many foreign actors such as France and the US, though also including China. One must keep in mind that in the Sahelo-Saharan space the focus on terrorism is deeply linked to these economic interests.

In order to confront the threat posed by jihadist katibate (or brigades) and to control various forms of trafficking, the four countries of the “champ” (Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Algeria) decided to join together and form a committee of operations (CEMOC, the Centre d'Etat-Major Opérationnel Conjoint) in 2010. Even if the organization is governed by a rotating presidency, Algeria has a key role to play. Undoubtedly the capacities of the Algerian Army (ANP, for Armée Nationale Populaire) are far more significant than those of its three partners in the CEMOC. As the Nigerian Minister of Foreign Affairs has remarked, the Algerian army is compelled to intervene outside of the country's borders, mostly due to the fact that the Malian army is unable to control its own territory.

The involvement of the ANP has been even more solicited since terrorism in the Sahelo-Saharan space is deeply rooted in Algeria's own history. AQIM, which is essentially a franchise of Al-Qaïda, was born from the successive divisions and reconfigurations of Algerian terrorist groups, namely the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) and the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC). Many fighters that now belong to AQIM are of Algerian origin, as is the case with emirs Abou Zeid and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, for example. In addition, the powerful military intelligence (once called Sécurité Militaire and now known as the DRS, Département Renseignement et Sécurité) is suspected to be involved in the strengthening of the Tuareg Rebellion. Some critics go so far as to assert that the DRS might use the threat of terrorism in the Sahelo-Saharan space as a way to gain leverage with France and to justify American interference in the region. Given the past activities of the DRS during the civil war, these assumptions seem credible. Undoubtedly, Algeria is key to the geopolitics of the region

due to its military superiority, experience in anti-terrorism, and the important role played by its intelligence services. These factors provide the regime with an opportunity to strengthen its national and international position.

TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL AS GEOPOLITICAL RENT

This situation might initially seem contradictory given that Algeria's foreign policy is based on non-interference. Yet, at the same time, international cooperation plays a central role in the strategy of the regime. The “global war on terror” is a longstanding priority for Algeria's international allies, most notably France and the US.

Alleged connections between AQIM and the Nigerian fundamentalist sect Boko Haram prompted fears of a unified terrorist movement in both parts of the Sahelian space. The recent display of force by Ansaar Eddine in Timbuktu has exacerbated the feeling of urgency, especially in France where these events emphasize the loss of control in a region that was previously viewed as a private hunting ground. With the growing involvement of US and China, the former colonial power is not as influential as it once was. But France's commitment to regional stability is still significant, especially as it seeks to secure access to Sahelian uranium that is key to its nuclear industry.

Yet, intervention of any kind is impossible without the agreement of Algiers, who has been careful not to give its consent. In fact, despite the insistence of Washington and Paris, the country's authorities remain narrowly focused on their own territory (Le Canard Enchaîné 2012). One cannot overlook the fact that the strengthening of Sahelian jihadists is directly linked to NATO's operation in Libya, which has been strongly criticized in Algeria. Moreover, a direct intervention by French or American forces would be seen as an attempt to take direct control of the region's ground resources, mainly uranium and hydrocarbons. Such a risky venture would also, logically, be understood as another instance of aggressive imperialism in the name of the “global war on terror.”

At the present time, the Algerian regime and army must also contend with internal dissent, a situation that would only be worsened were they to support a foreign intervention in the Sahel. Even though the ANP participated in the military committee of NATO in January 2012, the institution is reluctant to assume a direct partnership (El Watan 2012). This form of alliance would fit neither with the history nor interests of the army. Instead, Algiers seeks to continue a pragmatic approach based on a series of strategic bargains, which ensures that their Western partners are dependent upon the good will of the regime.

De facto, Algeria is a key player in the Sahel, perhaps now more than ever. The crises in Libya and Mali will likely bolster the geopolitical rent that has benefited the Algerian regime since 11 September 2001. As long as the country is involved in the so-called “war on terror,” its international partners are forced to avoid making any interference in Algerian affairs. Interested in maintaining the stability of the country, they must also court the (widely corrupt) military aristocracy, which is a key player in political decisions. With the upcoming legislative elections in May that will determine the succession of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the Malian crisis provides the military elite a welcome occasion to make itself indispensable in the eyes of its international partners.

THE FEAR OF SECESSION

The Malian crisis is also significant for political debates in Algeria. Defensive nationalism is a longstanding rhetoric of authoritarian regimes. This discourse does not insist so much on the

greatness of the nation, but rather emphasizes the risks that would occur should disorder prevail. Thus, the Algerian response to Azawad's declaration of independence echoes an old nationalist strategy. Playing on the fear of a secession of the South has become a way for political leaders to show their commitment to defending the Algerian nation. For example, Bouguerra Soltani, the President of an Islamo-nationalist party that left the presidential coalition to form a "Green Alliance" with other moderate Islamist formations, reacted strongly when Algerian diplomats were taken hostage by Ansaar Eddine in Gao. He claimed that the unity and integrity of Algeria were a "red line" for him.

This nationalist rhetoric is usually directed against the northern province of Kabylia, which is well known for its tendency to resist the centralized power emanating from Algiers. Responding to an imaginary threat of secession is a good and consensual way to avoid more conflictual issues (economic segregation, claims for democracy, etc.), as did the Raïs Bouteflika when he was visiting Tizi Ouzou in 2009. However, in the last decade, growing discontent in the southern portion of the country has led to a continuous wave of protests and riots, most recently seen in Ouargla, Hassi Messaoud or Laghouat. Local populations have found themselves marginalized by the central government both economically and politically. Their protests are rooted in the fact that the benefits from hydrocarbons are not distributed equitably. For them, the state is stealing a local resource that should, in principle, be used to help this region, which has continuously faced poverty and unemployment. What may appear to be a mere economic or social grievance is also political; the exploitation of local resources has also undermined the legitimacy of the government. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the issue of contention is not principally about political independence. In fact, even within groups which emphasize the regional nature of these grievances (like the Comité de défense des droits des chômeurs du Sud), calls for secession or autonomy continue to be extremely marginal.

Despite this reality, when Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia visited Tamanrasset on 7 April, he claimed that all Algerians "now live in equality" and stated "there is no space for those who want to use inequalities in development in order to call for revolution in Algeria." The Prime Minister is notoriously close to the military elite, often serving as a spokesman for the interests of the army. According to him, Azawad's declaration of independence should serve as a boon for Algerians. He noted that, "What is happening [in Mali] is an opportunity to unify our ranks and to understand the value of independence, territorial integrity and national unity."

The imaginary threat of secession is often invoked by Algerian nationalists, especially those who are close to the army. One must bear in mind that the ANP's political influence is based on its constitutional duty to protect the nation. According to Article 25 of the constitution, the army "assures the defence of the country's territorial unity and integrity." However, it is clear that using a rhetoric based on fear enables the regime to avoid responsibility for the fact that national wealth remains unequally distributed.

AND THE SPECTER OF CHAOS

Beyond this fantasy of secession, the Algerian regime is playing on a much more concrete fear that reinforces the need for obedience to a strong and stable state. Because of the recent civil war, the spectre of chaos is still omnipresent in the mind of the Algerian people. Security is a fundamental desire of the population, who continue to live under the threat of "residual terrorism," as it was called by the regime. Yet, in fact, this violence never formally ceased after the end of the civil war. On 3 March 2012, a kamikaze attack wounded approximately forty people in Tamanrasset, a town where the command centre of the CEMOC is located. Additionally, the involvement of AQIM's katibate and Ansar Eddine in the Tuareg blitz showed that the threat of terrorism is, in fact, far more than "residual" in the Sahelian space. Given the

upcoming legislative elections, these developments help officials augment political capital by highlighting the need for security in the region. This practice is a long-standing tradition of Ahmed Ouyahia's Rassemblement National Démocratique (RND), whose political discourse caters to its military supports.

Last year, the gruesome images of conflict in Libya acted as a foil for the fear of chaos that remains significant in Algerian memory. It also helped curb protests in a country that is still deeply traumatized by the civil war (organized violence is still banned from “repertoires of contention”). In a similar fashion, the Algerian regime benefits from the Malian crisis in emphasizing the need for obedience to the state. Subsequently, the regime is able to treat daily protests, strikes, and riots, as nothing more than a dangerous and infantile expression of chaos. The day before his visit to Tamanrasset, Ahmed Ouyahia explained to French newspaper *Le Monde* that the popular uprising in October 1988 and the insurrectionary strikes in May-June 1991 were nothing more than “agitation.” The Prime Minister then reminded French journalists that Algerians “know the price of anarchy” (*Le Monde* 2012).

By making this connection between protest and anarchy, Algerian authorities emphasize security risks rather than economic, social, and political phenomena. Protests are rooted in the feeling of *hogra* that invokes the chronic contempt, denial of justice, and even persistent “invisibilization” by the regime. Since power itself is often understood as a system without a centre, this frustration often remains diffused as it is unable to articulate a precise target. All these issues call for a political (as well as economic) solution. However, Ahmed Ouyahia continued to describe the riots of January 2011 as a “sugar and oil crisis” that was supported by external forces. Finally, he congratulated the security forces for quelling the unrest.

The crisis in Libya and now Mali allow the regime to invoke the spectre of chaos, remind the population of the violence of the 1990s, and insist on the need to strengthen the security apparatus. This situation brings to mind Lakhdar Ben Tobbal, ex-Minister of the Interior of the *Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne* (GPRA), who in 1960 claimed that the nationalist movement had to be especially disciplined in order to control the so-called natural Algerian tendency towards anarchy (Harbi 1981). It also reminds us of General Larbi Belkheir, who once claimed to have “made the choice to spare Algeria from Afghanistan's fate” by interrupting the electoral process in 1992. This goes to show that in Algeria, the so-called risk of chaos has often been employed in order to legitimate authoritarianism.

FEAR MUST NOT HIDE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR POLITICAL OPENING

The situation in Mali is a new shock for Algeria, which has already been shaken by popular uprisings in neighbouring countries and the NATO operation in Libya. In this context, the regime's spokesmen continue to call for the Algerian people to respect the state. In doing so, they also belittle social and political protests, calling them “*jacqueries*” (peasants protests), or food riots, and insinuate that the unrest is due to foreign support (or “plots planned in the name of democracy” according to Ouyahia). Thus, the regime continues to embody the qualities for which it is criticized by rioters, acting with paternalism and contempt and showing no respect for Algerian popular will.

But these regional circumstances should not eclipse the main issue facing the Algerian regime in the coming months. The succession of Abdelaziz Bouteflika provides an opportunity for political opening. Moreover, the tripartite governing coalition that has ruled the country for the past decade (the FLN, moderate Islamists and the RND) seems to be falling apart. The FLN has faced internal dissidence and occasional violence for many years. Moderate Islamists, who were once co-opted by the state, have created a new “Green Alliance,” hoping that the success

of religious parties in neighbouring countries will help give them legitimacy after being largely discredited in the 1990s. Despite his calls for unity and discipline, Ahmed Ouyahia himself is now facing virulent accusations coming from within his own party. For instance, a senior member of the RND, Nouria Hafsi, who was demanding increased transparency, has publically called Prime Minister Ouyahia “a despot” and “a danger to the country.”(El Watan 2012)

In light of the upcoming legislative elections, many political actors are relying on a nationalist rhetoric that manipulates the fears of the Algerian population while claiming to prevent anarchy and sedition. Undoubtedly, this well-worn authoritarian strategy is a thinly disguised attempt to protect the privileges and political influence of the ruling elite, especially the military aristocracy. Yet the population will soon have a chance to express its discontent at the polls. Since voting is an institutional practice, it will be difficult for the self-proclaimed defenders of the nation to portray law-abiding citizens as a force of chaos and anarchy. Ultimately, given the trauma resulting from the civil war, elections on 10 May are a real way for the Algerian people to express a peaceful aspiration for change. This time, maybe, Algerians will have the chance to see their long-standing discontent heard by a new government that resolves issues rather than using them for political gain.

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