The Challenge of Security in the Sahel: The Algerian, Moroccan and Libyan Perspectives

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The Sahel's Emergence as a Security Threat

The 'security-development' crisis that has engulfed much of the Sahel over the last 12-18 months, especially in Mauritania, Mali and Niger, has been recognised by international and EU bodies as posing a particular threat and challenge to the EU and EU interests, especially in the Western Mediterranean region, and, of course, to the Maghreb itself.
For example, at its External Relations Council meeting in Luxembourg on 27 October 2009, the Council expressed its "concern over the security situation in parts of the Sahel region, in particular in Mauritania, Mali and Niger. (…) Recent events indicate that the region runs the risk of becoming a safe haven for terrorist networks and activities. This situation constitutes first and foremost a serious threat to the Sahel region and its population, but also to other regions, including Europe."
For example, in November 2009, Richard Barrett, the former British intelligence official and the UN's highest ranking official responsible for monitoring the activities of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, said that, while attacks by al-Qaeda and its operatives were decreasing in many parts of the world, the situation was worsening in North Africa. He was referring specifically to the activities of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which had changed its name from Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in January 2007.
Within a year of the October 2009 meeting, the Sahel had risen to the top of the agenda of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council. At its meeting in Luxembourg on 25 October 2010, the Council concluded that "the development of cross-border threats such as terrorism and organised crime, coupled with extreme poverty, unresolved internal conflicts and the weakness and fragility of the States concerned, constitutes a growing challenge for the stability of the region and for the European Union. These threats directly affect the local populations and States of the region, particularly Mauritania, Mali and Niger. They also have an impact on the security of European nationals. (…) In close cooperation with the States of the region, (…) the European Union intends to (…) foster security, stability, development and good governance in the Sahel-Saharan strip." Accordingly, it instructed the European Commission to draw up a strategy on the region for the beginning of 2011.

The Origin of GSPC/AQIM Activity in the Sahel

The first action attributed to GSPC/AQIM in the Sahara-Sahel region was the abduction of 32 European tourists in Algeria in February-April 2003. Fourteen were taken to Mali before being released, reportedly for a ransom of around €5 million. The operation was run by an Algerian, Amari Saifi (alias El Para). El Para, as documented in *The Dark Sahara* and *The Dying Sahara*, is widely believed to be an agent of Algeria's Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS), which orchestrated the operation with the complicity of US military-intelligence services. The US used the operation to justify the launch of its Sahara-Sahelian front in the Global War on Terror (GWOT).
After El Para's 2003-4 operation, the other incidents attributed to GSPC/AQIM prior to 2008 were

the attack on the Lemgheity garrison in Mauritania in 2005; two engagements in September and October 2006 between Tuareg and an alleged GSPC group in northern Mali; the attack on Djanet airport in south-east Algeria on November 11 2007; and the murder of four French family members near Aleg in Mauritania on December 24 2007.

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In spite of massive propaganda and disinformation, mostly from Algerian and US military intelligence sources, it is very doubtful if GSPC/AQIM had anything to do with any of these incidents. Evidence suggests that the Lemgheity attack was organised by the Cavaliers de Changement, a Mauritanian movement opposed to President Ould Taya, who was overthrown by a military coup a few weeks later. The two engagements against the GSPC by Malian Tuareg were arranged by Algeria's DRS, who paid the Tuareg to undertake the attacks to make it appear as if the Tuareg were supporting the Americans in the GWOT. Djanet airport was not attacked by AQIM, as claimed by the Algerian security forces, but by Tuareg youth in Djanet as part of their social protest against the Algerian government. The convicted murderers of the French family in Mauritania admitted to being members of AQIM only after two and a half years in detention and alleged torture.

2008: The First Hostages since 2003

The year 2008 saw the first hostage-takings since 2003. However, both abductions took place outside the region. Two Austrians were seized in Tunisia in February, while two Canadian diplomats, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy and his assistant (their driver was later released), were seized near Niamey in December.
It is likely that neither pair was abducted on AQIM orders. The Austrians were seized by Hamed Essoufi, alias Abdelhamid abou Zeid, second-in-command to El Para in 2003 and strongly believed to be associated with the DRS. There is strong circumstantial evidence that the Austrians were taken hostage on the orders of the DRS, staged as an act of AQIM 'terrorism.' Local information from Niamey suggests that the Canadians were seized by henchmen working for the Niger government and passed up to AQIM. All four finished up as hostages of AQIM and were held in the same part of northern Mali as 14 of El Para's hostages in 2003. The Austrians were released after eight months and the Canadians after four, both after reported ransom payments.

2009: The Escalation of AQIM Activity in the Sahel

Since 2009, AQIM activity in the Sahel has escalated: between January 2009 and January 2011, 19 Westerners (all Europeans), a Togolese and a Malagasy (both subsequently released) were abducted by or on behalf of AQIM. At the time of writing (April 2011), four Frenchmen (all abducted from the Areva uranium complex at Arlit, Niger) and an Italian woman (abducted in southern Algeria) were still in captivity.
Four of these 21 hostages have died: three French and one English. In the case of the three Frenchmen, one may have died through natural causes and the other two as a result of French military intervention. The one death over which there is no ambiguity regarding AQIM's culpability was that of the Englishman, Edwin Dyer, who was executed in Mali by Abou Zeid on May 31 2009. Dyer's execution gave AQIM extensive international publicity and 'credibility' as a serious terrorist organisation in the Sahel. However, serious questions about the roles of both the British and Algerian authorities in his murder remain unanswered.

At the Heart of AQIM is the DRS

On hearing of Dyer's murder, the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said: 'I want those who

would use terror against British citizens to know beyond doubt that we and our allies will pursue them relentlessly, and that they will meet the justice they deserve.' Neither Abou Zeid nor al-Qaeda in the Sahel (AQIS) has been pursued relentlessly. The exact opposite has been the case, except for a brief engagement by a Malian army patrol which reportedly killed three members of AQIS. AQIS believed it had been betrayed by Malian intelligence officer Colonel Lamana Ould Bou, a double agent between AQIS and Mali's State Security. Lamana was gunned down in Timbuktu. Just before he died, he told the local media that: 'At the heart of AQIM is the DRS.'

Lamana Ould Bou confirmed what some people knew and many others suspected, namely that AQIS was fundamentally a creation of the DRS. Its core structure, or 'heart' to which Ould Bou referred, comprised Abou Zeid, El Para's former second-in-command, and a few dozen Algerian GSPC who had accepted President Bouteflika's amnesty and 'repented.' A few dozen of these '*repentis*', as they were known, appear to have been encouraged or were sent by the DRS into Algeria's extreme south in 2006 where they were reorganised by Abou Zeid into the 'hard core' of AQIS. Most reports from Algerian and other 'intelligence' services, estimated their number during the period 2006-2008 at around 200. Since Abou Zeid's return to the region with the two Austrian hostages in 2008, AQIS has been actively recruiting radical Islamists – young 'jihadists' – from within the Sahel. Most of the new recruits are Mauritanians, who, according to Algerian security sources, now outnumber Algerians, with small numbers from Mali and probably less from Niger. Estimates of the total number of AQIS are now put at around 300-400.

The Tuareg Rebellions

AQIS has had a major destabilising presence in the Sahel, especially since the end of 2009 and early 2010. One reason for this has been the failure of both the Mali and Niger governments to achieve satisfactory and long-lasting peace agreements with the Tuareg after rebellions had begun in both countries in 2007.

The causes of both rebellions were multiple and localised. Both, however, reflected an increasing sense of marginalisation and disenfranchisement, compounded by the abuse of indigenous rights by international mining companies, notably uranium in Niger, without any benefit to the Tuareg populations themselves. In both countries, the rebellions 'fizzled' out, in a state of exhaustion and despair, with no coherent 'post-conflict' peace plan other than crudely brokered deals in which Libya's Colonel Gaddafi managed to 'buy off' some of the rebel leaders while persuading fighters to lay down their arms for a 'cash payment.' In Niger, the overthrow in February 2010 of President Mamadou Tandja in a military coup, rather put the question of a Tuareg settlement onto the back burner.

The result of this lack of any serious attempt at 'post-conflict' resolution and reconstruction, combined with the massive damage done to local economies since 2003 – particularly the tourism industry – by Washington's GWOT, meant that many hundreds of young Tuareg former rebels found themselves with absolutely no economic livelihood. Not surprisingly, a growing number have sought survival through 'banditry' as 'auxiliaries' to AQIS.

International Drugs Trade Moves into Sahel

The destabilisation caused by the presence of AQIS and the post-rebellion problems of the Tuareg were compounded by the emergence in the region of seemingly massive drug trafficking interests. Smuggling and 'trafficking' of goods of one sort or another across the Sahara has always been an integral part of the desert's economic lifeblood. Increasingly over the last decade, drugs – cocaine from Latin America and cannabis resin from Morocco – have overtaken cigarettes as the dominant commodity.

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The scale of the cocaine trafficking came to light in November 2009 with the discovery of a Boeing 727, capable of carrying 10 tonnes of cocaine,

wrecked on a makeshift airstrip at Tarkint in Northern Mali. The plane's undercarriage had seemingly failed and the crew had tried to incinerate the evidence. The plane appeared to have been one of several that had carried cocaine from Latin America (probably Venezuela) into the Malian desert for transshipment across the Sahara.

Perhaps not surprisingly, investigations appeared to reveal a close overlap between those elements of AQIM, the DRS and Malian State Security who were involved in the 'hostage-taking' business and those involved in the drugs trafficking. In addition, many of the local Tuareg and Arab communities clearly had more than a passing interest.

July 22 2010: France's Military Interventions

On July 22 2010, France carried out two disastrous military raids into Mali: one to the north-west of Timbuktu; the other in the Tessalit region of north-east Mali. The raids, undertaken alongside Mauritanian forces, failed in their alleged aim of freeing Michel Germaneau, a Frenchman abducted in Niger and held hostage by Abou Zeid. AQIM claimed to have executed Germaneau in retaliation for the raids, in which 6-7 AQIM members were killed. However, evidence from both local sources and DRS agents indicated that Germaneau may have died from heart disease some weeks before.

President Sarkozy's response to the Germaneau announcement, in language reminiscent of George Bush, was to declare war on AQIM. AQIM's response was to seize seven hostages (5 French and 2 African) from Areva's uranium mining complex at Arlit in northern Niger on September 16. The hostages and their abductors were tracked to the same Tigharghar Mountains near Tessalit where France had made its abortive July 22 raid. At the time of writing, the two Africans and a French woman have been released; four remain captive. The four survivors are believed to have been moved to north-east Niger.

In January 2011, two more Frenchmen, Antoine de Leocour and Vincent Delory, were abducted from a restaurant in Niamey (Niger). They were killed the next day during a French military assault close to the Niger-Mali border.

This series of events – Sarkozy's botched July 22 raids, his 'declaration of war', the Arlit abductions and the deaths of Leocour and Delory – have raised questions about both the calibre of France's intelligence services and its predisposition to military intervention in the Sahel.

Some commentators have argued that the rush by French intelligence services to identify (incorrectly according to Algeria's DRS) Leocour and Delory's kidnappers and the haste with which Sarkozy ordered a massive military intervention when the lives of the hostages were not in immediate danger suggest that Sarkozy's decision-making is geared more to improving his popularity with France's electorate than safeguarding the lives of hostages and ensuring France's best long-term interests in the Sahel.

Algeria's Motives in the Sahel

Alternatively, there is reason to believe that France may have been led into a trap in the Sahel by Algeria's DRS.

Algeria is being strongly backed by both the US and the UK as their key ally in their ill-informed and ill-conceived regional counter-terrorism strategy. This, in turn, has strengthened Algeria's own ambitions of establishing itself as the dominant regional power in the Sahel. Hence its brinkmanship strategy of destabilising the region through its orchestration of AQIS, while putting itself at the head of a largely self-created regional security grouping, comprising itself, Mauritania, Mali and Niger, which would be sufficient to deter any foreign (i.e. Western) military intervention in the region.

Algeria's questionable commitment to the Sahel's security was demonstrated by its very noticeable boycott of the October 14-15 Bamako conference to examine the security and 'terrorist' situation in the Sahel

The ongoing theatre that ensued through much of 2010 saw the establishment in April of a joint command headquarter at Tamanrasset between these four countries and a series of security conferences

and meetings, managed almost entirely from Algiers, designed to reassure and reinforce Algeria's US and UK alliances, while excluding all other Northwest African powers, especially Morocco, from any involvement in the Sahel.

However, France's influence in the Sahel, as the former colonial power, is an obstacle to Algeria's hegemonic intentions. Hence its strategy of trying to embarrass France (through misleading information) and weaken its standing in the region.

While France is certainly experiencing difficulties in the region, Algeria's strategy could backfire.

Firstly, Algeria's neighbours have become increasing aware of its role in managing 'terrorism' and fermenting instability in the region. For example, one Mauritanian Minister, Cheikh El Moktar Ould Horma, accused Algeria of being AQIM's *porte-parole*, while a Wikileaks document revealed Mali President Toure's anxieties about the Algerian army's association with AQIM.

Algeria's questionable commitment to the Sahel's security was demonstrated by its very noticeable boycott of the October 14-15 Bamako conference to examine the security and 'terrorist' situation in the Sahel. The conference was attended by anti-terrorism experts from all G8 member countries and their counterparts from Burkina Faso, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. Representatives from Spain, Switzerland, Australia, the European Union, the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also attended.

Secondly, the EU is becoming increasingly aware of Algeria's duplicitous role in the Sahel.

Libyan Contagion

Thirdly, the above concerns are likely to be overwhelmed by possible 'spill-over' consequences from events in Libya. By mid-March, some 20,000 refugees/returnees had arrived back in Niger and Mali. This number will rise substantially, causing potentially huge problems for Sahelian countries. These difficulties will be compounded by the return of many armed and militarily trained Tuareg.

The region could become even more insecure if these movements are accompanied by an inflow of arms and so-called 'al-Qaeda' elements. Not surprisingly, it is Algeria that is beating the al-Qaeda drum most loudly, with ministers issuing alarming reports of al-Qaeda operatives and arms flowing into the region, although, as is so often the case, without any verification.

Further reading

KEENAN, Jeremy. *The Dark Sahara: America's War on Terror in Africa*. London: Pluto, 2009.

KEENAN, Jeremy. *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa*. London: Pluto, 2011.