

IS A RENEWED ALGERIAN REGIONAL DIPLOMACY EMERGING?

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Over the past two years, Algiers's diplomatic discretion and inaction in the regional affairs has irritated the Malian government and been deeply questioned by its Sahelian partners.² Since the Sahel is traditionally Algeria's backyard, the country has participated in all negotiations on the Northern question in Mali since the 1990s. However, in recent years, Algeria's influence has progressively deteriorated in the region, following a decade of dissension between the Algerian government and the former Mali president Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT).

ATT accused the Algerian president of failing to maintain control of his intelligence services, which Mali said were acting on their own in the Sahel and fuelling regional tensions. Sahelian governments also suspected that Algeria is seeking to dominate its neighbours by asserting control over counterterrorism operations and lucrative smuggling routes.³

In 2013, ECOWAS, France and the Sahelian countries questioned Algeria's contributions to a negotiation process with the armed groups. In particular since the leader of Ansar al-Dine, Iyad Ag Ghali, is well known in Algeria and works closely with the Algerian intelligence services (DRS).⁴

But in May this year, the Malian and French governments were in favor of an Algerian mediation of the inter-Malian dialogue. The French defence minister visited Algiers to discuss Algeria's role in resolving the Northern Mali crisis with Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. France had spent a huge amount of money on the Serval operation and wanted to involve the regional partners. France also benefited from Algeria's collaboration during its offensive against armed Islamist groups in the Adrar des Ifoghas in the Kidal region of Mali, and recently when nine terrorists hunted by the French troops were stopped and killed by Algerian security forces near Tinzaouatine (Tamanrasset) in May 2014.

Mali's new stance on Algeria's unavoidable role in its internal crisis was established during Mali President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita's visit to Algiers in January 2014, and reasserted during the 2nd session of the Algerian-Malian bilateral strategic committee in April 2014 (which also includes Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad). Mali's request is rooted in the fact that Kidal remains out of control of the central power, and has always been a zone of influence of Algeria, with the whole economy of the region still dependent on trade exchanges with Algeria. According to the Mali foreign minister

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2 Laurence Aïda Ammour, 'L'Algérie et les crises régionales: entre velléités hégémoniques et repli sur soi', in *Nouveaux regards sur le Sahel: entre rémanences du passé et impasses du présent*, Groupe de Recherche et d'Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité (GRIP), Brussels, July 2013.

3 Laurence Aïda Ammour, 'Regional Security Cooperation in the Maghreb and Sahel: Algeria's Pivotal Ambivalence', *Africa Security Brief*, no. 18, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, February 2012.

4 Laurence Aïda Ammour, 'Algeria's Role in the Sahelian Security Crisis', *International Journal of Stability, Security and Development*, London, June 2013.

Abdoulaye Diop, "Algeria represents an important partner for the development of Mali".⁵

Moreover, Algeria is well aware that any further uprising in Northern Mali might destabilize the south of the country, where many Malian Tuareg refugees live or have settled permanently.⁶ That is why Algeria's growing pro-active attitude in the region is dictated by tactical circumstances and geopolitical interests. As a result, it seems then that a new diplomatic era is opening up for Algeria, imposed by various internal and external convergent factors and recent developments in neighbouring North African countries. The most important of these factors are:

The cabinet reshuffle after the re-election of Algerian President Bouteflika last April, which was controversial because of Bouteflika's fragile health. The reshuffle resulted in the appointment of a new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ramtane Lamamra, a career diplomat and former ambassador to Washington, on September 11, 2013. Lamamra, who has a strong background in African affairs, quickly advocated a negotiated solution in Mali, maintaining at the same time good relations with the US and the interventionist French power.⁷

The worsening of the security in the region, mainly in neighbouring Libya, where general Khalifa Haftar initiated an armed offensive against Islamist militias in May, and where the elected House of Representatives (HoR) based in Tobruk supports Haftar's military strikes on Benghazi. The fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 not only destabilized the Algerian government but weakened its control when the Islamic Maghreb splinter group attacked the In Amenas gas facility near the Libyan border in January 2013. Moreover, the failure of the country's Saharan policy became blatant when seven Algerian diplomats were kidnapped in Gao in April 2012.

The potential alliances with two actors, Libyan general Khalifa Haftar and the newly elected Egyptian President Abdel Fatah Al Sisi, which may herald a new power axis in North Africa, favourable to Algeria. Sisi, who made his first trip abroad to Algiers in June, called on Algeria to make a coordinated effort to fight Islamist militancy. Algeria is still considering cooperation with Egypt to confront the threat from Libya, through the Joint Algerian-Egyptian Higher Committee which met in June for the first time in five years.⁸ There is no doubt that any Algerian-Egyptian convergence, completed by the existing operational security agreement and cooperation between Algeria and Tunisia, would have been a key security factor in the Maghreb.

However, Egypt is little by little deviating from Algiers' position and playing its own game by delivering weapons to General Haftar last month, and welcoming a number of high ranking Libyan officers and Abdallah al-Thinn in Cairo to discuss intensified military aid. Moreover, in August, Egypt's support to the UAE airstrikes against Misrati militias in Tripoli, complicated internal alliances and fuelled the

5 Faten Hayed, 'Mali : Alger entre deux feux', *El Watan (Algeria)*, 25 April 2014. In 2009, ATT declared 'when I talk about Northern Mali it's like talking about Algeria. Gao, Tessalit and Kidal are for me the last wilaya (province) of your country', quoted by *El Watan (Algeria)*, 25-26 April 2009.

6 Many of them have Algerian citizenship. See also interview with the author 'Si un soulèvement devait se produire au Mali, l'Algérie serait forcément concernée', *Les Echos (Mali)*, 20 February 2014.

7 By opening its airspace to French over-flights, mobilizing forces on the ground in southern Algeria, and supplying petrol to French troops.

8 Algeria is a major supplier of natural gas to Egypt, making the economic interests between Egypt and Algeria inextricably intertwined with the political ones. Moreover, Egypt was rekindled as an integral part of Africa at the beginning of July 2014 during the 23rd African Union summit in Malabo.

conflict. Al Sissi disregards the Algerian initiative on Libya since he was not invited to be part of it. Algeria was indeed waiting to see whether Haftar could have been an element of stability or a factor of destabilization, even if Haftar would greatly welcome an Algerian military strike on Libya.⁹

The pressure exerted on Bamako by France to start negotiations with rebel groups in the North after one year of inaction. First, France, whose troops beat back an Islamist push into the centre of the country and whose money is critical for reconstruction, has been strict about keeping to an election timetable. Secondly, the presidential election was intended to quickly start the national reconciliation and dialogue processes. Third, in February, the US and France agreed to develop a close partnership to fight terrorism in Africa, also with the aim of stabilizing Mali. More recently, France decided to redeploy 3,000 soldiers to fight militants across Africa's Sahel region,¹⁰ after a fresh outbreak of violence in northern Mali where deadly clashes broke out in May between Mali government troops and Tuareg MNLA separatists.¹¹ The deterioration of inter-community relations both between the North and the South and within the Azawad region itself is of great concern in the Algiers and Mali talks, as shown by the recent discussions in which the author participated in Bamako in July, which insisted on an urgent reconciliation process including all local communities (not only Tuaregs but also Arabs, Songhais, Bellahs, Imghads, etc) who all have legitimate security and economic claims.¹²

Finally, the escape of 15 suspected Islamist militants detainees from the main jail in Bamako last June, with the alleged complicity of armed Islamists from the North, and several recent arrests of jihadists in Northern Mali and along the Algerian and Niger borders show that some *katibas* are still active in the country and that some of them are able to hit capital¹³

Despite the reluctance of some rebel groups to accept its mediation,¹⁴ Algeria initiated discussions and negotiations in Algiers in January 2014, which will continue until the autumn.¹⁵ What can be seen as a novelty in Algerian diplomacy is the way the

9 *Echorouk* (Algeria), 5 May 2014. An unconfirmed Algerian operation in Libya is supposed to have taken place in May 2014, in co-ordination with U.S. and French Special Forces. The aim of this military offensive was to eliminate AQIM terrorists from the cities of Nalut and Zintan from where weapons are transferred into Tunisia and Algeria, and to destroy the organization's infrastructure, armaments and training camps in the area of Sebha in Southern Libya. See Akram Khariief, "La Guerre secrète de l'Algérie en Libye", *El Watan* (Algeria), 6 June 2014; Deborah Haynes, Michael Evans and Hassan Morajea, "US special forces arrive to tackle Libya Islamists", *The Times*, 30 May 2014 ; "Algeria sent troops in Libya," *The Henry Jackson Society*, London, 7 June 2014.

10 The Serval Operation was officially declared over by mid-July and replaced by a wider counter-terrorism operation codenamed Barkhane. While Paris deployed 3,000 troops backed by six fighter jets, 20 helicopters and three drones in northern Mali, Niger and Chad, the United States opened a new drones base in Northern Niger (Agadez) in September to better track Islamist fighters coming from Libya.

11 See the visit by François Hollande's counsellor, H  l  ne Legal, who went to Bamako in June 2014 few days after the failed Mali Prime Minister 's trip in Kidal that resulted in clashes between armed rebel groups and the army.

12 'Quelles constructions politiques dans la zone sahel  -saharienne ? R  flexion sur les pistes de solution pour permettre le retour de la paix au Mali et la stabilit   de la zone sahel  -saharienne', Journ  es de r  flexion et de propositions, sous l'  gide du Premier Ministre, Chef de Gouvernement de la R  publique du Mali et du Minist  re de l'  conomie num  rique, de l'information et de la communication, Bamako, 24-26 July 2014.

13 'Un   mir captur   et trois terroristes   trangers abattus par l'Arm  e dans le Sud', *Tout sur l'Alg  rie*, 9 November 2014. 'Niger : l'arm  e fran  aise d  truit un convoi d'Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique', *Le Parisien*, 10 October 2014.

14 Mainly the MNLA who always accused Algiers of failing to implement previous agreements, of expelling injured Tuaregs who were seeking shelter in southern Algeria during the fighting, and of infiltrating the MNLA with agents from the DRS. However, on 15 July, Algeria played a key role in the exchange of prisoners (45 Malian soldiers for 41 Tuaregs) in a goodwill gesture between the Mali government and Tuareg rebels. Even as recent negotiations progressed, there were still signs of distrust, with the main Tuareg separatist group accusing the Malian army of backing local militias fighting them east of Timbuktu.

15 Since the *Ouagadougou Accord* signed in June 2013, the following steps have been taken: in January and February

negotiations are led: apart from the rebel groups (MNLA, HCUA, CPA), they involve different regional actors, including ministers from neighbouring countries, ECOWAS, the African Union, the European Union and MINUSMA, which was not the case in previous private mediation efforts. For Algeria who is keen to use the inter-Malian talks as a model in the Libyan national dialogue and reconciliation process, the Mali crisis might be the first real test for its new-look regional diplomacy.

In Libya, the challenge for Algeria will be to prevail upon external actors who are fuelling the conflict to cease interfering in Libyan affairs. Among them, Egypt's growing meddling that could have unforeseen consequences.

Finally, the setback represented by the Libyan Supreme Court invalidation of the legality of the (HoR) not only will likely plunge the country deeper into crisis, but will complicate the Algerian project to engage all Libyan actors in a peaceful and inclusive political dialogue.

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preparatory meetings were held in Algiers and Bamako. After a ceasefire signed on 23 May in Kidal thanks to the Mauritanian President's mediation, on 9 June, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, the High Council for the Unity of Azawad and the Arab Movement of Azawad signed the *Algiers Declaration* pledging their "good faith" to strengthen the process of reconciliation through dialogue, after the initial phase of the 'inter-Malian dialogue'. From 1 to 24 July, Mali's government and Tuareg-led rebels signed an agreement for a roadmap toward securing a broader peace deal to end decades of uprisings in the north. The roadmap that calls for negotiations to work out "questions of substance" was to resume between Aug. 17 and Sept. 11 but had to be postponed because of the formation of a new self-defence armed group (Gaita). This group formed in August 2014, has close links with The Malian government and claims it should participate in the talks. The second round resumed in October to discuss areas such as security, reconciliation and humanitarian issues. A draft of the peace agreement is still under discussion and seems to be subject of many divergences from the Tuareg movements and from Mali opposition parties. See: *Feuille de route des négociations dans le cadre du processus d'Alger*, 24 July 2014, and *Elements pour un accord pour la paix et la réconciliation au Mali*, 23 October 2014.