

Algeria and the Crisis in Mali

Alexis Arieff

The multifaceted crisis in Mali, which has effectively led to state collapse and split the country in two, has drawn international attention to Algeria's role in the stability of the Sahel. One might expect Algeria, as the region's preeminent military power, and one that has sought to position itself as a leader in counter-terrorism, to lead the international response to the growing chaos along its volatile southern border. Indeed, Algiers has hosted a parade of Western and regional leaders hoping for a white knight to face an increasingly disastrous-seeming situation. Yet the events in Mali have come at a time when Algeria's leaders are distracted by narrow domestic interests, and by deep political changes in the Maghreb region that have left Algeria's aging elite more isolated than ever. Algeria's ambiguous stance in the face of a genuine regional crisis complicates the country's self-projected image as a key regional player.

Mali's crisis (at least in the immediate, as its roots are far deeper) began in late 2011 as independence-seeking Tuareg insurgents, armed with weapons from Qadhafi's arsenal, streamed home to Mali from Libya. The crisis escalated in March, when mid-ranking Malian soldiers, dismayed by repeated defeats and defections and by massive corruption at the senior command level, overthrew the government of President Amadou Toumani Touré. The Tuareg insurgency took advantage of the disorder to seize all the main towns in the north, and then fractured among rival factions. Of these, the autonomy-seeking National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which launched the fight, appears increasingly irrelevant, while the Islamist movement Ansar al Deen, which seeks to impose an extremist vision of *sharia* throughout Mali and has leveraged its ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), appears to enjoy the upper hand.

The increasingly brazen presence of AQIM commanders in northern Malian cities, the brutal treatment of local populations by militant Islamists, and reports of foreign fighters flocking to the region have provoked concerns in

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the region and in Western capitals that northern Mali could become a launching pad for transnational terrorist attacks. Some additionally fear that the ideology that ostensibly motivates Ansar al Deen and AQIM could gain currency beyond Mali's borders. Meanwhile, Mali's political class and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have struggled to reconstitute any semblance of an effective government in Bamako.

Algeria has long positioned itself as a quiet mediator of conflicts in the impoverished Sahel, at times in apparent competition with the late, more flamboyant Qadhafi. Notably, Algeria mediated peace processes that brought an (albeit fragile) end to previous Tuareg uprisings in Mali in 1991-1995 and 2006-2009.¹ Since the winding down of its own civil strife in the late 1990s, Algeria has also sought to marshal a coordinated regional response to cross-border terrorism, smuggling, and other armed group activity in the Sahel's vast and under-policed border regions. The signature initiative of this effort is the "Tamanrasset Plan" agreed to in 2009 by Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania, which led the establishment, in 2010, of a joint military operations center (known as the CEMOC) in Tamanrasset (southern Algeria) and of a joint intelligence cell in Algiers. In 2011, Algeria offered a reported \$10 million in development aid to Mali.

Yet Algeria's role in the Sahel and relationship with Mali are complex and fraught. Algerian-Malian counter-terrorism cooperation was particularly troubled under deposed President Touré. Algeria, with some justification, viewed Bamako as insufficiently committed to the fight against AQIM (even as AQIM commanders operated from Malian territory), incapable of protecting shared intelligence, and eager to facilitate prisoner release agreements and ransom payments to AQIM kidnappers.² Western military and development aid, premised on Mali's identity as a frontline state in counter-terrorism, may also have fueled corruption within the armed forces, although a precise picture is lacking.³ Malian officials often countered, off the record, that AQIM, an Algerian-led group, was Algeria's responsibility, and criticized Algeria for allegedly being unwilling, despite Bamako's permission, to use its superior forces to pursue AQIM cells when they crossed the border into Mali. Some further (and vaguely) accused Algeria, or elements of the Algerian security services, of leveraging control over military operations and influence within Tuareg communities to profit from lucrative Sahel smuggling operations, and of seeking to dominate zones of the Sahel that may hold lucrative natural gas or mineral reserves.⁴ As in Algerian opposition circles, some actors in Bamako suspect Algerian

¹ In 2009, Algerian sponsored talks culminated in an agreement by former Tuareg rebels to contribute to Malian counter-terrorism operations (see Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, "Malian Tuareg Groups," August 2009). However, Bamako was slow to implement the Algeria-mediated agreements, allowing non-implementation to become a grievance in and of itself (as the current surge of unrest makes clear). The promised integration of Tuareg combatants into the Malian armed forces was particularly slow to materialize, and was reportedly plagued by ongoing desertions, defections to rebel groups, and intelligence leaks by Tuareg troops.

² See, for example, Laurence Aïda Ammour, *Regional Security Cooperation in the Maghreb and Sahel: Algeria's Pivotal Ambivalence*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 2012.

³ *Africa Confidential*, "Mali: Rebels and putschists," March 30, 2012.

⁴ Ammour, op.cit; Ferdaous Bouhleb-Hardy, Yvan Guichaoua, and Abdoulaye Tamboura, "Tuareg Crises in Niger and Mali," minutes from an IFRI Seminar held in November 2007, published in January 2008; and Annette Lohmann, *Who Owns the Sahara? Old Conflicts, New Menaces: Mali and the Central Sahara Between the Tuareg, Al Qaida and Organized Crime*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), June 2011.

intelligence and/or security services of covertly aiding or abetting AQIM in order to bolster their domestic and regional position. Indications that the 2011 appointment of Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga as Mali's foreign minister would ease bilateral relations remain untested due to the 2012 coup, which overthrew Maïga along with the rest of the Malian cabinet.

More broadly, the degree to which the Tamanrasset Plan has served as the preeminent framework for regional security cooperation is questionable. The effectiveness of the CEMOC and the joint intelligence center are unproven. Moreover, the arrangement was designed, in part, to ward off Western military intervention in response to terrorist and criminal threats in the region, a scenario Algiers perceives as a direct affront to its cherished commitment to national sovereignty.⁵ Yet the Sahel states have maintained and sought to expand their security cooperation with France, the United States, and others, and have on occasion worked with each other in joint military operations instead of coordinating through Algeria. France has even conducted at least two direct military operations since 2010 to free French hostages held by AQIM in the Sahel.⁶ (Both failed.)

The current situation in Mali would appear to be a threat to two of Algeria's foreign policy priorities: to stave off secession movements and to prevent the regional spread of terrorist ideology.⁷ A budding refugee crisis is another undesirable factor. And as of January 2012, Algiers appeared to be taking a predictable approach. As the Tuareg insurgency (then predominantly perceived as separatist) grew, the government called for an immediate ceasefire and the preservation of Mali's "territorial integrity," and put itself forward as a mediator. Algiers further announced it was freezing bilateral military training operations in northern Mali, indicating that this would preserve its neutrality in the conflict and that military cooperation was designed for counter-terrorism, not counter-insurgency purposes. However, early negotiations proved abortive, and were likely doomed at that point, in any case, by the rebels' perceived military superiority, which removed the incentive for an early compromise.

In March, Algeria condemned the military coup in Bamako. However, the government was noticeably silent in the weeks that followed, aside from occasional statements of concern about Mali's growing instability. This relative absence from the international policy response endured despite (or perhaps because of) the kidnapping in April of seven Algerian diplomats in the Malian town of Gao by an AQIM splinter faction, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). In addition to concerns that official statements could jeopardize the hostages' fate,

⁵ For a larger discussion of Algeria's foreign policy priorities, see Yahia Zoubir, "The Dialectics of Algeria's Foreign Relations, 1992 to Present," in Aghrout, A. and Bougherira, R., eds, *Algeria in Transition: Reforms and Development Prospects*, New York: 2004.

⁶ In July 2010, following the first operation, France's then-Prime Minister François Fillon declared that France was "at war" with Al Qaeda and would step up its "fight" against AQIM in the Sahel. See *France24*, "François Fillon déclare la France 'en guerre contre Al-Qaïda,'" July 27, 2010.

⁷ Some analysts have viewed Tuareg separatism as particularly threatening to Algeria given its sizable Tuareg population in the south and Berber restiveness in the northern Kabylia region; that said, there has never been a serious Tuareg separatist movement in Algeria. For the first view, see Isabelle Mandraud, "Les ambitions indépendantistes touareg inquiètent Tamanrasset," *Le Monde*, April 11, 2012.

Algiers' quietude could be attributed to political circles' preoccupation with domestic affairs. Much-anticipated legislative elections were slated for May 10, and had been portrayed as the embodiment of political reforms initiated in early 2011 amid the stirrings of the "Arab Spring." (Like the halting, the elections appear, in the end, to have been largely symbolic.) Domestic concerns have since continued to dominate, with increased speculation in the press about elite competition over who will inherit the presidency in 2014.

In late June, Algerian officials rejoined the international debate about Mali through a series of well-orchestrated public appearances. Algeria's Minister for Maghreb and African Affairs Abdelkader Messahel held a joint press conference with visiting UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Alistair Burt on June 24, in which Messahel underscored Algeria's preference for a "political solution" through "dialogue," while Burt praised Algeria's role as a "key player" in the region and asserted that a military intervention in Mali would be considered only as a "last resort."⁸ The event was an apparent swipe at ECOWAS efforts—unsuccessful, to date—to mobilize a regional stabilization force in Mali under a UN mandate. ECOWAS's proposal is supported by the African Union, which suggests Algeria is not (yet) leveraging the vacuum in that organization left by Qadhafi to further boost its regional influence. However, the UN Security Council's wary stance toward the proposal was hailed as a victory for Algeria in the local press.⁹

Algiers' distaste for the concept of a regional intervention force may be due to concerns that such a force could potentially serve as vehicle for French military deployments or intelligence collection activities in the guise of assisting regional troops. (After meeting with Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou—a vocal proponent of ECOWAS intervention—in mid-June, French President François Hollande indicated vaguely that France would put itself "at the service of the United Nations" to aid an African-led military mission in Mali should it obtain a green light from the Security Council.) However, whether, and under what conditions, Algeria would accept and/or aid an ECOWAS intervention, even in the absence of French participation, remains unclear. Algerian policymakers may primarily wish to curtail ECOWAS's efforts to claim the mantle of primary regional actor vis-a-vis Mali and the regional organization's related role as a conduit for Western conflict resolution efforts. Morocco, which currently holds a rotating seat on the Security Council, has taken advantage of Algerian ambivalence, and the opportunity to support Paris, by becoming a vocal advocate of military intervention in Mali.¹⁰ The potential for unilateral Algerian strikes at AQIM or MUJWA targets within Malian territory is also uncertain, and the topic remains taboo (at least in public) for Algerian politicians.¹¹

⁸ AFP, "Mali: l'Algérie estime qu'une solution 'politique négociée est possible,'" June 24, 2012.

⁹ In U.N. Security Council Resolution 2056, adopted on July 5, 2012, the Council noted the request by ECOWAS and the African Union to authorize the deployment of an ECOWAS stabilization force but reiterated its demands for "additional information" from ECOWAS "regarding the objectives, means and modalities of the envisaged deployment and other possible measures." For Algerian reactions, see, e.g., "As Army Intervention in Mali Fades Away, Advocates Turn to Algeria for Exit Plan," *El Khabar* via BBC Monitoring, June 27, 2012.

¹⁰ *Le Monde*, "Le Maroc veut internationaliser la crise malienne," July 1, 2012.

¹¹ The Algerian army reportedly carried out a targeted airstrike in April against a column of vehicles said to hold MUJWA fighters engaged in smuggling operations near the Malian border. See *El Khabar*, "L'ANP liquide 20

The absence of a clearly articulated Algerian approach to—or clear interpretation of the significance of—MUJWA is also salient. In addition to continuing to hold Algerian (and European) hostages, MUJWA has now asserted control over the northern Malian city of Gao, having ousted MNLA commanders in late June. Much as has been the case with AQIM’s Sahel cells, which have (to date) been at least as preoccupied with making money through smuggling and kidnapping as with the global jihadist cause, questions abound as to MUJWA’s ultimate aims and *raison d’être*, not to mention its relationship with AQIM. Although the group’s leadership appears to be based in Mali, the terrorist attacks for which it has claimed responsibility have mostly been carried out within or against Algeria, raising questions as to the veracity of its stated desire to spread jihad to Sub-Saharan Africa.¹² Algerian nationals, including AQIM commanders, have also reportedly traveled to Gao in an apparent bid to help shore up MUJWA’s position. Intrigue has heightened further with recent news reports that Qatar is financing Malian armed groups, and that MUJWA provided security for Qatari aid agencies traveling to Gao. Such allegations, which originated in the French satirical newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné*, have since been repeatedly aired in the Algerian press, possibly reflecting tensions between Algiers and Doha over energy issues and regional policy.¹³

In sum, Algeria’s stance toward Mali increasingly appears to consist of hedging bets while seeking to preserve the prerogatives of a regional heavyweight. In the context of rapidly shifting developments with uncertain implications, Algeria has maintained contacts with a wide range of actors (including a visiting delegation from Ansar al Deen) and seems to be prioritizing access to information and influence over a clearly formulated strategy. This may make sense for Algiers, and a similar approach can be seen in the behavior of Burkina Faso’s Blaise Compaoré, the official ECOWAS “mediator” in Mali. Yet—as is often the case when dealing with Algeria’s government—it is far from clear which Algerian agencies and entities are most powerful in determining the course of action. For example, it seems likely that various entities within the Algerian state—including but not limited to the presidency, the foreign and interior ministries, and the military command and intelligence services—are competitors as much as collaborators with regard to Mali policy. That these familiar dynamics appear to be inhibiting a more strident Algerian position highlights the frequent tension between Algeria’s desire to come across as a “key player” and its proven ability to behave as such. Furthermore, Algeria’s approach means that ECOWAS (itself riven with internal differences) and Mali’s most militarily powerful neighbor are potentially working at cross-purposes. Such uncoordinated actions have presented Western policy makers with a challenging environment for enabling sought-after “African solutions to African problems.”

membres du MUJAO à Tinzaouatine dont le chef de Tassallit,” April 29, 2012; see also Andrew Lebovich, “Is Mali the ‘Next Afghanistan?’” *al-Wasat*, June 10, 2012.

¹² Other than the kidnapping of Algerian diplomats in Gao in April, MUJWA’s notable attacks include the kidnapping of three European aid workers in the Western Sahara refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, in October 2011; and suicide bombings in two normally secure areas: Tamanrasset, in March, and the city of Ouargla in Algeria’s oil and gas producing region on June 29. See *The Moor Next Door*, “More on MUJWA: The Battle at Gao and Even More Questions,” July 1, 2012; and “Some Things We May Think About MUJWA,” May 30, 2012.

¹³ *Jeune Afrique*, “Le Qatar accusé de financer les groupes islamistes de l’Azawad,” June 6, 2012.