

The Sahara at the crossroads

Taking a long view on events in Southern Algeria and Mali

The current crisis in Mali, the French intervention and the international terrorist threat it poses, most directly, to Europe, have once again put jihadism centre-stage in the media. While analysts assess the likelihood of France's success in the region and the critical situation, rightly emphasising the consequences of recent events in Libya, few have taken into account the intricate regional dynamics that stem from the combination of political developments in Algeria, France's relationship to its former colonies, and the complex interplay between Islam and tribal developments. In this analysis for Counterpoint, Berny Sèbe underlines some crucial regional, cultural and strategic points that are in danger of being overlooked.

Ongoing events in Mali and the recent hostage crisis in Southern Algeria have put a spotlight on the immense geostrategic importance of the Sahara, a space the size of the United States and on Europe's doorstep. The Sahara could be turned into a remarkably effective terrorist sanctuary if several underlying problems are not addressed immediately. Though it is apparently a space shared amongst ten countries, borders are so porous that the Sahara in its entirety is becoming an open space for terrorist organisations, which will certainly adapt their tactics to the conditions created by the new war in the region.

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Rather than thinking in terms of individual countries, the threat should be considered from a global Saharan perspective. This is because many dormant conflicts may be reactivated as instability prevails; a pattern characteristic of the last two decades. With one of the last two remaining poles of stability – Gaddafi's Libyan Jamahiriya – gone with the fall of the dictator, the entire region is now subject to centripetal forces that will be even more difficult to tackle if they are seen in isolation from each other, rather than as volcanoes belonging to the same tectonic ridge.

Nowhere has this been more in evidence than in Mali, where the return home of disgruntled – and jobless – mercenaries has shaken the fragile equilibrium which had allowed the country to remain for years on the brink of war without it breaking. The combination of three factors –

- increasingly vocal jihadist movements able to confine the army to its barracks and undermine the central government's authority in the north;
- the end of Gaddafi's networks of influence (geared towards containing Islamic fundamentalism, though it is all too often forgotten);
- and a stream of trained fighters, weapons, ammunitions and militarised 4WDs –

have all led to a situation that was more than the capital, Bamako, could cope with.

A Saharan emirate? Sharia and 'glocal' dynamics

Islamist movements felt they could now achieve in the Sahel what they had failed to impose in Algeria twenty years ago: an Islamic emirate, but this time based on a singularly narrower (and more intolerant) interpretation of sharia law. In a perfect example of glocal dynamics, their regional bid also had a global side: the Imaratou es-Sahra (emirate of the Sahara) was meant to become a safe heaven from where the struggle would be extended, both to neighbouring countries and to Europe (with the 'reconquest' of Southern Spain regularly presented as a credible and acceptable objective).

The spread of jihadist groups from Algeria to the Saharo-Sahelian regions resulted from the ever-increasing capability of the (western-backed) Algerian army, which fought a protracted battle against a variety of armed Islamist movements throughout the 1990s. The spread of these movements had been triggered by the abrupt ending of the democratisation process between the first and second rounds of a general election that was bound to see an overwhelming victory for the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Gradually asphyxiated militarily, weakened by internecine wars, partly discredited in the eyes of the populations by their willingness to co-operate occasionally or permanently with organised crime and smugglers, they were repelled to the margins, first in the Algerian desert and then beyond – especially to Mali.

The secret of the successful transplant to Mali of the leadership of these terrorist groups lies in their ability to absorb existing conflicts and turn them to their advantage

From Algeria to Mali: how exasperation spreads

The secret of the successful transplant to Mali of the (mostly Algerian) leadership of these terrorist groups, along with a few hundred fighters (soon joined by local recruits) lies in their ability to absorb existing conflicts and turn them to their advantage: a widespread exasperation among young people at the chronic lack of personal and professional opportunities in the region; the dissatisfaction of Tuareg nomads against governmental attempts to sedentarise them; a deep (and not unfounded) feeling that the benefits of highly valuable underground resources such as oil, uranium, gold and iron ore do not trickle down to the local population; persistent conflicts between sedentary and nomad populations over scarce overground resources; etc. Combined with the lucrative trade of hostages and drug trafficking – which increased their financial standing – as well as cunning matrimonial strategies which made Islamist leaders kith and kin of some influential local families, this has allowed these terrorist groups to gather enough support to develop relatively safely in the Azawad region. (Where President Toumani Touré, forced to resign in the spring 2012 precisely for this reason, had the weakness to tolerate them.)

Guerilla tactics, or how David might undermine Goliath

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Yet, the overwhelming majority of the Malian population seems opposed to the societal project put forward by the Islamist groups. In particular this is because Wahhabism is seen as an import in a country where Islam has been largely practiced through Sufism, which implies the

intercession of saints, judged as idolatry by Saudi-inspired followers. The destruction of Sufi shrines in and around Timbuktu ('the city of 333 saints', as it is, or was, also commonly known) by jihadists is emblematic of this clash of conflicting orthodoxies.

The jihadists' heavy-handed administration, which involved harrowing corporal punishment such as hand and foot amputations as well as stoning, has certainly made their case less popular locally. But this does not mean that the re-conquest of the territory by the Malian government in months to come will be an easy task. From a military point of view, Malian and French forces, and their allies, will face the risk of seeing rear-guard action by small cells able to wage a guerrilla war. This would compensate its military inferiority with an ability to make the most of the surprise effect and to retain the power to decide where and when battles take place – the nightmare of any strategist. Men and arms can be moved around discreetly in small convoys of one or two vehicles, which are much more difficult to detect than the large flying columns of hundreds of pick-up trucks that triggered 'Operation Serval'. The desert makes guerrilla tactics hard to tackle, even with the most sophisticated surveillance systems, and Islamist groups undoubtedly count on the critical advantage which their intimate knowledge of the terrain gives them.

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But if winning the war will certainly be a challenging task, winning the peace will be even more so. To be entirely successful, the current military operation needs to neutralise armed katibas as well as sleeping cells, whilst refraining from inflicting indiscriminate reprisals against light-skinned ethnic groups (generally suspected of collusion with the Islamists by dark-skinned soldiers). More importantly, any military victory, if it can be clearly obtained, will have to be followed by a full return to a functioning democracy in Mali, and by a clear commitment from Bamako to give its Northern provinces all the attention they deserve. Given this commitment, they might get over a craving for independence which triggered the current crisis in the first place. The place of the Tuareg minority, which has felt uneasy in its own country ever since independence and which has risen up five times (over five decades), will have to be negotiated so that Tuaregs find their place in the national community.

A global vision for the Sahel is the only way of making the use of military muscle meaningful in the long-term

Incentives, or how to make terrorism the least attractive option

Ultimately, stability in Mali will only last if the situation of the entire region improves and Islamist radicalism and local movements no longer find fertile breeding grounds. A better distribution of the benefits made from the valuable underground resources available, a clear clamp-down on all sorts of trafficking and the restarting of peaceful and lucrative legal activities (such as arts and crafts and tourism) will create the appropriate economic environment to make terrorism and delinquency unattractive. A global vision for the Sahel is the only way of making the use of military muscle meaningful in the long-term. Implementing these strategic changes will not be an easy task, but all governments in the area (and, first among them, the Algerian one) have an objective interest in purging the security cancer which has been undermining their Saharan territories for years now. Europeans can help them achieve this goal (on the proviso that such assistance is requested), and this would be a noble and

useful undertaking, sealing a mutually beneficial partnership between two areas of the world which have more interests in common than is usually acknowledged.

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