

THE PARANOID NEIGHBOR

Algeria and the Conflict in Mali

Anouar Boukhars

MIDDLE EAST | OCTOBER 2012

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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Summary

As the crisis in Mali threatens to grow into a full-fledged regional security and humanitarian nightmare, nervous neighboring countries are looking to Algeria to lead a conflict management effort. In many ways Algeria has always wanted recognition as a regional leader. Yet, Algiers worries about being dragged into a Saharan quagmire and seems reluctant or unable to maintain stability in its backyard. Both the country's neighbors and the West are questioning Algeria's decision not to take a more active role in Mali.

Key Themes

- Following an uprising launched by secular Tuareg rebels in Mali's north, the government collapsed in the south and its military was thrown into disarray.
- The new administration is struggling to gain popular trust and assert its authority over Malian territory.
- Ethnic tensions are rising dangerously in the north, where Islamist militant groups have consolidated their control. In particular, Ansar Dine—led by Tuareg notable Iyad ag Ghali and backed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—has moved to the fore.
- Algeria has more than \$200 billion in foreign currency reserves, battle-tested security forces with combat experience in counterterrorism, and influence in regional and international organizations.
- Diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis and the Economic Community of West African States' strategy for restoring order through force in the north have yet to gain traction.

Findings

Algeria's sustained, cooperative, and sincere engagement in Mali is necessary. Algiers, critical to the success of conflict management and resolution in the region, is in a unique position to influence events in Mali.

Bolstering the political transition in Bamako should be a priority. Rushed military intervention without first stabilizing the regime in the south could disturb the precarious northern dynamics and have disastrous consequences. It must attempt to coordinate its actions with its neighbors.

Algeria should urge Iyad ag Ghali to sever his ties with AQIM. This would facilitate a political settlement with Bamako and help end the conflict.

Algiers should employ its military and counterterrorism capabilities along its southern border. Doing so would help prevent spillover of the conflict.

The United States should assist in rebuilding the Malian armed forces. Mali needs a disciplined army capable of stabilizing the south and credibly threatening the use of force in the north. The United States must engage in a way that is complementary rather than competitive to Algeria's security and diplomatic initiatives.

Influence and Instability in Mali

The collapse of the old order in Mali came faster than anyone expected. Less than three months after the crisis erupted there in January 2012, the Malian army was unceremoniously defeated as it tried to quell an insurrection in the north, driven back south by an assortment of loosely aligned armed groups. A military coup on March 22 sent President Amadou Toumani Touré into hiding.

The crisis has created a major challenge for Algeria. Given its status as a regional military power and its intimate knowledge of the conflict dynamics in Mali, the country is expected to take the lead in solving the conflict. But preoccupied with a looming leadership transition, faced with popular disenchantment at home, and fearful of possible blowback from military intervention in Mali, Algeria has been more timid, hesitant, and ambivalent than the international community wants it to be. This posture is also attributed to the country's strict and inflexible adherence to the principle of nonintervention.

With more than \$200 billion in foreign currency reserves, a massive military budget, battle-tested security forces with combat experience in counterterrorism, and influence in regional and international organizations, Algeria should logically use its military power and political influence to foster regional stability and sincerely coordinate a regional effort to fight terrorist groups in the Sahel. In Mali in particular, these resources could be put to very good use in mediating the conflict and in exerting pressure on the armed groups in the north. But so far, the military resources Algeria has applied have not equaled its capabilities. Algerian foreign policy seems torn between the country's desire to be cast and recognized as a regional leader and its reluctance or inability to use the significant tools at its disposal to maintain stability in its backyard and help restore peace when conflict does break out.

The institutional collapse in Mali's capital, Bamako, and the military debacle in the north of the country are the products of local, national, and international factors that are inexorably intertwined. The "wicked" problems of worsening state fragility,¹ compounded by the devastating shock of the Libyan war, directly led to the explosion of festering historical grievances in the north and the subsequent political vacuum in the south. After the coup, the military restored civilian rule and an interim civilian government, but the new administration is still struggling to regain popular trust and assert itself over the military junta. In the north, Islamist militant groups have consolidated their control.

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The crisis in Mali has exposed the country's tectonic fault lines, casting a shadow over current peace efforts and any future military intervention to reintegrate the north into the rest of the country. Diplomatic attempts to solve the crisis have faltered. The core states that could influence the key stakeholders in the conflict have been unable or unwilling to reconcile their interests and harmonize their actions. Accusations and counteraccusations of free riding and self-serving posturing remain the norm. Meanwhile, questions about the necessity, timing, and shape of the intervention force in northern Mali persist, as does speculation about Algeria's next move.

The bottom line is that a sustained, cooperative, and sincere engagement by Algeria is critical to the success of conflict management and resolution in Mali.

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The country's economic and political power as well as its efforts to position itself as a leader in its neighborhood place it in a unique position to influence events. Of course, its potential should not be exaggerated. The time when Algeria exemplified "revolutionary third-world nationalism" and held the "moral edge of leadership" is long gone.² The country is eerily out of step with the historic political changes sweeping the Middle East and North

Africa; its demeanor remains dour and its stances opaque.³ Yet, these issues do not negate Algeria's assets as a critical player in the Malian conflict. Western powers should engage in the conflict in Mali in a way that is complementary rather than competitive to Algeria's security and diplomatic initiatives.

Things Fall Apart

Keen observers of Mali have long considered the country the weakest link in the Sahel and the most prone to radical Islamist destabilization.⁴ Some have warned about the Malian public's simmering discontent with their seemingly democratic but deeply dysfunctional state. They predicted a resumption of ethnic militancy in the north—which has troubled the capital with secessionist rebellions off and on since 1962—even before the conflict in Libya erupted in February 2011. But none imagined the dramatic sequence of events that saw Tuareg rebels conquer the north and the government collapse in the south. The Tuareg are Berber nomadic pastoralists that had long pushed for autonomy from a central government they accuse of misrule and marginalization, but never before succeeded in so fully destabilizing the state. The disintegration of Mali is attributed to the fragility of the Malian political structure, weak governance and neglect of the hinterlands, and the simmering insurgency in the north, transformed by the Libyan war into a full-fledged armed rebellion.

Before it backfired on him, Amadou Toumani Touré, the president of Mali from 2002 to 2012, found it economically and politically convenient to rely on a loose network of questionable actors to keep control of the north rather

than pay the price necessary to extend the state's authority to the recalcitrant region. His strategy of preventing the thinly populated and expansive peripheral northern zones of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu (which comprise two-thirds of the country but only 10 percent of the population) from slipping into armed insurgency was based on outsourcing state functions to opportunist local elites and manageable armed factions and militias. The Touré administration was also widely suspected of having relations with political patrons and criminal entrepreneurs with ties to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a hybrid transnational terrorist-criminal organization that emerged from the Islamist insurgency that ravaged Algeria from 1992 to 1998.⁵

The collaboration among these actors was seen as mutually beneficial. Touré's sponsors and allies benefited handsomely from corruption and revenues from transnational criminal activity while allowing him to maintain Bamako's juridical authority in inhospitable spaces and to neutralize hostile armed groups.

This strategy of governance was ultimately unsustainable. It exacerbated ethnic and tribal tensions and left the structural problems of underdevelopment and poverty that produced the rebellions of 1963, the 1990s, and 2006–2009 unattended. Worse, it was also built upon shaky and unreliable alliances.

When the Touré government launched the €50 million (around \$64 million in today's dollars) Special Program for Peace, Security and Development in August 2011 to try and make up lost ground in the north, it was too little, too late. The plan was ill-conceived and badly implemented, and inflamed tensions between north and south. Funded by the European Union (EU) and other international donors, the program was designed to quell rising discontent and roll back the gains that AQIM and criminal entrepreneurs made at the expense of the state, but it ended up further alienating local populations, strengthening anti-Bamako sentiment, and paving the way for renewed militancy.

The Tuareg, who make up about a third of the population in the north, strongly opposed the investments the government made in reconstituting a military presence of its troops in the north. Bamako considered the force essential to reassert its lost authority and protect the Development and Governance Centers it had established for infrastructure development.⁶ It was seen as a violation of the 2006 Algiers accords, which laid out a ceasefire between north and south after a Tuareg insurrection and stipulated a reduction of southern state security forces in the northern part of the country.⁷ This episode underlined the depth of the historical mistrust between south and north that began with Mali's independence in 1960 and was aggravated by economic deprivations in the north.

Several Tuareg organizations tried to harness this anger at the central authority in Bamako. The most prominent was the National Movement of Azawad (MNA); the Azawad is the name the Tuareg use to refer to Mali's northern region. Created in 2010, it endeavored to build a local network of

dissent and mobilize international support for its project of northern independence from Mali. The MNA's case for secession revolved around grievances that had long existed. The capital was often accused of intentionally neglecting the north economically. Officials, the MNA said, siphoned off international aid for their own purposes, did not fully implement previous peace accords signed between north and south, and colluded with organized crime and AQIM.

Ultimately, an outside force was necessary to spur definitive action. The Libyan war that ousted Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 became the catalyst that "precipitated the [MNA] network's transformation into a rebellion."⁸ Hundreds of Tuareg who served in Qaddafi's pan-African force, established in 1972, and who fought against Libyan revolutionaries returned to their homes in northern Mali. Some of these fighters are the offspring of Tuareg who had migrated to Libya during the 1984 drought or fled the Malian government's repression during the 1963 rebellion. They ignited the simmering insurgency.

The armed revolt against Malian forces began on January 17, 2012, exactly six months after the Tuareg returned home from Libya. It was led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), an offshoot of the MNA established in October 2011 and composed of a mosaic of armed groups bound by loose loyalties and conditional alliances.

Since its inception, the MNLA was built on shaky foundations, vulnerable to micro-political, ideological, and tribal tensions. The fight, however, united the disparate groups and quieted their differences. The swiftness and decisiveness of the military campaign stunned the south, causing popular dismay and anger at Touré's handling of the war as well as a revolt within the military hierarchy. Capitalizing on the sour mood in the capital, a junta led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo overthrew the president on March 22, just six weeks before Touré's term ended. Sanogo defended his coup on the basis that Touré failed "to provide adequate equipment to the defence and security forces fulfilling their mission to defend the country's territorial integrity."⁹

The overthrow was a direct result of the Tuareg rebels' humiliating rout of Malian forces. But discontent within the lower ranks of the armed forces was simmering before the onset of the rebellion. Collusion and corruption were primary concerns. Junior officers fumed at the siphoning off of foreign military aid, unmeritorious military promotions, the corruption of the military elite, and their suspected ties to criminal traffickers. Anger was also

directed at the president's inner circle, which many viewed as deeply venal.

The coup illustrated the creeping decay of electoral democracy and degradation of military institutions. As Aminata Dramane Traoré, former minister of culture and tourism, aptly put it, "Sanogo is not the problem, Sanogo is a symptom."¹⁰ Mali, once a promising example

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of democracy in western Africa, was caught in a web of regional terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime. Its leadership unfortunately succumbed to these pressures with devastating consequences for state and society.

After the overthrow of Amadou Toumani Touré, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which was initially seen as the appropriate consortium to mediate the conflict, pressured Sanogo to cede power to an interim government led by Dioncounda Traoré. The new administration, reshuffled recently, is still unable to assert itself politically. Political parties are also numerous and fragmented, hampering the creation of a much-needed united national front.

In the north, confusion still reigns about how convergent or overlapping the armed groups are. The MNLA, which declared the independence of Azawad on April 5, 2012, after chasing government forces from Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, was forced to cede ground to armed Islamist forces—led by the group Ansar Dine (the supporters of religion)—that is cash rich and better armed than it is. As the revolutionary forces advanced south, armed groups in Timbuktu and Gao came to a provisional arrangement and began to reconfigure the power dynamics in northern Mali—a process that continues to spread and develop. The leading force of Ansar Dine has so far benefited the most from these realignments.

Mali's Battle Lines

The power struggle in both the south and north has exposed the underlying fragility of Malian society and the various entrenched powers at play. As soon as their common enemy melted away, Mali's disparate forces redrew battle lines. The military junta that toppled the government in an effort to ostensibly save the integrity of the state only expedited the dissolution of the country and threw the army into disarray. And the secular MNLA had their revolution "stolen" from them by the Islamist Ansar Dine, which is backed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, initially called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) before becoming an affiliate of al-Qaeda in 2007.

Currently, the groups associated with criminal and terrorist organizations are the dominant actors in the conflict in Mali. The actions of these groups, and AQIM in particular, disrupted the status quo and created new vested interests, buttressed by criminal associations and tactical alliances, contributing to the eruption of the conflict in the first place. Those developments also have complicated the search for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, as different and rival groups jostle to carve out a prominent role in any power-sharing agreement with Bamako.¹¹ These internal dynamics make outside intervention quite dangerous—such action could further inflame local tensions, spark new and more dangerous alliances, and, given these groups' links to other countries, potentially have spillover effects on the wider region.

The GSPC's transformation into AQIM was driven by the major setbacks it suffered in Algeria. By 2003, the group was plagued by internal divisions and was running low on money and fighters. Several militants put down their arms as part of two amnesty initiatives launched by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika while the rest were successfully hunted down by Algerian security forces or forced to flee Algerian territory into northern Mali. The GSPC also saw some of its fighters leave for Iraq to join the insurgency against U.S. forces. "The point to be underscored," as a USAID report put it, "is the extent to which events inside Algeria dictated the regional refocusing of the group's operations, embroiling Mali in dynamics with which it had little to do, and over which it had no control."¹² These "exogenous dynamics" necessitate a regional response to the crisis in Mali.

Since the GSPC set up shop in northern Mali in 2003, AQIM has become deeply ingrained in society, patiently building and expanding a network structure of family ties, social support, political relations, and economic exchange. Over the years, the group has become the "best-funded, wealthiest" terrorist and criminal organization,¹³ thanks to the toll it imposed on transborder smuggling of drugs and the large number of ransoms it extorted from Western governments to save the lives of their kidnapped countrymen.

Occasionally, AQIM has used its Arab roots to ingratiate itself with Arab communities. Timbuktu, for example, is a stronghold of AQIM and is where the group first built its network of social and political alliances, "including with Arab militias tolerated and even maintained by ATT [Touré]."¹⁴ At other times, it used the distrust and competition between Songhai and Peuhl on the one hand and Arabs and Tuareg on the other to its advantage. But the most critical factor in the success of AQIM has been "more economic than cultural."¹⁵ AQIM has managed to use its financial prowess to tap into the deep cultural divide in northern Mali. A few influential tribal leaders, for example, "received payments and gifts from GSPC operatives (including, reportedly, four-wheel-drive vehicles) in exchange for safe passage or sanctuary." Other Malian Arabs enriched themselves through active participation in the smuggling networks controlled or connected to AQIM.¹⁶ This has worsened the deep-rooted contentions and competitions between personalities and communities, upsetting the traditional socio-political patterns and the balance of power between and among communities.

The dominant role of criminal and terrorist organizations in the conflict dynamics is best illustrated by the alliance between Ansar Dine and the AQIM. Ansar Dine and its leader Iyad ag Ghali, a Machiavellian fixture of Tuareg insurrections, gradually outwitted and eventually outgunned the MNLA for control of the uprising. The secular MNLA rebels thought ag Ghali had been marginalized during the preparatory stages of the rebellion. Ag Ghali, who comes from the Ifoghas clan, the noblest tribe in the Tuareg caste system, and had been a key force in the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s, was present in the

discussions that the MNLA held by the Algerian border to mobilize support for their armed rebellion. He wanted to be the movement's secretary general but was rebuffed in November 2011, reportedly because of his links to AQIM, ties to Algeria, and past deals with the Malian presidency.

Ag Ghali has always been “inscrutable” with “a kaleidoscopic career as a diplomat, separatist rebel chief, and government mediator with Al-Qaeda hostage-takers.”¹⁷ Hardliners in the MNLA accuse him of selling out the Tuareg cause in the Tamanrasset Accord of 1991, which established a cease-fire between north and south after months of fighting. Besides compromising too much, he is seen as tilting the accords in favor of his region, Kidal, and directly contributing to the fragmentation of the Tuareg movement. His closeness to organized crime and a range of local armed militant groups is also troubling. But this time, “the lion of the desert,” as members of his Ifoghas tribe endearingly call him, is causing a major scare because of his reinvention as a firebrand radical intent on imposing an extreme form of Islamic law.

Ag Ghali's support for war in the north was predicated upon his desire to install sharia all over Mali. A convert to Salafism in the late 1990s, he knows that a number of Malians have become more conservative over the years and were influenced by the Tablighi ideas and preaching that has pervaded northern Malian society. Indeed, as the MNLA marched on Gao and Timbuktu during the uprising, it could not find adherents to its secular separatist project. The rebellion entered hostile “sociological, political and religious terrain” that was much more conservative and Islamist, and unsupportive of the MNLA's cause.¹⁸ So there is in fact some “social legitimacy to the project to impose Sharia law embodied by Iyad Ag Ghali.”¹⁹

Ag Ghali has certainly made headway. Once the military campaign began, he mobilized Ansar Dine and solicited logistical and personnel support from his purported cousin, Abdelkrim Targui, the emir of the militant unit Katiba al-Ansar, “The Battalion of the Victors.” Soon after, his forces had the upper hand on the battlefield, conquering the town of Kidal one week after the coup in Bamako and expelling the MNLA from Timbuktu shortly thereafter. By April, the charismatic ag Ghali emerged as the master of the desert, absorbing “MNLA leaders and fighters into his movement.”²⁰ Nevertheless, his recent religious excesses are strongly rejected by the Tuareg.

Alongside Ansar Dine and AQIM, the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)—a splinter offshoot of AQIM—has gradually established itself as a major actor in Gao, but very little is known about the group.²¹ It first burst onto the scene after the spectacular abduction of three European tourists from the heavily fortified camps of Tindouf in Algeria in October 2011. Besides a preference for Algerian targets and a sociological makeup distinct from that of AQIM (its core membership is from the Lamhar tribe, supplemented by Sahrawis and, increasingly, Songhai recruits), MUJAO has behaved like its extremist counterparts, combining criminal and

radical religious activity. MUJAO, and Ansar Dine as well, has benefited from kidnappings of Westerners for ransom, and the bonanza of the Libyan arms bazaar. The proceeds from these activities have enabled the group to broaden its recruitment base, despite popular opposition to its fundamentalist project. In the very ethnically diverse city Gao, for instance, MUJAO has solidified its presence and ties, particularly with the city's Arab communities. Residents of Gao have protested against the group but welcomed "the modicum of security that came with MUJAO and view the MNLA's departure as the first step in a broader process of 'getting things back to normal.'"²²

These groups' association with AQIM—if only potentially fleeting given how notoriously volatile and fluctuating alliances are—portends ominous consequences for Mali and its neighbors. AQIM's Algerian guru in North Africa, Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, also known as Abdelmalek Droukdel, confirmed such fears when he instructed his fighters to discreetly facilitate Ansar Dine's project of (gradually) implementing sharia in the Azawad and to "keep the cover of (AQIM) limited to our activities in the global jihad."²³ In other words, Droukdel prefers to leave the management of Mali's north to local Islamist forces like Ansar Dine and MUJAO while al-Qaeda's North African wing pursues its wider goals of dominating the region.

How successful AQIM's project is turning out to be in a complex social environment where loyalties change constantly is hard to tell. Careful observers of the Sahel believe that despite a long-standing trend toward religious conservatism at the grassroots level, it is highly unlikely that any force would be able to impose its extremist Islamist project on the region. Even though Salafi ideology has been making inroads for the last two decades, radical Islam in general lacks significant popular support in northern Mali.²⁴ And even though AQIM has developed impressive networks in northern Mali, the group's presence rests on unstable foundations. The vicissitudes of tribal allegiances, clan loyalties, and nomadic alliances make for an ephemeral existence, as does the unstable equilibrium within and between the different communities that populate the north.²⁵ Even Droukdel warned of zealous overreach, cautioning his allies not to seek immediate imposition of sharia in Mali's north. "Know that it is a mistake to impose all the rules of Islam at once on people overnight," he said.²⁶

AQIM, because of its cash war chest, acquisition of weapons from Libya, and ability to operate unhindered in northern Mali, remains a key factor in provoking instability across the region. With "increased freedom to maneuver, terrorists are seeking to extend their reach and their networks in multiple directions," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned recently.²⁷ U.S. officials suspect that AQIM fighters were involved in the September 11 attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. How to get a handle on this force must be a central concern for any policy aimed at quieting the situation in northern Mali.

Meanwhile, Iyad ag Ghali must also be aware of the pitfalls of overreaching. Too close association with AQIM endangers his cherished status as the main power broker in Mali, as was evident in the lead-up to the rebellion. Ag Ghali is concerned with maintaining his extensive ties to a variety of actors. As Rolan Marchal aptly put it, “Iyad ag Ghali is a good illustration of the type of people often needed by Algiers and Bamako to interact with AQIM or the Tuareg to maintain channels of communication.”²⁸ Ag Ghali boasts a formidable array of contacts in Bamako and the most influential regional capital (Algiers), and he is believed to have significant weight with armed (militant) groups. He has used this web of influence—especially in Algiers—in earlier conflicts to great success.

Algeria’s Man in the Azawad

The dominant role of ag Ghali in the current crisis in Mali and his connections to Algeria have placed enormous pressure on the Algerians to use their influence with him and his armed group. More broadly, based on decades of experience, Algeria knows the conflict dynamics in Mali and has the potential to pressure and influence the decision calculus of the main armed actors in the country.²⁹ Indeed, since 1990 the international community has come to rely on its good offices and diplomatic intervention to help mediate or avert conflicts in Mali.

But since the onset of the hostilities in January 2012, Algeria’s role has been opaque to many in the international community.³⁰ In the early months of the Malian conflict, Algeria adopted a more passive “wait and see” approach than it took in 2006, when it helped broker the Algiers accords. It appeared to hedge its bets carefully to protect its strategic interests.³¹ This attitude was interpreted in the region as “malignant neglect,” intended to punish Mali for the “sins” of its soon-to-be-deposed president Touré, whom the Algerians accused of “willful complicity” with AQIM.³² Malians in the south felt betrayed, especially when Algeria withdrew its military advisers and cut off the delivery of military equipment during the decisive battle of Tessalit in early March 2012, in which Malian forces were besieged. The Algerians justified their inactivity on the basis that their commitment to Mali was driven by counterterrorism goals and not by counterinsurgency warfare.³³

The MNLA is suspicious of Algeria’s intent and harbors resentment at the country’s past mediation strategy and choice of interlocutors, which limited Algeria’s influence over the MNLA. The group’s most influential wing is represented by those who were disenchanted by the 2006 accords. And the marginalization of Iyad ag Ghali during the formation of the MNLA was in many ways an indirect jab at the architects of those accords: Algeria and ag Ghali.³⁴ Some of the malcontents are convinced that ag Ghali in particular is an agent of the feared DRS, Algeria’s military intelligence service.³⁵ Some observers

go so far as to believe that Algeria is deliberately allowing Ansar Dine to gain full control of the north, as that would weaken the MNLA and its separatist project as well as slow the recruitment base of AQIM.

Ag Ghali in particular is a threat to the MNLA's desire to be the representative of the north. He has political, tribal, and ideological connections that make his movement more effective at establishing a modicum of order in its territory and, most importantly, reining in AQIM and its offshoots. He has also pushed for the release of Western hostages to show himself as a pragmatist and prudent leader.³⁶ It is therefore no accident that the MNLA turned down Algeria's invitation to attend peace talks in early February.

Of course, Algeria distrusts the MNLA as well, mainly because of the MNLA's links to the country's own separatist groups in France. For instance, the MNLA's association with Algerian Berber nationalists irritates Algiers. Kabyle activists in France who agitate for Berber self-determination in Algeria provide significant logistical assistance to the separatist activism of the MNLA. The group must also view as disingenuous Algeria's support of the Polisario's three-decade-long quest for the independence of Western Sahara from Morocco while it denies the Tuareg people their shot at self-determination.³⁷

Each of these factors makes it all the more difficult to take action to stabilize northern Mali—even when outside forces, Algeria especially, have the capacity to act.

Algeria's Geopolitical Posture

Algeria is a regional military power and has the potential to influence Ansar Dine and other actors in northern Mali. It could indeed be a key actor in the evolution of the current crisis. Algeria boasts the largest defense budget (\$9.5 billion in 2011) on the African continent, strong military power projection capabilities (thanks to its large fleet of aircraft), and recognized counterterrorism expertise. It also serves as a founding member and leader in several regional and global counterterrorism forums. Algeria hosts the Joint Staff Operations Committee (CEMOC) and the Fusion and Liaison Unit (FLU), institutional mechanisms that were the forums of choice for Algeria to shape the regional fight against terrorism while fending off foreign intrusion.

Algeria also plays a significant role in the counterterrorism structure the United States set up in the Sahel. From the 2002 Pan Sahel Initiative, expanded into the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership in 2005, to the 2007 Africa Command (AFRICOM) based in Stuttgart, Germany, the United States has focused on getting Algeria to use its experience in counterterrorism and counterintelligence in the fight against terrorism and organized crime. The country's DRS "is arguably the world's most effective intelligence service when it comes to fighting Al Qaeda," writes John R. Schindler, a former counterintelligence officer with the National Security Agency. "It is also probably

the most cold-blooded.”³⁸ The DRS developed its skills during the 1990s civil war when Algeria was a living laboratory of counterterrorism policy and practice. It led a brutal and unrelenting campaign against violent Islamist insurgents that significantly reduced the militant groups’ capabilities. The number of radical insurgents dwindled from a high of 27,000 fighters in the mid-1990s to no more than a few hundred in 1998.

The conduct of Algerian security forces in the peak period of horrific violence (1993–1997) put the country in the spotlight, and it became isolated internationally. After the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Algeria was brought back into the fold. President Bouteflika skillfully used these tragic incidents to realign Algeria’s security and foreign policy needs with those of America, selling Algiers as a valuable partner in the war on terrorism. Algeria was finally given the “kind of warrior’s legitimacy” it long coveted, “similar to the revolutionary legitimacy it enjoyed among the Non-Allied countries during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of its war of independence against France.”³⁹

In discussions in Algiers, most interlocutors pointed out that the Algerians fought an existential war against Islamist extremists without any help from the outside world. For Algerian officials, the terrorist attacks in the United States proved that the Algerian regime was prescient in its warnings throughout the 1990s about the dangers of radical Islam. Since September 11, this narrative “has been subsumed into the West’s counterterrorism,”⁴⁰ allowing the Algerian regime to move beyond international scrutiny of the gross violations of human rights committed in the 1990s. It also opened the way for the establishment of strategic relations with the United States.

The security partnership between the United States and Algeria was strengthened in 2010 with the signing of a customs mutual assistance agreement and a mutual legal assistance treaty. In February 2011, the two countries created a bilateral contact group on counterterrorism and security cooperation, and Algeria’s importance in the security realm is enhanced by a set of defense partnerships with several European countries, including Great Britain and Germany. (Its relations, however, with the EU and especially France remain strained for historical and geopolitical reasons. Algeria sees France and its regional allies, namely Morocco, as the biggest hurdle in its quest for regional dominance.) It is also anchored in a set of multilateral institutions, including the African Union, where Algerian Ramtane Lamamra heads the Peace and Security Council, and the United Nations, where Saïd Djinnit is the special representative of the UN secretary general for West Africa.

With all these power attributes, Algeria is naturally seen as an indispensable actor in the Sahel. Its leadership might be “a prickly, paranoid group to work with,” as former U.S. Ambassador to Algeria Robert Ford wrote in a diplomatic cable in 2008, but its importance in the fight against AQIM is essential.⁴¹ Still, deep-seated suspicion of Algeria’s motives as a regional power—whose security

policies in the Sahel reverberate across regional boundaries—were clearly evident in the several extensive interviews conducted with a range of specialists in Algiers, Brussels, Berlin, Nouakchott, Rabat, and Washington, DC.

Most interlocutors highlight Algeria's core strengths and strategic importance to the fate of a critical region, but they are frustrated by how brittle, paranoid, and opaque a partner the country can be. Most of these frustrations revolve around the spread of AQIM. Algiers has refused to direct its attack capabilities against AQIM outside its borders. It justifies those decisions with its long-established doctrine of state sovereignty and nonintervention.⁴² But that fails to convince others, especially in France and the European External Action Service. To its European critics, Algeria has the material and military capabilities to weaken AQIM, especially if it coordinates with Western powers, but the resources it has applied have been disproportionate to its capabilities, enabling the group to establish footholds in unstable places like northern Mali.

Even American security officials, clearly the most patient and in favor of Algeria assuming the mantle of regional leadership, are not certain the country is willing to manage its backyard. In an interview with the author, a senior officer at AFRICOM portrayed Algeria as an ambivalent regional power whose expectations and actions are difficult to discern because they vary according to the issue area. The country can at times be very helpful in support of U.S. intelligence and surveillance operations in the Sahel but uncooperative at others, withholding some critical intelligence on AQIM activities and doing little to monitor and control the logistical supply lines to extremist armed groups in the Sahel. Similar complaints were advanced by a senior U.S. diplomat who expressed his frustration with Algerian officials' unwillingness to share the information they have on the main actors in the conflict in Mali.⁴³

Algerian officials react defensively and angrily to these accusations. In interviews in Algiers and Brussels, Algerian officials bemoan the prevalent misreading of their country's role and functions in the Sahel. Algeria, they say, has done more than any other country to support the objective of security and peace in the region—and to contribute actively to conflict resolution in Mali. All the previous accords were signed in Algiers, and in the current conflict, Algeria hosts over 30,000 refugees and has donated tons of food and medicine to other camps in Mauritania and Niger. Algeria also pressured the MNLA to release dozens of Malian soldiers. Still, the Algerian regime is extremely worried about being dragged into a Saharan quagmire, which could have catastrophic effects on its domestic stability.

Algeria's Reticence

The Algerian regime's hesitancy is rooted in a number of factors, ranging from its norm of nonintervention to its wariness about outsider meddling and the spillover of the extremist threat into its territory. Several interlocutors in

Algiers believe that an Algerian intervention in Mali would embroil the country in a disastrous adventure. Some claimed that such an eventuality is exactly the intention of ECOWAS, which has been promoting a two-phased intervention strategy, and its foreign supporters, namely France and Morocco.

A former senior administrator in the influential African Center for Studies and Research on Terrorism in Algiers compared an Algerian intervention in Mali to that of the blunder of Argentina's military junta in the 1982 Falklands War. The British humiliatingly routed the Argentines who had occupied the islands; that defeat had repercussions in Buenos Aires, ending military rule of Argentina and ushering in a democratic transition.

The analogy of the Soviets' imbroglio in Afghanistan was also amply cited in discussions in Algiers. In the words of one journalist, the Algerian regime is not foolish enough to take the lead in fighting radical Islamists beyond its borders because such action brings along with it the potential to unite disparate armed groups behind the banner of AQIM and against Algeria. "This is exactly what the Americans did to Pakistan," said Abdelaziz Rahabi, former Algerian diplomat and minister of communications. Pakistan, which was made to take on extremist groups, ended up being those groups' target of choice. Rahabi fears that subcontracting the war against terrorist and criminal groups in Mali to Algeria would make his country the main target of AQIM and its associates.⁴⁴ It would also "push tens of thousands of refugees to our southern borders, and more of the weapons' flow."⁴⁵

The Algerian regime is also worried that an intervention in Mali would threaten the balance it has laboriously built between its foreign and domestic priorities.⁴⁶ The primary driver of Algerian foreign policy is regime preservation and its legitimization by the international community.⁴⁷ Despite an inescapable divergence of interests within the ruling circle, there is a general shared consensus on the necessity to create favorable external conditions for securing the regime's hold on power and the country's privileged geopolitical position. Specifically, this means that the regime must control the instabilities in its southern Sahelian hinterland, protect against Western intrusion and interference, and neutralize its regional rivals. With the Islamist ascent to power in its neighborhood and Western intervention in Libya, the regime is "concerned that one of the main planks of the past decade's strategic balance struck with the U.S. and Europe has been weakened."⁴⁸

Algeria is broadly suspicious that a French-led bloc is being established with the main goal of containing Algerian power. The country is distrustful of its neighbors, especially the so-called pro-French axis, led by Morocco and the weaker states of the Sahel. And the feeling of unease and insecurity has only grown with the momentous political changes that have engulfed neighboring Tunisia and especially Egypt, where Islamists swept away the

The Algerian regime is worried that an intervention in Mali would threaten the balance it has laboriously built between its foreign and domestic priorities.

old-guard generals without triggering any public protests or military coups. Very few observers anticipated a scenario in which a democratically elected Islamist president outmaneuvers his generals within a month of his election. It took Turkey's Islamists decades to finally jettison military rule. In contrast, in Algeria, twenty years ago, the generals cancelled the whole electoral process to prevent the Islamists from coming to power, plunging the country into a horrific civil war. The increasing closeness of post-Qaddafi Libya with Morocco only adds to Algeria's fears.

The dramatic purge of the senior Egyptian military command by President Mohamed Morsi, helped by disaffected younger officers, is no doubt troublesome to the aging generals in Algeria, including DRS's all-powerful and long-serving chief, General Mohamed Mediene, and eighty-year-old Army Chief of Staff Giad Salah. (A number of generals have already died or were forcibly retired.) To be sure, the security establishment in Algeria is entrenched and secretive, making it hard to know whether there is any disgruntlement in the ranks. But the status quo might soon become unsustainable as the old generation of military leaders is replaced by the new.⁴⁹

The response of the international community to the stunning developments in Egypt equally worries the Algerians. Despite serious concerns about an Islamist power grab, the United States has not voiced (public) alarm nor has it threatened to cut off military and financial aid. This prudent and measured reaction feeds suspicion that the United States is cozying up to the Islamists. Since the onset of the Arab revolt, the Algerians have been perturbed by the positive engagement of Islamists and Washington's (gentle) prodding of military leaders in Egypt to refrain from monopolizing legislative and executive power.

The prospect of Islamists surging to power in Algeria remains remote (Islamist parties performed far below expectations in the country's May 2012 legislative elections),⁵⁰ but the acceleration of events domestically and regionally heralds a period of flux. So far, Algeria has successfully weathered the popular upheavals. Importantly, Algerians' appetite for revolutionary change remains subdued, as memories of the 1990s civil war are still vivid. The political opposition also remains weak, and the regime has successfully used oil and gas money and limited reforms to placate social dissenters. It has skillfully used the tragic developments in Syria, the turbulent transition in Libya, and the chaos in Mali to warn Algerians about the dangers of brusque radical change. The regime portrayed the Western-induced regime change in Libya as a sinister plot by Western forces, rekindling Algerian nationalist sentiment.

In the face of incessant calls for an intervention in Mali, the Algerian leadership has called for national unity. Last May, President Bouteflika urged Algerian youth to mobilize against the "instigators of *fitna* (chaos) and division" and guard against foreign meddling and interference. A few weeks ago, it was the turn of the newly appointed prime minister to call for the establishment of a "strong internal front" to protect the country from "malicious

hands” desirous to do harm to Algeria and its territorial integrity. Some Algerians believe that these calls for patriotism stem from genuine fears of external destabilization. According to a source close to the Algerian presidency, the historical precedent to these fears goes back to General De Gaulle’s proposal in 1961 to rob Algeria of its Sahara.⁵¹ Most analysts, however, believe that the regime is playing the nationalist card to temper Algerians’ disgruntlement with their social conditions during a difficult leadership transition.

The country’s leadership seems deadlocked over the heir to ailing president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who is expected to retire when his third term ends in 2014. It took four months after parliamentary elections were held for a new government to be appointed (key ministers kept their portfolios), exposing a rift in the ruling clans over who should be nominated for key ministerial posts and who to anoint as the next leader. This uncertainty over succession is a cause of concern as it creates a political vacuum and amplifies popular disaffection. “The main challenge for the leadership that has ruled Algeria since 1962,” argued Algerian journalist Lamine Chikhi in an interview with the author, “is whether they can avoid a messy succession battle.” The outcome would have ramifications for the pace of institutional change and the direction of economic reforms.

Securing Borders

The conflict in Mali is a test case of whether Algeria can reconcile its domestic priorities with its foreign goals. The threat that the conflict in northern Mali will spill over into Algeria is not negligible, nor is the prospect of a French-led intervention into the north. Both of these eventualities might affect the dynamics of the power struggle within Algeria’s leadership and threaten the country’s dominant position in its neighborhood. Kamel Daoud, an Algerian columnist, nicely summed up Algeria’s perceived vulnerability when he stated that a Western military presence on the country’s southern flank is detrimental to an Algeria already besieged by unfriendly neighbors and instabilities. The country is wary of its Moroccan rival in the West, concerned about rising discontent and instability in the southwestern Polisario camps of Tindouf, and threatened from the east by turmoil in Libya.⁵²

Since the turmoil in Mali began, Algeria has taken actions to protect itself against the repercussions of these scenarios. It has significantly beefed up its troop presence on its southern flank and increased the number of checkpoints and surveillance flights to track the movement of drug dealers, arm traders, and terrorists that could carry the conflict across a range of territories. Border crossings were also tightened and transport of goods controlled and monitored.⁵³ These are the kinds of measures that the United States and the EU have been pushing Algeria to take for years now.

Armed militias proliferate in northern Mali and the swelling number of vulnerable refugees and displaced Malians overwhelms aid efforts.

Algiers has also stepped up its monitoring of the massive refugee camps near Tindouf in southwest Algeria. On a number of past occasions, these camps were infiltrated by extremist groups and gangs intent on kidnapping Westerners for ransom.⁵⁴ Trouble seems to be brewing once again. On July 29, 2012, Spain sent a military plane to evacuate its aid workers from the camps in Algerian territory due to “well-founded evidence of a serious increase in insecurity in the region.”⁵⁵ The evacuation represents a political embarrassment to Algeria, which has long maintained that the refugee camps are impervious to the advances of extremist and criminal groups.

As armed militias proliferate in northern Mali and the swelling number of vulnerable refugees and displaced Malians overwhelms aid efforts and strain neighboring countries that are already facing severe food shortages, Algeria has also recently stepped up its efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict. So far, however, international action has lacked coordination, and Algeria’s actions have simply not been enough.

To Intervene or Not to Intervene

The mediation process led by the Economic Community of West African States has been ineffective, and the group is badly divided, with some arguing for military force and others for a more graduated approach. Thus far, ECOWAS has struggled to win the backing of the United States, the United Nations Security Council, and Algeria, casting serious doubt on its plan to help Mali restore its authority in the north.

Currently, ECOWAS is seeking to implement a phased military deployment process in Mali. Phase one entails securing the political transition and revamping Mali’s (military) institutions to lay groundwork for military action. In phase two, a military intervention in the north takes place. But that strategy seems unlikely to work. Despite being members of ECOWAS, Senegal and Ghana have already declared that they will not participate in military deployment to Mali. Other members of the bloc, especially Niger and Burkina Faso, are itching for war in the north even if the political conditions in the south are still not propitious for such escalation.⁵⁶

Yet, given all of the unstable forces at play in northern Mali and the precarious position of the government in the south, any premature intervention could have disastrous consequences. The Malian army is in disarray and it has thus far refused to allow the deployment of West African soldiers in Bamako, rejecting any direct intervention of ECOWAS. Moreover, the first phase of the strategy is critical to the second phase of military intervention in the north. Without it, a successful intervention is unlikely.

International Reactions

A successful intervention is also unlikely without the backing of key international actors. While the EU supports the initiative, most United Nations Security Council members have serious concerns about the mandate and fighting capacity of the stand-by force of 3,000 troops that ECOWAS claims to have mobilized. The plan is “too imprecise and too drawn out in its timetable,” complained a diplomat on the Security Council.⁵⁷ On October 12, the UN Security Council passed a unanimous resolution giving ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations forty-five days to present a credible plan for military action in the north.

The United States insists on bolstering the political transition in Bamako first before contemplating an assault on armed forces in the north. Otherwise, “an ECOWAS mission to militarily retake the north is ill-advised and not feasible,” said Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson in testimony before Congress.⁵⁸

But as the crisis persists, the United States has grown more concerned about the ability of AQIM to use northern Mali as a staging ground to destabilize its Sahelian neighbors and the new fragile democracies of North Africa. It has already increased its counterterrorism training and military aid to the countries most threatened by the chaos in Mali. For example, in July Mauritania was awarded military equipment (trucks, uniforms, and communications gear) worth nearly \$7 million while Niger received two military transport airplanes to conduct surveillance that amounted to \$11.6 million. In conjunction with France, the United States also led military exercises with its West African allies (Senegal, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Gambia).⁵⁹

There is currently a debate within the American administration about whether to deploy armed drones in northern Mali. The United States is already conducting “a series of clandestine-intelligence missions, including the use of civilian aircraft to conduct surveillance flights and monitor communications over the Sahara Desert and the arid region to the south, known as the Sahel.”⁶⁰ Those in favor of conducting unilateral strikes against AQIM strongholds in northern Mali believe the terrorist group represents a global menace rather than simply a regional one. They warn that “Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, as the Yemen-based affiliate is known, was similarly discounted as a regional menace until it was linked to the attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound plane on Christmas in 2009.”⁶¹ The alleged involvement of AQIM fighters in the killing of the U.S. ambassador in Libya has fueled the drone advocates’ calls.

Skeptics, however, warn of potential blowback. The “doings of obscure Malian Islamists” should not be a matter “of more than local concern,” warns former CIA station chief Robert Grenier.⁶² This is the same agonizing question that the United States confronted in Yemen in early 2011 with the

emergence of the local militant group of Ansar al-Sharia, “Partisans of Islamic Law,” that is related to but separate from al-Qaeda.⁶³

This fear of a blowback is not far-fetched, as the Somali case illustrates. In 2006, the United States backed an imprudent Ethiopian invasion of Somalia that drove the country closer to al-Qaeda. The military campaign was designed to remove the Union of Islamic Courts from power but ended up empowering its radical fringe, the Shabab. The latter was thus transformed from a “marginal” force into “the backbone of the resistance,” mobilizing significant swathes of the population to repel an attack by Somalia’s archenemy.⁶⁴

For now, the United States is trying to work with ECOWAS “to further elaborate a robust peacekeeping plan with the new interim government of Mali that would work both on securing the capital and on pushing north,” said State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland.⁶⁵ But there are concerns that ECOWAS is already strained by the crisis in Guinea-Bissau, where a junta overthrew the government in April 2012. The organization sent peacekeeping troops to Guinea-Bissau to reinstate civilian rule, but as Gilles Yabi of the International Crisis Group stated, “no one really knows just what this force’s mandate is and how military and diplomatic action by ECOWAS would help the country to finally address the crucial reforms which now seem indefinitely postponed, beginning with reform of the armed forces.”⁶⁶ This challenge will go a long way toward showing whether ECOWAS is capable of playing the role of regional stabilizer.

Intervention and Mali’s Neighborhood

A military intervention would also fail without the support of the so-called *pays du champ*, the core countries of the region—Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. So far, the group has not been able to coordinate their actions, with Niger vociferously advocating a military intervention and Algeria and Mauritania opposed. According to journalist Yacoub Ould Bahdah, Mauritania is extremely wary about “any military action that may lead to the ‘Afghanisation’ of northern Mali and the resulting ‘Pakistanisation’ of Mauritania.”⁶⁷

Algeria has resisted calls for military intervention, urging patience and support for Mali’s government in the south, and warning about the fallout from an ill-conceived external adventure in the north. Algerians like to remind their neighbors and their Western supporters that had the international community heeded their warnings about an intervention in Libya, the chaos in Mali would not have occurred in the first place. The Algerian regime (rightly) faults NATO for failing to control the weapons within Libya and halting their flow into neighboring countries. It also believed that the humanitarian calculus behind the intervention was bogus and feared the dangerous precedent that the enforcement of the doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” against the depredations of authoritarian regimes sets. Despite the success of the mission in stopping a bloodbath in Benghazi and ridding Libya of a nasty regime, the

Algerians maintain that NATO's lack of foresight has opened a Pandora's box of far-reaching consequences. To Algiers, international supporters of ECOWAS, especially France, therefore need to accept that their quick resort to military intervention only worsened the risks of terrorism in the region.

Some ECOWAS members, especially Niger and Burkina Faso, interpret this prudent attitude toward military intervention as overcautious and self-serving. They are concerned that Algeria's insistence on diplomacy is a ploy to avoid sharing in the burdens and risks of restoring order in Mali. Some complain that Algeria's lack of engagement with ECOWAS stems from its desire to dominate the negotiation process. In their view, the Algerians do not tolerate the leadership of others. The country emphasizes sovereign equality and consensus building but insists on shaping the rules of engagement and influencing multilateral norms. In other words, Algeria seeks to establish itself as the supporter of a regional order rooted in institutions where it is the dominant agenda-setter and the lead mediator of conflicts.

Algeria sees ECOWAS as a tool utilized by France to advance its interests in its former colonies in West Africa, which discredits the organization in Algerians' eyes. To make matters worse, Morocco has injected itself into the Malian conflict and has thrown its support behind ECOWAS. As in the Libya intervention, Morocco is expected to play a discreet but active role in any military campaign in Mali. The Moroccans have good relations within the organization, and they see it as a useful forum to cultivate soft power, compensate for their absence from the African Union, and thwart Algeria's determination to marginalize them from Sahelian affairs.

The Algerians of course see Morocco's foray into the Malian crisis as a play to entangle Algeria in an intractable war in the Sahara. Algeria's suspicion of Morocco's motives recently reached a fever pitch, with Algerian press openly accusing Morocco of manipulating the MUJAO for its own purposes (that is, undermining Algeria's support for the Polisario and delegitimizing the movement's quest for independence). Similar accusations were advanced in early September by a retired military officer.⁶⁸ The logic behind these allegations might be "bizarre," to use the word of an American scholar teaching in Algeria, but the fact that MUJAO has primarily targeted Algeria and its protégé, the Polisario, is apparently enough incriminating evidence against Morocco.

Algeria's Broader Regional Initiatives

For Algeria's critics within ECOWAS, the country seems more interested in isolating its regional competitors and limiting the influence of external powers than in coordinating the region's power assets to organize an effective regional defense against AQIM on its southern flank. Nigerian officials in particular have publicly criticized Algerian-led security initiatives.

The Tamanrasset-based Joint Staff Operations Committee (CEMOC) has been in hibernation since it was set up in April 2010, noted the foreign

minister of Niger in June 2012.⁶⁹ The CEMOC's primary function is to bolster military and security cooperation, and intelligence and logistical coordination, between its members (Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger) and build support for a 75,000-strong joint force. Its future aim is to expand its operations to the "second ring" countries of the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, and Senegal).⁷⁰ But the troops and the communication infrastructure have yet to be built or made available, and the last meeting of the CEMOC's Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region in Nouakchott in July 2012 did not yield any concrete measures to help Mali.

The Fusion and Liaison Unit, which provides a mechanism for consultation between the core countries' intelligence services,⁷¹ also lacks a coordinated strategy, not to mention the requisite mutual trust among participants, for intelligence sharing. The other members of these counterterrorism forums complain that Algeria hoards intelligence and monopolizes information, while Algiers suspects Mali of intelligence leaks, according to interviews conducted in Rabat and Nouakchott.⁷²

A series of interviews in Brussels revealed the same frustration with these Algerian initiatives. Several EU officials dismissed the CEMOC and the FLU as empty shells designed to ward off regional competitors (Morocco), undermine EU efforts in the Sahel (West Africa Police Information System, Sahel Security College, EUCAP Sahel), and frustrate any other attempt to fight insecurity in the region. Meanwhile, the Algerians are suspicious of EU initiatives because they suspect they are shaped and driven by their former colonial rulers, the French.⁷³

The United States is the most amenable to and supportive of Algerian-led regional efforts. Despite the occasional frustrations of dealing with Algerian officials, Washington sees value in the Algerian-dominated framework of the CEMOC and FLU. In the words of one American official interviewed in Algiers, Algeria can certainly do more in counterterrorism and multilateral coordination, but its leadership in the region is essential. This explains why the U.S. position regarding the use of force in northern Mali seems closer to that of Algiers—it is hesitant about the ECOWAS military strategy and wary of military entanglement in northern Mali.

A Shaky Foundation

The difficulty that the international community has in agreeing on an action plan for peace spells trouble for Mali and its neighbors. As it stands, the foundations for military intervention are still missing. Bamako remains in a state of political and military flux, and the ECOWAS strategy for restoring order through force in the north where ethnic tensions are rising dangerously remains unconvincing.

An ill-conceived and rushed intervention in such a dangerously explosive mix of civil-military tensions, divergent communitarian identities, and

conflicting ideologies might have devastating effects on Mali and neighboring countries that already suffer from the same institutional fragility, disgruntled military, and societal cleavages that bedevil Bamako. The overlapping ethnic communities and armed groups in West Africa seriously increase the possibility of such deleterious spillover into countries that can ill afford to relapse into ethnic conflict (Niger) or see an escalation of militancy (Nigeria) or terrorist attacks. War also increases the risk of exacerbating disgruntlement in the military ranks of those countries that have promised to contribute troops (Niger, Nigeria, and Ivory Coast).⁷⁴

With the proliferation of armed militias in the north, the temptation of Malian authorities or regional actors to arm anti-Islamist or anti-Tuareg militias exists, exacerbating intercommunal tensions. A recent Amnesty International report documents several instances in which vigilante militias have killed Tuareg. The prospect of a slow-burning proxy warfare is real. This would turn an already chaotic environment “into a theatre of more or less latent confrontations between armed groups with each of them benefiting from international ramifications.”⁷⁵

Conclusion

International action on Mali has not yet lived up to expectations. The core countries that could influence the trajectory of the conflict remain at loggerheads over the best means to restore stability to Mali. Questions about the necessity, timing, and shape of the intervention force in northern Mali persist. Does ECOWAS have the ability to defeat the Islamist armed groups in the north and can its members withstand the inevitable reprisals on their territories? Would ECOWAS receive the intelligence and logistical support of the United States and France, including air support? Would it have Algeria’s (tacit) backing? A “no” to any of these questions would put the mission at serious risk.⁷⁶

But any rushed intervention that ignores the complex local dynamics could only worsen the country’s fault lines, which are constantly shifting. Several analysts have drawn a clear-cut demarcation of the battle lines without serious regard for the mutation of interests and “political posturing” of the different actors involved. There are many collaborations taking shape in northern Mali—not just Islamist ones. Most are driven by complex socio-political dynamics, ideology, ethnicity, personality conflicts, criminal networks, and historical grievances.⁷⁷ And that makes it difficult to predict what effect any type of strong action will have on Mali’s north and the region more broadly. To be sure, the time for some kind of military intervention in northern Mali might come. The question, however, as a U.S. diplomat told me recently, should not be *when* to intervene but whether the intervention will be just another “stupid” military action or will instead be a well-planned and well-resourced African-led

military effort. Even Algeria might come around to acquiescing in military action if it is done properly.

Given its military power, economic superiority, and intimate knowledge of the conflict in Mali, Algeria has the potential to contribute to conflict resolution in the country. Its warnings against a rushed military intervention are sound, as is its emphasis on bolstering the political transition in Bamako and providing immediate food aid to the country. This, however, must be complemented by a sincere effort to coordinate its actions with its neighbors. It must use its influence with Ansar Dine and its leader Iyad ag Ghali to sever his ties with AQIM and negotiate a political deal with Bamako. Algeria should employ its military and counterterrorism capabilities to better monitor its southern border and prevent spillover from the north of Mali.

Algeria should also seek to control resources (fuel, charcoal, Toyota parts, and more) that help these various armed groups flourish. Without that action, it would be difficult to weaken AQIM capabilities and disrupt its logistics operations in Mali, according to one AFRICOM officer. Algeria also has a responsibility to strengthen the CEMOC and make it a true forum for sharing intelligence and coordinating the fight against terrorism. At this time of turmoil, the Algerians would benefit from bringing Morocco (the other regional power) into the fold.

The EU should engage in the Sahel in a way that is complementary rather than competitive to Algeria. Its strategy for the region was designed as a means to encourage cooperation between Europe and the Sahel, paying only lip service to Algeria's suspicions and concerns about foreign intrusion in its privileged sphere of interest. In its desire to strength economic and security cooperation with fragile Sahelian countries, the EU entered into competition with Algeria's regional ambitions and its determination to dominate regional security institutions. This was perceived in Algiers as a direct challenge to its authority and contributed to hampering desperately needed multilateral conflict prevention and crisis preparedness efforts.⁷⁸

The fact that the EU supports the ECOWAS initiative to resolve the Malian conflict has also strained relations with Algeria, which sees a military intervention, backed and financed by the EU, as a foreign intrusion in its backyard. In the last few months, however, there have been efforts from both sides to better coordinate their approach to security and make EU efforts in the Sahel complementary to Algiers. The EU must also design a coherent and clear policy toward the payment of ransoms to terrorist/criminal organizations and their local intermediaries, which embolden criminal entrepreneurs and violent extremists across the region.

The United States should coordinate its efforts with the EU and Algeria to help rebuild the Malian armed forces and transform them into a disciplined army capable of stabilizing the south and credibly threatening the use of force in the north.⁷⁹ The Malian army must be able to participate in any

effort to dislodge or target the most intransigent and radical extremists in northern Mali. The United States and its allies must also urgently resume external aid and expand economic assistance to Mali to stave off a brewing social crisis in the south and humanitarian catastrophe in the north.⁸⁰

Notes

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