

## HOW TO SAVE THE SAHEL<sup>1</sup>

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As rebels try to consolidate their grip on Mali's north which fell into rebel hands in late March, fears are growing that a breakaway Islamic state could emerge in one of West Africa's poorest broken states, creating a strengthened base of operations for the region's  *jihadis*  and criminal gangs; the hard line Islamic movement  *Boko Haram*  for its part continues to preach a firebrand version of Islam across northern Nigeria to the dismay of traditional Muslim leaders and the state – which appear powerless to halt its horrifying acts of violence against the civilian population and Christian churches.

### The strategic importance of Libya

Nine months after the murder of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya, controlled largely by local militias, is far from fully stable, with arms runners still selling weapons across the Maghreb and the Sahel from the former dictator's armouries, including back to the new Libyan army. Increasing flows of cocaine from Latin America which

had been using Guinea Bissau as a transshipment point have shifted towards Mali. The spectre of drought is hovering once again across the Sahel, which could affect up to 18 million people with malnutrition and starvation according to international aid agencies. Even a resurgence of locust swarms is the latest unexpected consequence of the fall of Gaddafi, which is threatening croplands in Niger and Mali as uncontrolled swarms from Libya and Algeria move south. Libya's locust eradication spraying capacity was destroyed during the uprising.

**Growing turmoil in the Sahel meets with disunity in North Africa and lack of EU policy**

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The troubling turn of events in the Sahel would not only threaten the stability of Algeria and Morocco, a weakened Tunisia and a still unstable Libya, but Europe.

Failure of action on bolstering regional unity in the face of multiple threats will only encourage the likes of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine or "the supporters of faith" to gain sway over broader areas of the Sahel, just as American drones redouble their patrols over eastern Libya and likely elsewhere.

After their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and considering the insecurity they have left in the wake of intervening in Libya and then quickly leaving, the US, France and the United Kingdom would be well advised to refrain from trying to play the grand game in the Sahel region.

The president of Niger and former regional colonial power France have stated that Northern Mali and countries beyond could become a "West African Afghanistan" as Touareg forces swept into Mali last winter from Libya, where the violence in the south is worse than it was during the struggle to oust Gaddafi. Libya's south and west have been witnessing ethnic feuding tempered by fragile ceasefires imposed by northern militias, fighting which has already displaced tens of thousands of people. As the home of the bulk of

the country's oil and water wells the fate of Libya's south is strategic to the whole region.

<sup>1</sup> The French version of this article was published on Slate Afrique on July 7: <http://www.slateafrique.com/90715/comment-sauver-le-sahel-geostrategie>

## Algeria and Morocco, two enemy brothers

In the midst of regional turmoil and uncertainty, the only two states in North West Africa that have fully functioning and equipped security services, a foreign policy and the capacity to craft – if they so wish – a new framework of security are Algeria and Morocco. Unfortunately these two enemy brothers have been in a Mexican standoff since 1975 over the future of the former Spanish colony of the Western Sahara and, although on again off again in recent months, usually turn their backs on each other to the detriment of substantial economic and security gains for the entire region.

History everywhere deserves to be remembered and revisited. Since Algeria became independent half a century ago, its leaders have always been suspicious of French and most Western motives. Newly emergent Algeria from the get-go strongly backed the PLO and trained its commandos as it trained those of the ANC and never waived in its support for Nelson Mandela throughout his years in prison. Algerian Arab nationalism made it a hawk in OPEC, and its oil and gas income explains why it never engaged fully with the Barcelona Process (whose economic impact on the

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region has been far more modest than EU officials claim), while its successful but costly containment of an Islamist-led rebellion after a 1992 anti-democratic coup taught its leaders and its people a profound lesson of caution. The country refuses to accept that foreign powers should meddle with the affairs of the region – hence its extreme reticence in the face of last year's successful campaign to topple a much despised neighbour, Colonel Gaddafi. There is strong sympathy from a generation of serious Algerian nationalists for the nationalist aspirations of Saharawis. When Abdelaziz Bouteflika said in 2005 that the Saharawi cause was "*sacré pour nous*", he meant it.

## Frontiers remain closed

Morocco projects a mirror image in reverse of Algerian attitudes. Always ready to help the West during the Cold War as it intervened in Africa – from Congo Kinshasa in the 60s, it actively helped and encouraged discreet relations between Israel and Palestinians when neither side was officially talking to the other. King Hassan famously asked whether the kingdom could join the EU in 1987 only to be rebuffed – the Moroccan ambassador in the US famously described this in a lecture at Harvard as a case of "the mouse (Morocco) scaring the elephant (EU)", but the country's policy of hugging the EU closely continues unabated. The Moroccan autono-

my plan for the Western Sahara has been welcomed by the US and France and helped reconcile the three hundred and eighty year old Alaoui dynasty with its people. This link had been damaged by two bloody attempts to overthrow King Hassan Second in 1972 and 1973 and the traumas of the repression which led the Morocco Equity and Reconciliation Commission in the mid-2000s to pay reparations for human rights abuses from 1956 to 1999 to over 5,000 families, of which at least a quarter were Saharawi.

Despite improved relations between these two North African heavyweights in the 1980s and the consequent building of the Pedro Duran Farell gas pipeline in the 1990s, the frontier remains closed and the two countries often ignore each other. The former colonial power for its part can be counted to support Morocco in EU councils, the IMF and the World Bank, never Algeria.

## The impact of Spanish-Moroccan quarrels

While Morocco squabbles with Spain at times about regaining its former territories in Ceuta and Melilla, something Europeans extending their stay in Morocco have suffered

of lately as they tried to cross into Ceuta for a day unsuccessfully to renew their visas, the Moroccan motivation to reassemble the divided up kingdom to resemble a version of its pre-colonial domain remains as "sacred" for ardent Moroccan nationalists as supporting Saharawi nationalism is

for their Algerian brethren. Recent events in North West Africa do however suggest the need for a radical shift in thinking and in policies, not just in Morocco and Algeria, but in the EU, if the region is to avoid further turmoil and eventually become really prosperous. The troubling turn of events in the Sahel would not only threaten the stability of Algeria and Morocco, a weakened Tunisia and a still unstable Libya, but Europe.

The EU's difficulties in coordinating strategically about it's near abroad – Russia, the Middle East, Turkey and North Africa is not new and self preservation (the euro crisis) has pushed everything else off the diplomatic agenda, rendering Europe effectively isolationist across the board, especially in Italy and Spain, both Mediterranean frontier countries hard hit by the economic crisis. Until the end of the Cold War the old continent had the luxury of spending its time on building its own institution and trying to define a European culture. In the 1990s the disintegration of Yugoslavia caught it unawares and by the end of that decade it had abdicated any pretence of a policy different from America's in the Middle East. Relations with Turkey have not improved in recent years as misgivings about one of the West's military allies of long standing ever joining the club have been voiced in France and Germany, although this might be changing somewhat under President Hollande if visa-free travel for Turks to Europe becomes a reality.

## **The EU should avoid adopting a multi-layered strategy**

North Africa has traditionally been a region where the EU has deferred to the formerly French “sphere of influence” – just as the US often did – and never attempted to bring Algeria, Morocco and the Polisario closer, leaving that thankless task to the United Nations and its succession of sincere but as yet unsuccessful mostly American peace brokers.

Rather than slipping into the time honoured and unimaginative position of depending on the false stability afforded by playing, or at least acquiescing to, a game of multi-layered divide and rule, Europe should understand that the economic and security cost of No Maghreb is being paid south of the Mediterranean but also north of the mare nostrum. It negatively affects both European security and European economic potential. If Algeria and Morocco choose to pursue their time honoured quarrel without understanding how much security and economic factors have changed since 1975, if Europe, not least France fails to grasp the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan and its own colonial past – which suggest that outside intervention in the Muslim world is, long term, futile, and at best engenders long term resentment and blowback effects, that failure of action on bolstering regional unity in the face of multiple threats will only encourage the likes of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine or “the supporters of faith” to gain sway over broader areas of the Sahel, just as American drones redouble their patrols over eastern Libya and likely elsewhere. AQIM still holds western hostages – possibly as an insurance policy against potential European or American strikes – and some well trained and armed fighters from Gulf States as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan have been reported in the region. The 400,000 people who have fled northern Mali to its south and to neighbouring countries could swell to a much greater number if matters get further out of hand. In such circumstances, outside military intervention would offer those involved more risks than rewards.

## **France’s double diplomatic strategy**

The “proclamation of independence” of the northern Mali Touareg Azawad on France’s international TV station France 24 last March suggested that the then French head of state was convinced such a policy might help contain AQIM and comfort the French uranium mining interests in neighbouring Niger, but the alliance which followed between Ansar Dine, with its AQIM connections and the Touareg pointed to the danger of playing Machiavellian

politics in this part of the world. Wise words came last spring from the former French minister of Foreign Affairs Alain Juppé who stressed that Algeria must be a party to resolving this conflict.

The whole episode suggests that France has two policies. One is happy to tweak Algerian pride and interests (the same France 24 explained on a number of occasions just over a year ago that “Algeria was helping Gadaffi”). The other is often voiced by the former Director of the DST (Défense et Sécurité du Territoire) Yves Bonnet. It is a policy altogether more mindful of geopolitical realities and the benefits of working with Algeria to secure and stabilise its long and difficult to guard southern and eastern frontiers.

The Western Sahara has for a generation remained a frozen conflict. It is today joined by other conflicts that are spreading across the soft Saharan underbelly of the Maghreb and by extension Europe. After their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and considering the insecurity they have left in the wake of intervening in Libya and then quickly leaving, the US, France and the United Kingdom would be well advised to refrain from trying to play the grand game in the Sahel region.

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## **Breaking with an ostrich-like strategy**

Armed intervention, be it directly or through some West African proxy, will only bring more strife to the region. Trying for once to be an honest broker in the Maghreb and the Sahel region; supporting efforts to show the economic cost of No Maghreb and the benefits greater security and regional economic cooperation would bring to the whole region and Europe, would mark a departure from past ostrich-like practise. It would show that the EU, France and the US were facing up to the real challenges of today. The suction effect of the instability in Yugoslavia nearly destroyed Europe, at least twice over the last century. If a brake is not put to this spreading insecurity in the Sahel, coinciding as it does with a worsening Euro crisis, the suction effect of what is going on at present in the Sahel could have dramatic consequences – not simply for the countries bordering the Sahara but also for Europe.