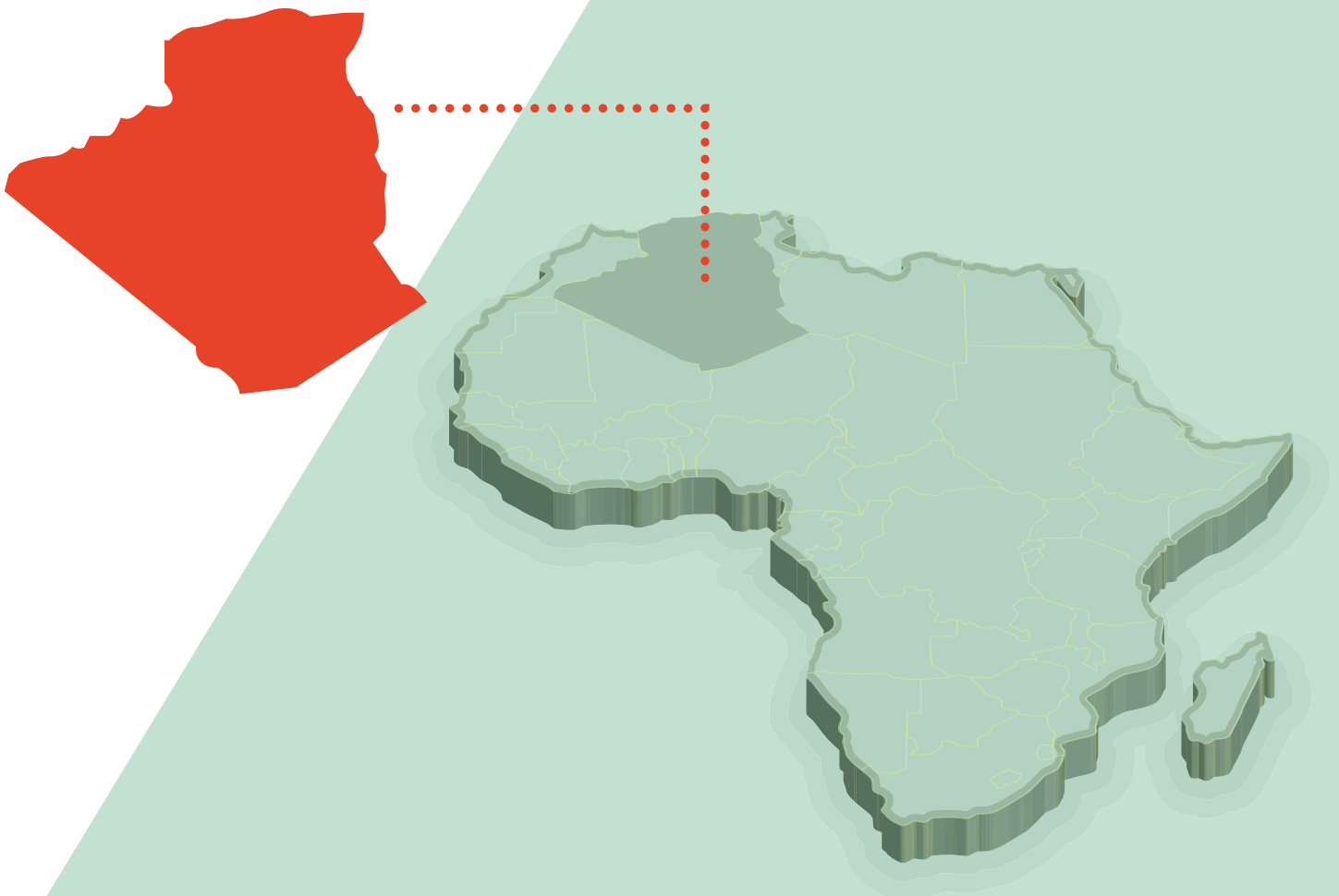


THE ALGERIAN STRATEGY IN THE SAHEL: SHIFT OR ADAPTATION?

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Djallil Lounnas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines Algeria's possible changing role in the Sahel conflict in the wake of the announcement of the termination of the French military operation Barkhane in 2022. Taking in to consideration the willingness of new President of Algeria, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, to play a more important role in the region after years of absenteeism due to Algeria's domestic problems. On that regard, President Tebboune declared that, while an Algerian military intervention in the Sahel was not the solution, Algiers "will neither allow Northern Mali to become a sanctuary for terrorist organizations" nor will it accept the partition of the country.

The paper starts by examining the extremely strategic importance of the Sahel region for Algeria and one in which it has played traditionally a major role. Right after independence Algeria was involved in the region, where different actors, including the former Libyan ruler Khadafy tried to destabilize the post-colonial country, using Tuareg fighters for his own political aspirations.

Algeria's policy towards the Tuaregs was strongly influenced by the political solution to its own "Tuaregs" having been able to successfully integrate them in to the post-independence political order by political integration and socio-economic development policies. However, in neighboring Mali, shattered from the 1960s by successive Tuareg rebellions, a political integration was never pursued and instead the conflict dragged on for years weakening the stability of the country leading to the brink of collapse since 2012 with gradual disintegration of the political order there.

Resorting to mediation in the Mali conflict, Algeria has consistently attempted to narrow down the differences between the various Malian actors involved in the conflict by insisting on an inclusive political solution rather than resorting to the use of force. The appointment of President Tebboune did so far little to change this as the country is deeply attached to this "mediation paradigm". Rather, the change so far has been essentially on the renewal of Algiers diplomatic activism to implement the political solution. However, the presence of multiple and powerful factions in the Sahel region with extremely conflicting interests persists and makes it difficult to implement a peaceful solution. The rise of JNIM and to a lesser extent ISGS and despite heavy losses, including the recent elimination of Abu Adnane Al Sahraoui founder of ISGS, had so

far no impact on its policy position refraining from a direct military intervention.

Although the return of Algeria to the Sahel is certainly very positive, it remains to be seen whether a political solution can be implemented after the withdrawal of French and other foreign military forces in 2022 or whether Algeria decides to take a more assertive role there.




INTRODUCTION

In May 2021, in the wake of the announcement of the termination of operation Barkhane, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune declared that, while an Algerian military intervention in the Sahel was not the solution, Algiers “will neither allow Northern Mali to become a sanctuary for terrorist organizations” nor will it accept the partition of the country. This declaration came after November 2020 constitutional changes that, among others, authorized, for the first time, Algeria to deploy its army abroad. As part of the same declaration, President Tebboune announced that Algeria considered “Tripoli as a red line” and would not allow it to fall, referring to the Haftar offensive, which ultimately failed¹.

These strong declarations signaled an important change in Algeria’s foreign policy, especially concerning the Sahel, following several years of stagnation during the last years of the late President Bouteflika’s rule. Providing an example of this period of inertia, a high-ranking official said, “when one would call Algiers, there was no one on the other side of the line, there was no response”². Thus, President Tebboune’s declarations signaled both the return of Algeria to the international stage as well as a major change to Algeria’s national foreign policy and the Sahel in particular. In fact, since 2011 at the beginning of the Malian crisis, when it came to dealing with regional instability, Algiers systematically promoted a “political solution”, derived from the Strategy of National Reconciliation introduced by President Bouteflika in 1999 to end civil unrest in the country. This political solution opposed the strategy established by France, the other major actor in the Sahel, which essentially focused on counter-terrorism operations such as Serval and Barkhane. From a Paris perspective, there could be no dialogue with jihadist groups at all, irrespective of who they were. This position was adopted by former President Francois Hollande in 2013 when operation Serval started and was endorsed by his successor, Emmanuel Macron. It was also illustrated in 2020 by Florence Parly, the French Minister of Defense, who made it very clear that “One cannot dialogue with jihadist groups that have not renounced terrorism.”³

Algiers opposed this view under President Bouteflika arguing that only an inclusive dialogue with all the parties could solve the crisis. Thus, Algeria rejected any foreign military intervention in Mali considering

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- 1 See Kamel Daoud et Adlene Meddi, « Abdelmadjid Tebboune: «L’islamisme en tant qu’idéologie n’existera plus jamais en Algérie», Le Point (June 3rd, 2021).
 - 2 Interview 1 with an Algerian official, Algiers, Algeria (June 2019).
 - 3 Cited in Remi Cayrol, «Le Mali contre la France ? Le défi des négociations avec « les terroristes», Orient XXI (November 21st, 2020). Online : <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/le-mali-contre-la-france-le-defi-des-negociations-avec-les-terroristes,4321>

it as interference in Mali's domestic affairs. This noninterventionism extended to the Algerian military as well and was based on the so-called "non-external deployment doctrine" of the Algerian army. Thus, the declarations by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune appear to not only signal a return of Algeria to the Sahel, but also an important change in terms of doctrine as the new constitution paved the way for military deployment abroad.

Thus, this paper explores the Algerian foreign policy in the Sahel and asks the following questions: What is the strategic importance of the Sahel for Algeria? What are the threats to Algeria that come from the Sahel? What has been the strategy followed by Algeria to deal with the situation in the Sahel? What does the so-called political solution/doctrine of non-intervention mean? Has the election of a new president introduced a real shift/return of Algeria in the region?

We argue that the current Algerian foreign policy in the Sahel is marked by strong activism and a renewed engagement but with similar parameters to those over the past decade, i.e., a political solution. Nonetheless, a dramatic change in the Sahel could lead the Algerian leadership to a more "robust" engagement in the region as far as its constitution and military allow.



ALGERIA'S HISTORICAL ROLE IN THE SAHEL

As a former Algerian explains “The Sahel is the first circle of Algerian National security!”⁴. Indeed, for Algiers, the dynamics and developments in the Sahel directly affect Algeria itself with the Sahel representing a major strategic area for Algiers but also a dangerous one. Various threats, and the inability of the regional states to counter them, renders the Sahel, as Yahia Zoubir puts it, «Algeria’s Soft underbelly” and “the corridor of all danger” (le couloir de tous les dangers) ⁵.

The many threats include the porous borders between Algeria and the Sahel, the presence of large interconnected Tuareg populations in both southern Algeria and in the Sahel who repeatedly rebel against the central governments, the fact that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was able to deploy from Algeria into the Sahel since 2003 that ultimately led to the rise of radical jihadi organizations, the eruption of multidimensional conflict in Mali since 2011 that destabilized the whole region, the fact that the regional states are weak and failing, and all manner of trafficking. Furthermore, the paradoxical situation of the presence of foreign troops, especially French troops since 2012, and the unsettling prospect of a power vacuum once it withdraws in 2022 is also of great concern to Algeria.

Algeria’s economic security is also regarded as vulnerable to the destabilization of the Sahel. Since the late 2000s, Algeria has been negotiating with Nigeria and Niger on the construction of a trans-Saharan natural gas pipeline destined to link the city of Warri in Nigeria to Hassi R’Mel in Algeria and then to Europe. The implementation of this project has been lagging for years. Shortly after the election of President Tebboune, he attempted to kickstart the project by sending the then Algerian foreign minister, Sabi Boukadoum to Abuja in November 2020 specifically for this purpose. Once implemented, this strategically important project would consolidate economically, politically, and diplomatically, the presence and influence of Algeria in the Sahel. Algiers would then be a vital and major link between Africa and Europe allowing the latter access to additional sources of natural gas while reducing its



4 Interview two with a former Algerian diplomat, Algiers, Algeria (September 2012).

5 See Yahia Zoubir, “Algeria and the Sahelian Quandary: The Limits of Containment Security Policy” in Dalia Ghanem ed., *The Sahel: Europe’s African Borders* (Euromesco, April 2018), 72. Online: https://www.euromesco.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/EuroMeSCo-Joint-Policy-Study-8_The_Sahel_Europe_African_Border.pdf

dependency on Russian imports⁶. However, given the regional insecurity and instability, the prospect of implementing such a project remains at this point difficult⁷.

Therefore, to understand Algeria's strategy in the Sahel, one must first look at the threats and how they are perceived in Algiers.

1. The Tuareg issue

An Algerian former official explains, "In fact, Algiers was initially worried, shortly after its independence, about the Tuareg population in southern Algeria and the potential demands for autonomy or independence"⁸. The exponential increase of Tuareg rebellions in the Sahel in the quest for independence has always raised the fear of a spillover into Algeria's Tuareg population, as evidenced during a rebellion in northern Mali in 1963-64. Suspicious and concerned about the potential impact on Algeria's Tuaregs, Ahmed Ben Bella, Algeria's then-president decided to authorize the Malian troops to pursue rebels attempting to flee into Algeria⁹. Aware of the Algerian fierce defense of its borders and its refusal to tolerate any foreign troops within its territory, this incident demonstrated the country's concern regarding the Tuareg issue in the Sahel and the potential impact on its national unity, i.e., potential demands for autonomy and independence.

However, rather than discrimination or exclusion, the Algerian authorities opted for a strategy of full integration of the Tuaregs into civil society. Thus, in the fall of 1963, Ahmed Ben Bella appointed the Amenokal (local leader) Bey Ag Ahamouk, a major local Tuareg figure, as the 3rd Vice-President of the National Assembly¹⁰. He was replaced in 1975 by Hadj Moussa Akhamokh, another leading local figure of the Algerian war of independence. Moussa Akhamokh also became a member of the ruling party FLN, deputy of the National Assembly, and was a close supporter of the Algerian authorities. He, therefore, became a sort of



- 6 Russia has the largest natural gas reserves in the world and is the most important supplier to Europe. Since the early 2000's Europe has been trying to reduce its dependency on Moscow's natural Gaz by trying to get access to Iran natural gas and also reinforcing its partnerships with other countries including Algeria. Thus this, trans Saharan pipeline could potentially play an important role in this strategy of diversification of Natural Gaz suppliers.
- 7 See France info, "Les projets de gazoducs et d'exploitation offshore se multiplient sur le continent africain", (February 2nd, 2021). Online: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/mozambique/les-projets-de-gazoducs-et-d-exploitation-offshore-se-multiplient-sur-le-continent-africain_4316925.html
- 8 Discussion 3 with a former Algerian official, Algiers, Algeria (June 2014).
- 9 Michel Valet, «Les Touaregs du Hoggar: entre décolonisation et indépendance (1954-1974)», *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la méditerranée* 57, 1 (1990), 86-87.
- 10 Ibid, 86.

facilitator between Algiers and the locals¹¹.

The fact that the Algerian Tuaregs participated in the war of independence and that they rejected the North-South division of Algeria by the French¹², reinforced the positive perception of the Tuaregs in the eyes of the Algerian leadership, giving them “revolutionary legitimacy”¹³. In this context, Houari Boumediene, President of Algeria from 1965 to 1978, gave a major impetus to the policy of integrating the Tuaregs by granting them important rights¹⁴ and allocating funds for major economic investments to develop the south and its infrastructure.¹⁵ Part of this strategy to reinforce the feeling of nationalism, apart from the sedentarization of the local population, was an attempt to reduce the trans-border caravan trade and the generalization of Arabic¹⁶. The policy aimed to weaken any demand for independence or autonomy by the Algerian Tuaregs by reinforcing their feeling of nationalism. Although this worked, because there has never been any separatist demand in the south, it nonetheless diminished the standing of the Algerian Tuaregs in the overall tribal Tuareg hierarchy, and this happened at the worse moment.

In 1969 when Colonel Khadafy took over Libya, he immediately aimed at positioning Libya as a major Maghrebi-Sahelian actor. In his view, the Libyan Tuaregs were to play an important role in this strategy. Using Libya’s money and power, Khadafy tried to establish himself in the Sahel using the Tuaregs by massively supporting their rebellions in Niger and Mali and providing them with military training camps and weapons.¹⁷ Khadafy also instigated various militias, namely, Islamic Legion, the Green Legion, and the African Legion comprised mostly of Malian and Nigerian Tuaregs who received training and equipment to serve as his personal security detail abroad¹⁸. These militias trained the rebels and, through established links, Khadafy expected to play a pivotal role in the region. Among the former members of these legions, Iyad Ag Ghali, current leader of the Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Al Qaeda affiliate in the Sahel, and Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, and Mohamed Ag Najem, two of the most important Tuareg separatist leaders. In the



- 11 «Hadj Moussa Akhamokh, le chef spirituel des Touaregs, est décédé», Le Nouvel Afrik (December 29th, 2005). Online: <https://www.afrik.com/hadj-moussa-akhamokh-le-chef-spirituel-des-touaregs-est-decede>
- 12 In 1960, France offered to grant independence to the North of Algeria while remaining in control of the South, an offer which was totally rejected by the leaders of the FLN who considered that all Algeria was to remain united and indivisible as well to be independent all at once.
- 13 Interview 4 with a former Algerian diplomat, Algiers, Algeria (February 2018)
- 14 Yahia Zoubir and Louisa Ait Hamadouche, *Global Security Watch—The Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2013), 120.
- 15 Valet, 87-88
- 16 Valet, 88.
- 17 Zoubir, “Algeria and the Sahelian Quandary”, 75.
- 18 See Olivier Valee, «Khadafi: Le dernier Roi d’Afrique», *Politique Africaine* 125 (2012), 147-167.

same vein, Khadafy openly supported the creation of an independent Toureg State in 1980, triggering the concern and opposition of Algeria, which saw this as a direct threat to its national security and unity¹⁹. This failed to deter him from continuing to intervene directly in the various rebellions that were taking place in the Sahel, including a major uprising in 1990, by providing support to the radical leader Ag Bahanga while Algeria was attempting to mediate between the various parties to reach a ceasefire. In addition to his interference to assert his role in the region, and according to an Algerian diplomat, Khadafy attempted to diminish Algeria's influence in the Sahel by weakening the position of the Iforas tribe, largely present in Algeria and northern Mali, and the top of the traditional Tuareg tribal hierarchy, which is not the case for the Libyan and Nigerian Tuaregs.²⁰ If this happened, it would have reversed the hierarchical structure of the Tuareg tribal system and further limited Algeria's ability to influence the situation in the Sahel and directly affect its national security.

The Tuareg issue is therefore of paramount importance and directly influences Algeria's national security. When the Libyan regime collapsed in 2011, thousands of Tuareg fighters, who went to Libya to support Khadafy, returned to northern Mali to create the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). This destabilized Mali and triggered the 2012 war. Algeria could not stand aside given the implications. It directly intervened through mediation to end the conflict and continued to do so to maintain Mali's national unity and prevent the country from becoming a hub for illegal activity and terrorism.

2. Trafficking in the Sahel

The Sahel is composed of very poor, arid, mostly desert, and low-resource countries. It is also an area where, as Lemine Ould Salem explains, "trafficking, informal economy, and trans-border trades have always existed."²¹ Comprised primarily of weak states on the verge of collapse, with limited political influence²² if any, the Sahel has always been marked by (1) the persistence of dramatic and enduring economic poverty, (2) the inability of regional states to manage the effects of climate change



- 19 See cherif dris, "L'Algérie et le Sahel: de la fin de l'isolement à la régionalisation contraignante», *Maghreb Machrek* 200 (summer 2009), 62.
- 20 Interview 4 with a former Algerian diplomat (February 2018).
- 21 Interview with Lemine Ould Salem, journalist and specialist of the Sahel (March 2020).
- 22 According to Robert Rotberg, States are expected to deliver political good that is security, education, health service, control of the territory. Strong States deliver a both a high amount and quality of such goods, whereas weak States deliver only a limited one and failed/Collapsed States, none. See Robert I. Rotberg, *State Failure and State Weakness in Time of Terror* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

often involving long periods of drought that cause the collapse of local economies that are mostly based on agriculture and breeding, (3) vast demographic diversity that sparks tension between the various ethnic groups, and (4) the weakening of the state infrastructure that, in many areas, has either collapsed or vanished²³. Thus, when it comes to the Human Development Index, Mali ranks among the lowest in the world at 184th in 2020 with an index of 0.434.²⁴ For its part, Burkina-Faso was 182nd with an index of 0.452,²⁵ while Niger was in an even worse position with an index of 0.394 and ranked 189th.²⁶ So, the countries in the Sahel are among the poorest in the world leading the head of an NGO working in northern Mali to state that “there are only very limited policies if any for the social and economic integration of the youth in the North. Except for a few trading activities here and there, there is nothing, ... no industries. In this context, people have little choice to survive but to get involved in trafficking”²⁷.

The Sahel, therefore, remains a major hub for human, weapons, and drug trafficking, all of which are considered major threats to Algeria.

2.1. Human trafficking in the Sahel

A 2018 Interpol report showed how highly lucrative the business of human trafficking in the Sahel is, with profits of between \$450 - \$750 million, depending on the source²⁸. Traditionally, migrants from all over Africa would regroup in Gao in northern Mali, Agadez in northern Niger, and other smaller towns in the Sahel. From there, they would expect to be transported to North Africa, especially Libya, to obtain passage to Europe. As Serge Daniel explains, complex and vast business infrastructures and networks developed in the Sahel around human trafficking as “migrants need transportation, intermediaries, housing, phones, foreign currency exchange, etc.”²⁹



- 23 See on this François Gaulme, «États Faillis», «États Fragiles: concepts jumelés d’une nouvelle réflexion mondiale», *Politique étrangère* 1 (Spring 2011), Alain Antil et Sylvain Touati, «Mali et Mauritanie : des pays sahéliens fragiles et des États résilients», *Politique Étrangère* 1 (Spring 2011), Serge Michailof, «Révolution verte et équilibres géopolitiques au Sahel», *La revue internationale et stratégique* 80 (Winter 2010).
- 24 See United Nations Development Program, “Human Development Report: Mali”, 2020. Online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/mli>
- 25 See United Nations Development Program, “Human Development Report: Burkina Faso”, 2020. Online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BFA>
- 26 See United Nations Development Program, “Human Development Report: Niger”, 2020. Online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/ner>
- 27 Interview with the head of a local NGO based in Northern Mali, (Bamako, December 2011).
- 28 Nellemann, C.; Henriksen, R., Pravettoni, R., Stewart, D., Kotsovou, M., Schlingemann, Shaw, M. and Reitano, T. (Eds.), *World Atlas of illicit flows (RHIPTO:2018)*, 9.
- 29 Interview with Serge Daniel, journalist at Radio France Internationale and Specialist of jihadist groups, Bamako, Mali, (March 2017).

For years, Algeria was essentially a transit country for migrants heading to Europe. However, while there was a dramatic deterioration of the political and economic conditions in Africa, Algeria was experiencing a major economic boom due to the increase in oil prices between 2000 and 2014, making it a prime destination for migrants seeking security and better living conditions. As Raouf Farrah explains, the rise of oil revenues in Algeria permitted the government to invest massively in economic infrastructure, housing, and transportation projects including in southern Algeria. This prompted a massive influx of migrants from all over the region including Mali, Niger, Central Africa, Senegal, Benin, etc., looking for a better life.³⁰ In 2016, despite strict border controls, official statistics showed the arrival of 500 migrants daily, a rather unusually high number for Algeria. The geography of this migration settlement has also changed. Farah argues that until recently, the migrants who usually stayed in southern Algeria (Tamanrasset, Adrar, Ouargla) started to move to the northern parts of the country (Algiers, Oran, Annaba).³¹ He also states that while in the past migrants worked in Algeria for some time to make money and then return to their home countries, the economic crisis that plagued Algeria since 2014 with the fall of oil prices, made it more difficult for them to find jobs and earn a good income resulting in them staying longer. It is estimated that there are currently around 100 000 illegal immigrants in Algeria.³²

Algerian authorities regard migration as a threat to the country's national security as they link it directly to the instability and insecurity in the Sahel. Violence and war in sub-Saharan Africa are the most important drivers of this phenomenon in Algiers. Transposed on the country as a whole, the perception is that it could undermine Algeria's security and stability.³³ Of primary concern to the Algerian authorities is human trafficking networks that could be used by terrorist organizations active in the Sahel to finance their causes by offering protection and also recruit candidates for the jihad in the region, including in southern Algeria. It is further feared that these networks could be used to smuggle foreign fighters from the Middle East to the Sahel via Libya to join jihadist organizations.³⁴ Nonetheless, one should note that on this last issue, nothing of such a nature has happened yet and it remains to be seen whether it ever will. So far most foreign combatants have returned to their home countries to



30 Raouf Farrah, "Algeria's Migration Dilemma: Migration and human smuggling in southern Algeria", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Research Report (December 2020), 8.

31 Farrah, "Algeria's Migration Dilemma", 9.

32 Ibid, 10, 36.

33 Ibid, 34.

34 Interview with Serge Daniel, journalist at Radio France Internationale and specialist of jihadist groups, Bamako, Mali, (March 2017).

benefit from the various programs of deradicalization and reintegration called Reconciliation/National Reconciliation. As far as financing their operations, terrorist organizations have generally refrained from becoming involved in this business both for religious/moral reasons and the lack of need. To date, there have only been rare individual cases of terrorists being linked to illegal migration. For Serge Daniel “from a financial point of view, terrorists get peanuts out of human trafficking and in terms of recruitment, there is some but in homoeopathic doses, which is not the case for the other trafficking. If one adds some moral values, for them it is not worth being involved in this.”³⁵ Of course, there is always the possibility, and it depends entirely on the leadership of these groups, but, at this point, most of the armed jihadist groups operating in the Sahel/northern Mali area have little involvement in human trafficking. Armed organizations involved in human trafficking are evident at the borders and exclude jihadist groups. Thus, generally, when one talks about armed groups and human trafficking, one refers to the GATIA (Group d’Autodefense Touaregue Imaghad et allies) a pro-government militia, the HCA (Haut Comite pour l’Azawad) the so-called Platform close to the authorities, and the MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Liberation de l’Azawad).³⁶

Jihadist groups on the other hand are heavily involved in other forms of trafficking, mainly weapons and drugs.

2.2. Weapons and Drug trafficking in the Sahel

The collapse of Libya in 2011 had dramatic consequences in the sense that the vast stockpiles of Libyan army weapons were looted by all and sundry, i.e., militias, mafias, traffickers, extortionists, etc. The result was the pronounced explosion of weapons trafficking in the Libya-Sahel region between 2011 and 2015, which an Algerian high-ranking official, summed up as “there is a black market for Libyan weapons in the whole region if you have the money you can get any kind of weapons”³⁷. Thus, in 2016 Bouzid Ichlalene, an Algerian investigative journalist, confirmed that it was possible to buy Kalashnikovs and semi-automatic weapons, especially the better quality and less expensive Libyan ones, from traffickers at the Algerian-Tunisian borders for “very good prices.”³⁸ A



35 Ibid.

36 Mark Micallef, “The Human Conveyor Belt Broken – assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel”, The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (March 2018), 79-80.

37 Interview with an Algerian high official, Algiers, Algeria (June 2015).

38 Bouzid Ichlalene, « Algérie-Tunisie : «J’ai passé la frontière avec un trafiquant d’armes» El Watan (February 26th, 2016).

report from the Conflict Armament Research in 2016 showed that many of the weapons, Kalashnikov and Sam 7 missiles, seized in north Mali came directly from Libya as many of them were sold to the Khadafy regime by Poland in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁹ However, since 2015, there has been a marked reduction of Libyan weapons in circulation in the Sahel due to strict measures taken by the Libyan authorities in Tripoli and Tobruk and also the ongoing civil war since 2014, which made Libya a destination for weapons. Nonetheless, for Serge Daniel, at the end of the day most of the weapons in the Sahel, including those used by the jihadists, are local weapons that come from Malian army stocks acquired either by looting the stockpiles of the FAMA (Forces Armées Maliennes) or simply through the corruption of the local authorities and soldiers who sell their weapons to traffickers⁴⁰. Violence has exploded in the Sahel with an increase in banditry, militias, self-defense and jihadist groups, which has driven greater demand for weapons by all groups, especially those with access to additional revenue derived from various forms of trafficking in which they are involved,⁴¹ as well as huge ransoms they receive for the release of foreign hostages.⁴²

It is important to note that all trafficking is interlinked, especially the most dangerous ones, i.e. weapons and drugs. There is, therefore, overlapping of actors and transportation routes used for such activities.⁴³ Weapons trafficking is embedded in what one may describe as an established trafficking ecosystem that includes drug trafficking.⁴⁴

Drug trafficking is not a new phenomenon in the Sahel and dates back to the late 1990s with the rise in the cannabis trade.⁴⁵ From the early 2000s, to avoid stricter control measures by the United States and European countries, drug traffickers from Latin America opened new cocaine routes via Africa to Europe. Ships from Latin America, especially Venezuela and Columbia, would arrive in West Africa where security measures and controls were lax or nonexistent. From there, with the help of local traffickers, cocaine would be smuggled to the Sahel via



- 39 See «Investigation cross-border weapon transfer in the Sahel», Conflict Armament Research, North Africa Report (November 2016).
- 40 Interview with Serge Daniel, journalist at Radio France Internationale and Specialist of Jihadist groups, Bamako, Mali, (March 2017).
- 41 See Roberto Sollazzo and Matthias Nowak, “Tri-border Transit Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso– Côte d’Ivoire–Mali Region”, Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper (October 2020).
- 42 In October 2020, 4 foreign hostages were released in exchange for liberation of 200 JNIM prisoners and the payment of an estimated 20 million euros in ransom.
- 43 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, “THE WEST AFRICA–SAHEL CONNECTION: Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking”, Small Arms Survey Briefing Report”, Small Arms Survey, Briefing paper (December 2019), 5.
- 44 Id.
- 45 International Crisis Group, “Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali”, Africa Report N°267 (13 December, 2018), 3.

North Africa to Europe.⁴⁶ To increase shipments, drug traffickers even chartered planes to transport the product, giving rise to an operation called Air Cocaine. In 2007, the UNDC estimated that 47 tons of cocaine entering Europe had transited through Africa.⁴⁷ However, these were only estimates based on drug seizures, so the true figures were most likely considerably higher. Serge Daniel explains that cocaine was sold at prices varying between €20,000 - €32,000 per kilo, generating enormous amounts of money for local traffickers⁴⁸. He further explains that drugs were smuggled to Europe through the Sahel via Mauritania, Algeria, Niger, Chad, etc. Trucks full of drugs returned filled with weapons to be resold here.⁴⁹ By 2019, the pace had dramatically increased with, according to the UNDC, drug trafficking being expanded to include cannabis, cocaine, and amphetamines. In Cote d'Ivoire alone, 286 tons of drugs of all kinds were seized between 2017 and 2018.⁵⁰ Indications however point to persistent but declining cocaine trafficking since 2011 if one looks at the statistics on drug seizures, although this could be attributed to higher levels of corruption, instability, and conflict in the region, all of which negatively impact the fight against drug trafficking⁵¹.

For Algeria, trafficking is a direct threat to its national security specifically when considering that there have been major seizures of illicit weapons in southern Algeria in the cities of Ain Guezzam, Adrar, and Tamanrasset. Heavy weapons such as missiles, rockets, Kalashnikovs have been seized by the Algerian security forces over the years along with psychotropic and other heavy drugs⁵² , Therefore, the nexus between arms-drug traffickers on the one hand and terrorists on the other is considered as the gravest threat by the Algerian security services given that the most dangerous active jihadist groups, the JNIM and ISGS, operate on the borders and consider Algeria a target. The fact that these two groups have been involved in this type of trafficking to both finance their activities and to acquire weapons is extremely troubling. In this regard, a high-ranking French military officer explained that “some katibas [ISIL



- 46 See Alain Antil, “Trafic de Cocaine au Sahel”, *Etudes* 10, 417 (2012), 307-316.
- 47 UNDC, “The Transatlantic Cocaine Market”, Research Paper (April 2011). Online: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Transatlantic_cocaine_market.pdf
- 48 Serge Daniel, *AQMI : L’industrie de l’enlèvement* (Paris: Les Editions Fayard), 161-72.
- 49 Interview with Serge Daniel, journalist at RFI and specialist of Jihadist groups (March 2017).
- 50 See “United Nations Anti-Crime Chief Spotlights Alarming Drug Trafficking Trends in West, Central Africa, Outlining Disruption Efforts to Security Council”, United Nations Organization (December 19th, 2018). Online: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13635.doc.htm>
- 51 See Lucia Bird, “WEST AFRICA’S COCAINE CORRIDOR: Building a sub-regional response” Global Initiative against Organized Crime (April 2021). Online: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/West-Africas-Cocaine-Corridor-GITOC.pdf>
- 52 See example R.A, «Une cache d’armes et de munitions découverte par l’armée à Tamanrasset», *Tout sur l’Algerie* (July 23rd, 2019). Also see «Arrestation de 2 terroristes, reddition de 2 autres et saisie d’une grande quantité d’armes et de munitions en août» *Algerie Press Service* (September 1st, 2019).

battle groups—Ed.] of the Islamic State in Algeria are operating on the borders with Mali and Niger. When they go up north [Algeria –Ed.], they especially seek weapons and money”⁵³. Algerian security services regularly conducted operations against these networks to weaken the link between jihadist groups and traffickers. While this strategy was successful in Algeria itself, it had the counter effect of reinforcing the trafficking-jihadist alliance on Algeria’s very borders. An example is the famous case of Abdellah Bekhal, an Algerian trafficker who fled to Libya with three foreign hostages who were kidnapped by an armed group to use as leverage to negotiate the release of his brother who was involved in terrorist attacks in Algeria⁵⁴.

Naturally, a discussion on trafficking leads to the most prominent menace for Algeria in the region, i.e., the presence of powerful jihadist organizations directly involved in attacks against the country endangering its security and stability.

3. Jihadist groups in the Sahel: the principal security threat to Algeria

In June 2020, Abdelmalek Droukdal aka Abou Moussab Abdelwadoud, founder and supreme emir of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and arguably the most wanted man in Algeria, was killed in Talhandak on the Algerian-Malian border while preparing to meet the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara (ISGS - the second most powerful jihadist organization in the Sahel and rival of Al Qaeda⁵⁵). Most likely present in the Sahel since at least 2019, videos surfaced in 2021, a few months after his death, of a meeting between Droukdal, Iyadh Ghali, leader of JNIM, and Amadou Kouffa, the second in command, who were both theoretically under the authority of Droukdal since JNIM was created as an affiliate of AQIM in 2017⁵⁶. In December 2020, the Algerian security services announced that they had conducted military operations in the region of Jijel, northern Algeria, during which three AQIM leaders were killed and €80,000 seized. After investigation, it transpired that the money came from JNIM as part of a ransom paid to the organization by France



- 53 Cited in Camille Lafrance, “[Infographie] Algérie : l’armée sur le qui-vive face au terrorisme et aux trafics », Jeune Afrique (December 6th, 2019). Online:<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/863447/politique/infographie-algerie-larmee-sur-le-qui-vive-face-au-terrorisme-et-aux-trafics/>
- 54 See Mark Micallef, Raouf Farrah, Alexandre Bish, Victor Tanner, “After the Storm: Organized crime across the Sahel-Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali “, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2019), 47.
- 55 See “Mali : la France annonce l’élimination du chef d’Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique », Le Point (June 5th, 2020)
- 56 See «La DGSE dévoile la vidéo d’une réunion de l’état-major d’Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique», Le Figaro (February 2nd, 2021).

for the release of two western hostages in the Sahel⁵⁷. Worse still, in November 2020, Yazid Mebarek, aka Abou Obeida Youssef al-Annabi, was appointed the new leader of AQIM in Algeria thus succeeding Droukdal. One would not have expected the announcement during a speech by Abu Numan al-Shanqiti, a major JNIM figure but rather by AQIM itself on Al Andalus, the AQIM official media channel.

These major events illustrate the close ties that have existed between the jihadist groups in the Sahel and the Algerian ones since the 1990s during the Algerian civil strife. During the 1990 civil war, the Algerian jihadist groups focused on the northern part of the country and had little interest in the South as such. Salima Tlemceni explains that originally a certain Hassan Allal, a member of the feared Group Islamique Arme (GIA), with a following of about 40 jihadists established himself in southern Algeria intending to set up links with traffickers in the Sahel region to access weapons to smuggle to the GIA fighters in the north⁵⁸. The idea was to take advantage of the weakness of the states in the Sahel and the abundance of illicit trafficked goods, including weapons, to supply the GIA. Allal was rapidly replaced by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a veteran of the Afghan Jihad, who created a brigade known as Katibat Al Shouhada (Martyrs Brigade). Belmokhtar tried his utmost to organize and implement this plan to create the first jihadist groups in southern Algeria-Sahel and link them with traffickers to build a rear basis for the GIA⁵⁹. Despite his best efforts, the southern jihadist brigades were insignificant during the Algerian civil war playing a very minor peripheral role, if any, in the conflict. However, this also meant that Belmokhtar and his men were not targeted by the Algerian security services, which allowed him to strengthen his position in the Sahel.

By 1997, under the GIA leadership of Hassan Hattab in the Kabyle regions, several brigades of the organization, among which were the southern ones led by Belmokhtar, split from the GIA due to its extreme violence, especially against civilians, and formed the Salafist Group for Predication and Combat (GSPC)⁶⁰. This new jihadist organization claimed to conduct a jihad against the Algerian authorities while sparing civilians and returning to the true Salafi principles, abandoned by the GIA. Part of the GSPC strategy was to assert itself as a leading jihadist



- 57 See «Alger dit avoir récupéré une ‘tranche de la rançon’ des otages au Sahel», Le Figaro (December 28th, 2020).
- 58 Interview with Salima Tlemceni, Algerian journalist and Jihadist organization specialist (September 2012).
- 59 See Mohamed Mokkedem, *Al Qaeda au Maghreb Islamique : Contrebande au nom de l’Islam* (Algiers: Casbah Editions, 2010).
- 60 See Mathieu Guidere, *Al Qaida a la conquete du Maghreb : Le terrorisme aux portes de l’Europe* (Paris, Edition Rocher, 2007).

organization and form an alliance with the more global jihadist groups represented by Al Qaeda and Bin Laden to obtain support from the latter. Belmokhtar, who had spent years in Afghanistan, having met and kept contact with Al Qaeda leaders, was to play an important role in this strategy. This relationship placed the southern brigades of the GSPC in a more influential position rather than its role on the battlefield, which remained marginal. Belmokhtar was asked to reestablish contacts with Al Qaeda which was present in Sudan and Afghanistan. In 2001 an emissary from Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, Mohamed Al Yammani met Belmokhtar to explore the possibility of strengthening ties with jihadist groups in the Sahel and create potential sanctuaries for Al Qaeda⁶¹. The presence of the GSPC could thus facilitate this redeployment and be mutually beneficial.

However, the turning point came in 2003 when 32 western hostages were kidnapped in Algeria by a GSPC brigade led by Abderazzak Al Para and Abdel Hamid Abou Zeid. While 17 were released during an assault by the Algerian army, 15 others were taken to northern Mali where they were released after the payment of €5 million in ransom by European countries. The Algerian army meanwhile decided on the massive deployment of troops on the borders with Mali de facto blocking the return of Al Para, Abu Zeid, and their followers. Trapped in northern Mali, a weak state, and suddenly becoming extremely rich, the GSPC top leadership immediately understood the strategic importance of permanently establishing itself in the region, and the financial benefits especially hostage-taking could offer. For years the major issue had been the lack of funds to buy weapons. The 2003 events “paved the way” for the GSPC. As Mohamed Fall Ould Oumere explains, “at this point, this hostage-taking (2003 – Ed.) and the ones that followed over the years were done to collect money to support the GPSC with an estimated 60-70% of the funds being directed to the organization in Algeria or to benefit groups in northern Algeria (weapons, supplies, etc.), ...the organization and its brigades in the Sahel were then still very much focused on Algeria”⁶². As Serge Daniel explains, the fact that the GSPC men in the Sahel were extremely loyal to their leader in Algeria, ensured that this would indeed be done. Thus, the Sahelian brigades of the GSPC, which became AQIM in 2007, increased hostage-taking in the region and created what amounts to “an industry of hostage-taking” in northern Mali. As the western countries paid the ransoms, it provided AQIM with significant amounts of money and, supported by loyal commanders who organized camps, it recruited men and



61 Mokeddem, *Al Qaeda au Maghreb Islamique*, 137-142.

62 Interview with Mohamed Fall Ould Oumere, director of the Mauritanian newspaper «La Tribune», Rabat, Maroc (October 2011).

assimilated with local populations. AQIM in the Sahel became one of the most powerful Al Qaeda groups in the world. It also established strong links for the trafficking of food, oil, weapons, and drugs thereby reinforcing its position in the region as a major economic actor.

By 2012 when the Malian crisis erupted, AQIM had established a strong alliance with Ansar Al Dine (a local Malian jihadist group) led by Iyadh Ghali, one of the most powerful and important Touareg figures, and the Movement for the Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJWA). In May 2012 they were able to take control of northern Mali and created an Islamic Emirate, which triggered a major international crisis.⁶³ Although they lost control over the territory temporarily in January 2013 when the French launched operation Serval, the AQIM-Ansar Al Dine-MUJWA coalition regrouped in northern Mali-southern Libya, reorganized themselves, and merged in 2017 creating JNIM, currently the most powerful jihadist organization in the Sahel. JNIM effectively controls northern- and central Mali, except the major urban centers and northern Burkina Faso, in addition to being able to attack most countries in the region. As the Sahel is essentially composed of rural and desert areas, it means that JNIM practically controls the territory.

AQIM posed a direct threat to Algeria's national security because the main role of its Sahelian brigade was to bolster the terrorist groups' activities in Algeria with money and weapons. They also conducted several direct attacks against the country. Eleven Algerian gendarmes were killed in 2010⁶⁴ on the Algerian-Malian border, and seven Algerian diplomats were kidnapped in 2012 in Gao by the MUJWA with the subsequent assassination of one of them, Taher Touati, while the Algerian consul, Boualem Siess, became ill and died during captivity. In January 2013, the Belmokhtar⁶⁵ led group, Al Murabitoune, conducted a major attack against Algeria during an expat and Algerian hostage-taking incident at the Tiguentourine Natural Gas refinery. This was a major event as this facility accounted for 20% of Algerian natural gas exports in addition to being a blow to Algeria's international image. It ended with the killing of all the terrorists as well as 23 foreign hostages and damage to the facility. Finally, in 2020, the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara (ISGS), the other most important jihadist group in the Sahel affiliated with the



63 See Djallil Lounnas, "Al Qaeda au Maghreb Islamique et la crise Malienne", *Sécurité Globale* 20, 2 (2012), 43-58.

64 «Onze gendarmes tués dans une embuscade», *Jeune Afrique* (July 1st, 2010).

65 Mokhtar Belmokhtar has catastrophic relations with AQIM supreme leader Abdelmalek Droukdal, a situation aggravated by tension between Belmokhtar and his brigade, which was involved in drug trafficking, and Abu Zeid who was close to Droukdal and condemned the involvement of Belmokhtar in trafficking. Eventually in 2012 Belmokhtar split from AQIM and created his own organization the Those who sign in Blood Brigade. He then merged with MUJWA and created Al Murabitoune in 2013.

Daech, conducted a suicide bomb attack against the Algerian army. In addition, vast numbers of young Algerians from the south joined the jihadist Sahelian groups as the regular announcements of their surrender indicated. Lemine Ould Salem explains that nowadays, while most of the leaders of JNIM and ISGS are Sahelians because most of the Algerians and North Africans have been killed over the years, many mid-level leaders and fighters are Algerians.

Therefore, an Algerian diplomat rightly argued that security issues in the Sahel and North Africa are closely intertwined. Algeria's concern about security developments in the Sahel is justified as they directly affect its security. In response to the crisis, rather than aligning its position and strategies with Paris, the other main actor involved in the region, Algiers developed a national approach over the years, known as the political solution.



ALGERIA AND THE POLITICAL SOLUTION (2012-2019)

Algeria adopted a double-track strategy to tackle the Sahelian crisis. From a security point of view, it decided to resort to what one may define as a defensive posture consisting of hermetically closing its borders using massive military deployment to prevent the infiltration of terrorists or traffickers from the Sahel into the country. Politically, it distinguished itself from France, which adopted a purely military approach to the problem, by calling for a political solution to the Malian crisis. In 2014, Ramtane Lamamra, the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs argued that Algeria was “a country exporting stability and security” to differentiate Algiers’ position from that of France⁶⁶. An Algerian high-ranking diplomat explained, “that while this concept of stability and security is not clearly defined, it is structured around two major elements (1) the rejection of any kind of interference in the domestic affairs of a country, thus the need to respect the sovereignty of the countries involved given that external interventions only aggravate crises as in the Iraqi and Libyan crisis, (2) resorting to inclusive dialogue between all the parties involved in the conflict, in which case, Algeria could play the role of mediator to reach a political agreement to end the conflict”⁶⁷.

Louisa Ait Hamadouche considers the following as the pillars of Algerian foreign policy in Africa and the Sahel (1) noninterference, (2) sovereignty, (3) primacy of regional over the international, and (4) political solutions over military interventions.⁶⁸ The roots of this Algerian approach are to be found in Algeria’s political history and its independence from colonial France and remain the basis of its foreign policy stance. Algeria also uses mediation as a large part of its foreign policy position. Historically, Algeria, as a middle power, played an important role as a mediator in major international crises and conflicts such as in Iran-Iraq in 1975, which led to the Algiers Agreement that briefly ended the Iranian-Iraqi rivalry. Its most spectacular diplomatic achievements were securing the release of US hostages during the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979-1981 and more recently, in 2000, the Algiers Agreements, which ended the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict marking the return of Algeria to

66 Abbès Zineb, «Lamamra : ‘ L’Algérie est un pays exportateur de sécurité et de stabilité’», Algérie360, (September 19th, 2014). Online: <https://www.algerie1.com/actualite/lamamra-lalgerie-est-un-pays-exportateur-de-securite-et-de-stabilite>

67 Discussion with a high-ranking Algerian diplomat Algiers, Algeria (January 2016).

68 Louisa Ait Hamadouche, “L’Algérie et la Sécurité au Sahel : Lecture critique d’une approche paradoxale», Confluence Méditerranée 90, 3 (2014), 109.

the international stage after an absence of almost two decades due to domestic problems and the 1990s civil strife. Using mediation as a tool by a middle power like Algeria has several advantages that include increasing the prestige of the country and its international standing⁶⁹. Furthermore, using a strategy of projecting “security and stability” as a mature and honest peace broker, Algeria is perceived as a reliable partner and a major asset in the context of globalization, and the need for the regional states to cooperate to combat transnational threats. More importantly, mediations in the context of situations such as the one in the Sahel prevents spillover effects on domestic stability and the security of the country as a whole while avoiding military intervention. According to Saadia Touval, mediations by regional states, especially by middle powers like Algeria, derive from their perceptions of the international system, from their domestic needs, and their own foreign policy goals and capabilities. For her, it is impossible to separate domestic and external factors to explain mediations⁷⁰.

Thus, the political weight of Algeria, its historical role in the Sahel as a mediator, and the fact that it has always remained neutral strengthened its position to conduct successful mediations.

1. The political dialogue: Algeria’s mediation efforts

1.1. The 1991 and 2006 mediations

Algeria has been involved in the Mali mediations since the 1960s. The most recent being the 1991 agreement of Tamanrasset signed between the governments of Mali and Nigeria and the Tuareg rebels in both countries led by Iyad Ghali. The 1991 agreement included a ceasefire, the demilitarization of the Malian rebels and the integration of fighters into the Malian army, as well as the granting of special status to northern Mali. However, it did not meet the expectations of many Malian Tuareg rebel leaders who decided to continue fighting. These sporadic rebellions continued to erupt during the 1990s and early 2000s resulting in the weakening of the Malian state making it less able to deal with the situation.

Eventually, in 2006, a new general rebellion erupted in northern Mali. Algeria again attempted to mediate between the Malian government and the Tuareg rebels leading to the 2006 Algiers Agreement. This agreement,



69 Mehran Kamrava, “Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy”, *Middle East Journal*, Autumn 2011, Vol. 65, No. 4. (Autumn 2011), 541-542.

70 Saadia Touval, “Mediation and Foreign Policy”, *International Studies Review* vol. 5, 4 (December 2003), 92.

which represented an updated version of one in 1991, contained an economic development component. As a former high-ranking Algerian diplomat involved in the 2006 agreement explains, “Algiers did not want to give autonomy to the Tuaregs” due to its concerns about the spillover effects on other Tuareg populations including those in Algeria who could potentially ask for autonomy⁷¹. He further explains that from the Algiers point of view, the solution would come from granting special status to northern Mali in conjunction with an important economic development program. Algiers viewed the problem, first and foremost, as marginalization, specifically the economic marginalization of the north⁷². The result was that when the Tuaregs asked for autonomy in 2006, Algiers refused, arguing that the problems of northern Mali had to be solved within the context of the Malian state through economic and political integration.

Several rebel leaders were appointed to important positions in Bamako such as Amada ag Bibi, spokesman of the rebellion who became Representative in the National Assembly and Iyadh Ag Ghali, one of most emblematic leaders of the Tuareg rebels, who was appointed as Consul of Mali in Saudi Arabia. According to a Tuareg leader, there was a backlash against those who accepted these appointments, especially Iyadh Ghali. He was perceived and rejected by his former rebel associates as being too close to Bamako and having turned his back on the Tuareg movement⁷³. This was particularly relevant because Ghali had developed strong links with Algiers over the years, and was relied on during mediations⁷⁴. Economically, the 2006 agreement was also expected to produce economic benefits for northern Mali in the form of schools, health care, etc., which never happened. Instead, as the Tuareg leader explains, instability and corruption resulted in the money never arriving and being retained by the south, increasing tension and resentment,⁷⁵ and did little to help the agreement.

Until the mid-2000s, Algeria was very involved in Africa under the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, particularly in Mali, starting in 2007. Bouteflika tried to promote Algeria internationally but gradually, the Algerian diplomacy disregarded Africa as no major initiatives were undertaken in the region by Algiers anymore after this mediation⁷⁶. Conflict in Mali continued after the 2006 agreement while it continued



- 71 Interview with a former high ranking Algerian diplomat involved in the 2006 negotiations, Algiers, Algeria (2015)
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Telephonic interview with a Tuareg leader (September 2021).
- 74 Interview with a former high ranking Algerian diplomat involved in the 2006 negotiations, Algiers, Algeria (2015).
- 75 Telephonic Interview with a Tuareg leader (September 2021).
- 76 Interview with a former Algerian diplomat, Algiers, Algeria (2013).

to disintegrate with no Algerian intervention. Leaders once close to Algiers gradually distanced themselves from the country and were less responsive to any of its initiatives. For example, in 2009 Algeria entered into new mediation in Mali calling for the return to the 2006 agreement⁷⁷. However, this time negotiations were more difficult and members of the new rebellion refused to agree to the terms of the process. Even worse, they turned to Libya for support instead of Algiers, including Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, the alter ego of Ghali, and the leader of the Tuareg rebellion at that time. Reflecting on these events, an Algerian diplomat stated that it showed that Algiers had lost ground between 2006 and 2009, and fewer people were looking to it for solutions. Thus, when the Malian crisis erupted in 2011-2012, Algiers had lost many of its contacts and networks on the ground and found it extremely difficult to both mediate and find an acceptable solution, especially since the crisis resulted in the fragmentation of the political-rebellion landscape in Mali.

1.2. The political solution: Algiers' approach to the Malian crisis (2012-2019)

From the Algerian point of view, the ongoing crisis in Mali is the consequence of the amalgamation of two major yet different problems. The first one remains the unresolved Tuareg issue, which has plagued Mali and the Sahel since the 1960s aggravated by the second one, the deployment of jihadist groups since the 2000s within a very weak Malian state. For Algeria, these are two entirely separate issues. According to an Algerian official "the terrorist organizations, such as AQIM and the others, are ultimately transnational ones with transnational agendas but took advantage of the conditions in the Sahel to garner local support. They understood that without local support they would not make it. On the other hand, the Tuaregs are driven by local Malian dynamics"⁷⁸. In this context, Algeria pleaded for a political solution.

The political solution, which Algiers calls for, is derived from its experience in combating terrorism in the 1990s and the national reconciliation plan put in place in 1999 by President Bouteflika, which ended the civil strife. In late 1996, from a position of strength after several years of war, the Algerian authorities entered into a dialogue with what was considered a moderate jihadist group, the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS). This resulted in a ceasefire with the organization in October 1997 and was also observed by other jihadist factions that joined the negotiations. In 1999, shortly after his election, President Bouteflika issued the Civil Concord



⁷⁷ Interview with a former high ranking Algerian diplomat involved in the 2006 negotiations, Algiers, Algeria (2015).

⁷⁸ Discussion with a high-ranking Algerian official Algiers, Algeria, January 2015.

law offering amnesty to AIS fighters which was later extended to other jihadist groups. In 2004, this became the National Reconciliation Law. Using this legislation, the Algerian authorities entered into dialogue with jihadist groups that refused to surrender in 1997 (GIA and GSPC) offering them amnesty and social reintegration in exchange for their surrender. In parallel, the authorities launched extensive economic investment plans to satisfy the social and economic demands of the population to reduce the economic driver of radicalization while integrating moderate Islamist parties into government to give them political access. According to another Algerian official, the idea is to reach out to moderate jihadist groups, isolate radical ones, and simultaneously cut the population off from the jihadist groups by satisfying their economic demands and integrating the Islamists into governance⁷⁹.

Translated to the Malian crisis, the political solution called for a nationally inclusive dialogue between all Malian factions involved in the conflict. It also called for the formation of a government of national unity where all parties would be represented. The idea would be to have a legitimate government supported by the whole population. The political solution also implied the recognition of acceptable and legitimate demands of the rebels, including special status for the north and extensive economic and development initiatives⁸⁰. Algiers believed that if this happened, it would cut off the northern rebels and the local populations from the jihadist groups, as they would no longer need them, thereby isolating the population of northern Mali from the jihadist groups who, by definition, have a transnational agenda. It would also lead the Malians who joined the jihadist groups, because of local grievances, to leave them. Thus, jihadist groups would be cut off from the local population and would either have to surrender or would be eliminated with the help of the population⁸¹.

Accordingly, in late 2012, Algiers led a new mediation effort between the various factions involved in the conflict and the Malian government. As part of the process, it reached out to Iyadh Ghali who had returned from Saudi Arabia as a Salafi radical and had, by early 2012, formed Ansar Al Dine, a powerful local Tuareg jihadist organization, closely allied with AQIM. Initially, Ghali agreed to the negotiations and sent representatives to Algiers to sign the Algiers December 2012 Agreement between his organization and the MNLA. This was a major step in implementing the strategy of separating the local groups from the jihadists, as without Ansar Al Dine, AQIM would find itself cut off from the northern



79 Interview with an Algerian high-ranking official, Algiers, Algeria (September 2012).

80 Ibid

81 Ibid.

populations. Thus, in compliance with the December 2012 agreement between Ansar Al Dine and the MNLA, both parties agreed to enter into formal negotiations with Bamako, committed to upholding the national unity of Mali, to secure northern Mali from all terrorist organizations, and to free all hostages⁸². Regarded as a major diplomatic success, the agreement collapsed two weeks later for reasons that remain unclear. In early January 2013, Iyadh Ghali denounced the agreement in favor of reinforcing his alliance with AQIM and MUJWA and launched a major attack on the Malian troops in central Mali. This resulted in the French operation, Serval, and the reconquest of northern Mali by French and Malian troops. As for Algeria, this was a diplomatic disaster aggravated four months later, in April 2013, when President Bouteflika suffered a stroke that left him incapacitated. Given that diplomacy was his “reserved domain”, it further weakened Algeria’s stance both internationally and regionally in the Sahel.

Nonetheless, in an ultimate attempt to recover, Ramtame Lamamra, the then Algerian African Union Commissar for Peace and a specialist on conflicts in Africa, was recalled to Algiers in 2013 and appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs with the priority of bringing Algeria back into Africa and the Sahelian game.

The first thing Algiers did as part of its strategy was to cancel the debt of 14 African countries while Lamamra himself restarted the process of mediation in Mali. This was initially facilitated by the weakening of the Tuareg rebellion, especially by the MNLA, which had been defeated by the jihadists in mid-2012 and the initial and short-lived successes of operation Serval, which allowed Bamako to regain control of northern Mali. This led to the 2015 Algiers agreement. Considered a milestone and major success, the Algiers agreement of 2015 was signed by almost all the warring factions. Formally called the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, it was signed by the Malian government, the Coordination of the Azawad Movement (CMA), which represented most of the rebel factions, as well as the so-called Platform, a group of factions close to Bamako. The agreement excluded the granting of any kind of autonomy or independence to northern Mali. While recognizing the specificity of northern Mali (*réalité humaine* as it was termed in the agreement), it made provision for a larger representation by the northern population in Bamako’s local elections, the integration of the rebels in the Malian army, and investigations regarding the crimes committed between 2012 and 2015. On paper, it was a classical post-conflict agreement and the logical and positive outcome of Algerian mediation aligned with



82 See “Mali : Le MNLA et Ansar Dine signent un accord à Alger», El Watan (December 2012). <https://www.elwatan.com/archives/actualites/mali-le-mnla-et-ansar-dine-signent-un-accord-a-alger-21-12-2012>.

its principles of a political solution. However, the agreement was never implemented and fighting continued unabated.

Thus, as one Tuareg leader explains, in effect, it was simply a combination of the 1991 and 2006 agreements. He also argues that the agreement called for decentralization of Mali with nothing specific on the Azawad⁸³. Also, the CMA only signed the agreement under duress while the integration of the ex-combatants into the Malian army never materialized. Moreover, the creation of transitional local authorities only took place in 2017 after new outbreaks of violence. During those years, Mali continued to disintegrate in the northern and central regions while jihadist groups grew increasingly powerful, especially JNIM and ISGS. In Bamako, several parties rejected the agreement arguing that it would weaken and destroy what was left of the State. Instead, these parties called for a “Malian solution” with an agreement signed in Bamako between the various factions to restore the State⁸⁴. Moreover, those who called for this Malian solution rejected the possibility of negotiating with some of the jihadist groups, something that Algeria supports⁸⁵. Algeria believed that negotiations with Iyadh Ghali were possible because he is motivated by the situation in the Azawad rather than the Al Qaeda transnational agenda. Rejected by many key actors, the agreement was never implemented. Algeria then entered a period of a major domestic political crisis that culminated in the start of the Hirak in April 2019 and resulted in its quasi-total disappearance from the Sahel during those years.

The concept of Algeria’s political solution was also in question. As an Algerian observer argued, “the approach of Algeria is logical, but is it feasible?”⁸⁶. Indeed, Algeria tried to apply the model of national reconciliation to the Sahelian crisis. However, the conditions in Algeria in 1998-1999 were different from those in Mali. In 1997, the ceasefire between the Algerian army and AIS was the result of a military victory of the Algerian army over the terrorist groups in the country. It is only then that dialogue took place. Civil unity and national reconciliation only started after the Algerian army had achieved a military victory over GIA-GSPC-AQIM, not before. This is not the case in Mali where its army has not been able to achieve any form of success in the north. The Malian army is wholly dependent on the French troops for conducting its operation. Moreover, national reconciliation was aimed at ending what had become by then low-level insurgency



83 Telephonic interview with a Tuareg leader (September 2021).

84 Discussion with Malian political leader (August 2021)

85 Ibid.

86 Discussion with an Algerian observer, Algiers, Algeria (June 2014).

in which any victory by the jihadist groups was out of reach. This was not the case in Mali. Also, this process was conducted in the context in which the Algerian state was strong and had regained control on the ground. No doubt, Algeria had weakened in the 1990s but was never on the brink of collapse. Mali has been very weak for several years and virtually controls nothing in the northern or central regions of the country except some urban centers such as Gao and Timbuctoo. However, since Mali is largely a rural country, Bamako does not control much of anything. Another difference between the two countries is the issue of pro-government paramilitary groups. Groups such as Les Patriotes and Groupes de Legitime Defense (GLD) were created in Algeria in the 1990s and played an important role in the victory of the Algerian army against the jihadist groups. These groups were trained and paid by the Algerian state. They were also led and supervised by individuals who were close to the state, in many cases, former fighters of the war of independence, former policemen, state officials, etc., so firmly under its control. In Mali and the Sahel, these groups are often entirely autonomous militias exercising exactions from local populations and, in turn, fueling violence. Finally, the process of national reconciliation took place in the context of a fight against two main groups, AIS and GIA, both of which had no external backing and whose links to the population were gradually suppressed. In the Sahel, there is a multitude of factions and groups with foreign support and often local support.

These differences make the application and implementation of the process of national reconciliation to the Malian case very difficult. Conscious of these limitations, the Algerian authorities took important military steps to protect the country from the potential spillover effects of the violence in the Sahel.

2. The defensive position of the Algerian army

“Everyone wants Algeria on board, it is a major actor in the Sahel. However, Algiers wants to only play the role of facilitator, to mediate between all,”⁸⁷ explained a European observer in 2013. In 2014, a US official said, “we believe Algeria is a major regional power, we would like to see her take a larger role in the Sahel and why not intervene more directly”⁸⁸. These comments reflected the call for direct military involvement of Algeria in the Sahel given its military capabilities which made it appear to be “a regional power”. However, the officials in Algiers



87 Discussion with a European Union official, Algiers, Algeria (June 2014).

88 Informal discussion with a US official (2013).

have consistently refused to do so, elevating the principle “of no military deployment abroad” to a military doctrine. Furthermore, the Algerian constitution at the time forbade it.

As a very high-ranking Algerian official explained, “General Mohamed Lamari, Chief of Staff from 1992 to 2004 believed that the Algerian army had no vocation to be deployed abroad and thus was against any external military involvement of the Algerian army. This view was subsequently endorsed by his successor General Ahmed Gaid Salah and to that extent, the army does not intervene abroad”⁸⁹. Rather than a properly defined doctrine, this non-interventionism reflected the views of the Algerian military leaders on the external military deployments of other countries. An Algerian official explained that “when we look at the involvement of major powers in similar cases, whether the Soviet Union in Afghanistan or the United States in Iraq, we see that these end up in failures as they are costly, they aggravate the situations, and their troops get bogged down. And we are talking here about major powers. We don’t want the Algerian army to get bogged down in the Sahel”⁹⁰. Furthermore, the Algerian authorities also justified this noninterventionism as a constitutional rule which, according to them, prohibited such operations. However, on closer inspection, the constitution did not specifically state anything about external military deployment. It simply stated Algeria favored peaceful resolution of conflicts and respects the sovereignty of other countries. It also stated that in emergencies, the president could mobilize the army and declare war. It is therefore the interpretation of the constitution rather than the constitution itself that forbids the external deployment of the Algerian army.

Instead, Algeria took a defensive position in the Sahel. Thus, as early as 2003, after the GSPC hostage-taking, the Algerian army deployed to southern Algeria in an attempt to hermetically close the borders and prevent the return of jihadists to the country. At the same time, and while the situation deteriorated in Mali over the years, Algiers consistently refused to intervene in northern Mali where the AQIM brigades were deploying and reinforcing, transforming the region into sanctuaries. In 2010 for example, the then Malian president, Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) faced with the inability of his army to suppress the rebels, authorized the neighboring countries, including Algeria, to intervene by mobilizing their forces in northern Mali against the jihadists



89 Discussion with a very high-ranking Algerian official, Algiers, Algeria (January 2015).

90 Discussion with an Algerian official Algiers, Algeria (January 2015).

(droit de poursuite)⁹¹. Despite the Mauritanian army conducted raids against AQIM in Mali, Algiers refused to do so⁹². Instead, it focused on a regional response by creating The African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) as part of the African Union in 2004 “which functions as a research center of excellence in matters concerning the prevention and combating of terrorism in Africa”. As a structure of the African Union Commission, the center contributes to and strengthens the capacity of the African Union to deal with issues relating to the prevention and combating of terrorism in Africa with the ultimate objective of eliminating the threat posed by terrorism to peace, security, stability, and development in Africa”⁹³. Facing mounting threats, Algiers decided to reinforce regional military cooperation by creating the Commite d’Etat Major Operationnel Conjoint (CEMOC), grouping with Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger with its headquarters in Tamanrasset. The mission of the CEMOC was to coordinate the actions of these states in combating terrorism, including sharing intelligence, coordinating military operations, locating, and destroying terrorist groups in the Sahel. Unfortunately, apart from a few meetings, the CEMOC was never really able to act efficiently on the ground in the Sahel given the weakness of the states and the refusal of the Algerian army to intervene abroad.

The situation deteriorated from 2011 onwards with the collapse of Libya and then the 2012 takeover of northern Mali by jihadist groups. Algeria again substantially reinforced its military deployment in the region with additional troops, gendarmes, police, and customs officers⁹⁴. Akram Khariief explains that part of this defensive strategy was Algeria building small forts every 50km or so, while its air force deployed extensively in the south. With a major air force base in the border city of Bordj Baji Mokhtar, it conducted regular air reconnaissance flights supported by combat helicopters⁹⁵. Algeria acquired eight satellites to monitor its territory and reinforce its drone fleet. The Algerian army conducted large-scale military operations against terrorist groups in the country between 2013 - 2018 leading to the almost total annihilation of AQIM in Algeria. It also eliminated countless numbers of terrorist convoys entering Algeria from the Sahel while dismantling weapons trafficking networks supplying terrorist groups. The primary goal was to sever links



- 91 See Sabine Cessou, “Amadou Toumani Touré” : «Mon pays, le Mali, est otage et victime», Liberation (October 1st, 2010).
- 92 See Modibo Gaita, «Nouvelle menace terroriste en Afrique de l’Ouest: Contrecarrer la stratégie d’AQIM au Sahel», Bulletin de la Sécurité Africaine N0.11 (February 2011).
- 93 See The role of purpose of CAERT. <https://caert.org.dz/3389-2/>
- 94 See Abdennour Benantar, «Sécurité aux frontières : Portée et limites de la stratégie algérienne», L’année du Maghreb no. 14 (2016), 147-163
- 95 Interview with Akram Khariief, Algiers, January 2018.

between the terrorist groups in the country and their acolytes in the Sahel, thereby reducing the need for Algeria to intervene abroad. A total of 80,000 soldiers were deployed on the Algerian-Libyan-Malian border including 30,000 on the Algerian-Malian one. This was an extremely costly operation as it involved food, housing, and logistics in addition to equipment and maintenance⁹⁶. However, Algeria consistently refused to enter into any coalition to combat terrorism and relied instead on its own capabilities. This demonstrated the fact that the country wanted to retain operational autonomy and, as a former diplomat explains, “did not want to entrust the security at its borders to collective security mechanism of any kind and thus to be dependent on its relations with other actors for its security”⁹⁷.

In this overall context of considerable domestic problems, its noninterventionism in the Sahel and the fact the Algiers Agreement of 2015 was never implemented, Algeria saw its role in this crucial region for its security substantially diminished while the situation continued to deteriorate. By 2019, JNIM was launching attacks throughout the Sahel, while ISGS expanded and launched major attacks throughout the region and against Algeria as well, something JNIM had refrained from doing. At the same time, Mali continued to disintegrate and after years of endless war, France announced that it was withdrawing from Mali. While the start of the Hirak initially meant the total disappearance of Algeria from the Sahel, the December 2019 election of Abdel Majeed Tebboune changed this. He immediately made it clear that Algeria was to return to the regional and international scene starting with the Sahel.



96 Interview with a former Algerian diplomat, Algiers, Algeria (January 2018).

97 Ibid.



ALGERIA'S "NEW APPROACH TO THE SAHEL": 2020-2021

1. The political solution updated

Shortly after his election in December 2019, Abdel Majid Tebboune announced that he wanted Algeria back in the regional game, after a protracted absence due to the political turmoil that marked the last years of his predecessor Abdelaziz Bouteflika. However, in practice, the diplomatic parameters that had prevailed under the previous presidency seem to remain dominant, especially the approach to conflict, i.e. the political solution.

In August 2020, shortly after the coup d'Etat that ousted President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita (IBK), who was considered too close to Paris, Sabri Boukadoum, the then Algerian minister of foreign affairs went to Bamako to meet the newly-established military authorities. During this meeting he reaffirmed Algeria's total commitment to Mali and the Sahel, signaling its return to the region⁹⁸. He also reiterated the previous governments' position regarding the "unwavering commitment of Algeria to Mali and the Malian people... within the framework of the implementation of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, stemming from the Algiers process"⁹⁹ referring here to the 2015 Algiers Agreement. In November 2020, Sabri Boukadoum reiterated that Algeria, in its capacity as President of the Monitoring Committee of the Agreement, considered the Algiers Accord the only solution to end the crisis. As a result, it called for all the parties to do everything possible to implement it. This was followed by a much-publicized meeting of this committee for the first time in Kidal in March 2021 in presence of an Algerian representative as well as of the major powers and the UN. The prioritization of Africa was further reflected in early 2021 with the recall of Ramtane Lamamra, the architect of the Algiers Agreement. One of his first tasks was to further motivate the return of Algeria to the Sahel, especially after France announced, in early 2021, its intention to end operation Barkhane.

In January 2021, French President Macron pressured the EU to create the task force, Takuba, composed of European special forces. In February 2021, during a meeting of the G5 Sahel, Emmanuel Macron announced

that France would reduce its military deployment in the Sahel but counted on its allies to take more responsibility. Chad undertook to send 1,200 men to the three border regions to show the commitment of the Sahelian states to combat jihadists¹⁰⁰. However, things crumbled very quickly. In April 2021, Chadian President, Idriss Deby, Paris' staunchest ally in the Sahel, died in rebel combat. This was a major blow to France who had not only lost a valuable ally in the region but the Chadian troops were the only ones with the resilience and ability to defeat the jihadist on their own. Unfortunately, a few weeks later, in May 2021, and less than 10 months after a first coup, a second one took place in Bamako, which infuriated Paris. With no end in sight, France first announced the end of its military cooperation with Mali and, in June, the termination of its military engagement in the Sahel de facto suspending operation Barkhane by early 2022.

This French withdrawal offered Algiers both an opportunity to assert its role as the main power as well as the challenge of less protection against jihadist groups. The French military operations, Serval and Barkhane, had inflicted heavy losses on the jihadist groups in northern Mali, preventing the Sahel from falling into their hands. So, its withdrawal could potentially create a security vacuum that the Sahelian states, including Mali, would be unable to fill. In turn, this would directly threaten Algeria's national security with jihadist groups in full control of northern and central Mali. Even more catastrophic would be a spillover causing a domino effect on the other weak Sahelian states.

Thus, Algeria redeployed its diplomacy in the Sahel by first aiming to strengthen its relations with Niger. In July 2021, during an official visit by Nigerian President Mohamed Bassoum, the first of its kind in Algeria since the election of AbdelMajid Tebboune, Algeria signed several agreements with Niamey and decided to reopen the borders closed in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A first given that Algeria has kept all its other land borders closed. The agreement authorized the movement of goods and a solution to Nigerian migrants in Algeria. This rapprochement with Niger is important because the headquarters of the Takuba force in the Sahel will be located in Niamey, the only European deployment in the Sahel once Barkhane is gone¹⁰¹. The death of Idris Deby and the subsequent reduction of Chadian troops in the three border regions allowed Niger to assert its leadership in the



100 See «G5 Sahel : le Tchad envoie 1 200 soldats dans la zone des trois frontières», Jeune Afrique (February 16th, 2021).

101 Achraf Tijaini, «Niger-Algérie : Bazoum à Alger pour parler de l'après-Barkhane», Jeune Afrique (July 14th, 2021).

Sahel¹⁰². Thus, this rapprochement with Algiers is equally important as it will strengthen Algiers' position in the region as well as its approach to solving the Sahelian crisis. During a press conference in Algiers, President Bazoum stated that Niamey and Algiers agreed on every single topic that concerned the Sahel and decided to reinforce their security cooperation. In this regard, Niger expects Algeria to provide it with equipment and training for its troops given Algeria's vast experience in combating terrorism. This move on the part of Niger is extremely significant in the sense that, only a few days before visiting Algeria, President Bazoum indicated similar views to those of Paris on how to deal with the crisis.

Algiers diplomacy in the Sahel is marked by its renewed and strong engagement in the Sahel around the political solution approach but updated and adapted to the current situation. This option involving dialogue and negotiations has been further strengthened by the growing influence of Imam Amadou Dicko in Bamako, who has supported dialogue with JNIM. In early 2020 both Iyadh Ghali and JNIM announced that his organization was open to negotiations with Bamako to end the conflict. The fact that the Taliban in Afghanistan negotiated and signed an agreement with the United States permitted JNIM to envision a similar scenario in Mali. Thus, in August 2021, during a visit to Bamako, Ramtane Lamamra presided over a meeting of the Monitoring Committee regarding an agreement and later met with Imam Dicko, a clear indication of Algiers' support for this option. Algiers believes that dialogue with JNIM is possible considering that Ghali had negotiated and signed an agreement in 2012, indicating his willingness to negotiate. Since its inception in 2017, JNIM has never launched an attack against Algeria. ISGS is considered its main threat as it is notorious for its excessive violence and extremism, launching attacks not only throughout the region but against Algeria too. Many observers believe that although JNIM poses a threat to Algeria, it is possible to reach a deal with the organization, which is not the case with ISGS.

This renewed activism of Algerian diplomacy is also supported by what is perceived as a change to its military posture in the region.



102 «G5 Sahel : le Tchad retire 600 soldats de la zone dite des trois frontières», Jeune Afrique (August 23rd, 2021).

2. Is Algeria changing its military doctrine?

In December 2020, President Abdelmajid Teboune introduced a referendum for a new constitution. There was a major change to Article 91 that now authorizes the President to deploy the Algerian army abroad with the agreement of two-thirds of each of the chambers of parliament. Article 31 of the constitution further states that the Algerian army can be deployed for peacekeeping purposes within the framework of the UN, AU (African Union), or Arab League.

These two articles changed the position of the Algerian army from noninterventional to the possibility of being deployed abroad. This was interpreted as a follow-up to the strategy of “coming back” to the international scene after being absent for several years, and that Algeria was ready to accept responsibility as a regional power.

In February 2021, as part of this renewed engagement, Algeria relaunched the CEMOC, which met in Bamako. The Algerian delegation was led by General Kaidi Mohamed, Director of the Department of Employment and Preparation, one of the most strategic departments of the army. During this meeting, General Kaidi insisted on the need to beef up intelligence sharing and coordination to combat terrorism while “counting on our own forces and means”, most likely addressing the anticipated end of the Barkhane operation¹⁰³.

This was seen as a departure from its previous doctrine and everyone anticipated a rapid Algerian deployment in the Sahel.

However, in March 2021, major concerns about the benefits and the reality of an Algerian deployment in the Sahel were raised, given the prevailing security conditions and their repercussions (of such an intervention –Ed.) on Algerian national security, culminated in President Tebboune closing the debate stating “It is out of the question to send the children of the people to sacrifice themselves for others”. By saying this, he was most likely referring to the Barkhane operation nearing its end and the assumption that Algerian would step into the breach. Nonetheless, he did add that “such a decision would be taken if needed for deterrence purposes”¹⁰⁴ leaving the door open for such an option but it would solely be to strengthen Algiers’ security requirements. Those debates and discussions demonstrate the Algerian security dilemma.



103 «Le général-major Kaidi insiste sur l’attachement de l’ANP au cadre de coopération du CEMOC», Algerie Press Service (February 11th, 2021). <https://www.aps.dz/algerie/117433-le-general-major-kaidi-insiste-sur-l-attachement-de-l-anp-au-cadre-de-cooperation-du-cemoc>

104 «Président Tebboune: l’Algérie n’enverra par ses troupes au Sahel», Algerie Presse Service (March 2nd, 2021). <https://www.aps.dz/monde/118424-president-tebboune-l-algerie-n-enverra-par-ses-troupes-au-sahel>

The collapsing security situation in the Sahel and the French withdrawal, against a backdrop of the catastrophic end to conflict in Afghanistan, did not incite any deployment in the Sahel. At the same time, the real possibility of the Sahel turning into a Jihadistan alarmed Algeria given the direct implications on its stability and security.

In July 2021, President Tebboune then clearly stated that “Algeria will never allow northern Mali to become a sanctuary for terrorists nor accept the partition of the country”. He was referring to both the consequences of the French withdrawal and the concerns about the outcome of a potential negotiation with Ghali, which would transform northern Mali into an area controlled by JNIM. For Algiers, this is out of the question as a deal, if any, would need to end the violence, grant amnesty, and provide socio-economic benefits to help JNIM fighters reintegrate into society to avoid turning the Azawad region into a Jihadistan. He was also closing the door on the Tuaregs who asked for autonomy or independence of northern Mali. In the same vein, Tebboune did not exclude military intervention by Algeria if need be saying “the constitution authorizes it but we are not there yet”. Instead, he insisted once again on the importance of implementing the 2015 Algiers Agreement.

So, while the Algerian army no longer excludes a potential intervention, the extreme complexities of the situation on the ground make it very difficult for such an operation to take place. Instead, Algiers continues to rely on its traditional approach of a political solution/dialogue, coordination/security cooperation with local states and the training/support of local armies because any direct military involvement is extremely risky. The difference between the 2013-2019 period and the current one is a strong push on the part of Algiers to implement those rather simple statements of intention.



CONCLUSION

The Sahel is an extremely strategic region for Algeria and one in which it has always played a major role. Resorting to mediation, it has consistently attempted to narrow down the differences between the various Malian actors involved in the conflict by insisting on a political solution rather than resorting to the use of force. Thus, “the political solution” remains its main approach to solving the crisis. The appointment of President Tebboune did little to change this as the country is deeply attached to this paradigm. However, the presence of multiple and powerful factions with conflicting interests persists and makes it difficult to implement. The rise of JNIM and to a lesser extent ISGS and despite heavy losses, including the recent elimination of Abu Adnane Al Sahraoui founder of ISGS, has no impact on its policy position. Although the return of Algeria to the Sahel is certainly very positive, it remains to be seen whether a political solution can be implemented. As an Algerian observer reflected in 2012 “the political solution is the most logical, the most desirable, but is it feasible? This is the real question”. This remains the case.

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