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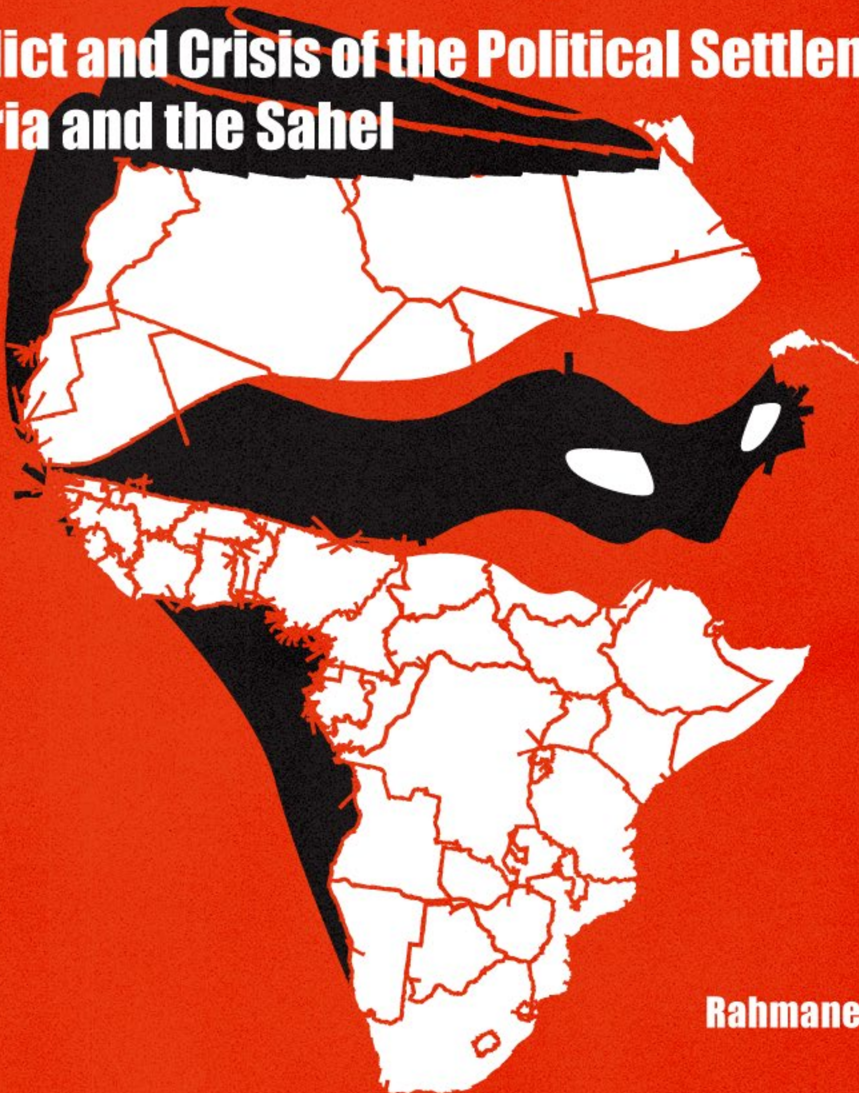
THE RISE OF MILITARISATION

Conflict and Crisis of the Political Settlement in Algeria and the Sahel



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INTRODUCTION

The current Sahel conflicts, a compound of Jihadist war in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and Tuareg rebellion in Mali, have a genealogy that traces their efficient causes to two north African countries, Algeria and Libya. The efficient cause of Aristotelian parlance is the one through which the connection between the origin of a phenomenon and the forms it takes are established: thus, in this case, while the origin of the Sahel conflicts is rooted in unresolved issues within Sahelian countries, they would not have broken out the way they did without factors involving Algeria and Libya. This is well known in the case of Libya, since the Tuareg armed groups who started the separatist rebellion that set off the troubles in early 2012 had returned to Mali from their pampered expatriation in Libya. Libya under Col. Kaddafi had a Sahel policy, which included helping to stabilise that region by restraining separatist Tuareg militants; and by funding Sufi Islam, considered a check to Salafi Islam—the one embraced by Islamist activists in the Sahel, even before the current Jihadist conflict. The collapse of Kaddafi's regime, at the hand of Western-supported insurrectionists, put an end to that policy, and the shock in the Sahel, namely in Mali, was as immediate as floods rushing in once the floodgates have been removed.

The role of Algeria is less well known, and yet the Sahel conflicts are a direct consequence of the Algerian conflict that began in 1992 and lasted into the mid-2010s, after abating considerably in the late 2000s. More than being just a consequence, the Sahel conflicts have replicated some of the dynamics of the Algerian one, often through a direct transfer of the outlook and methods of Algeria's Islamist militants to their Sahelian (Malian) comrades. And there are parallels, as well as significant dissimilarities, in the trajectories of Algeria and the Sahel as they have confronted and continue to confront the problem.

In order to make all of this plain, this paper develops two arguments: first, the Algerian conflict derives from a crisis in the Algerian political settlement which its leadership tried resolving through democratisation in 1988-92. The solution failed and instead plunged the country into years of conflict and a consolidation of militarised governance—an outcome that plays a central role in Algeria's sclerotic foreign policy, including as regard the Sahel. Second, the form which the Sahel conflicts have taken derives from the Algerian conflict and this, in turn, has led to a breakdown of the Sahel's democratic political settlement, with the apparent end of democratisation and rise of militarised governance in the region.

To present these two arguments, the paper supplies an in-depth exploration of the crisis of the Algerian political settlement through a methodology of historical analysis—i.e., tracing its defining elements from their point of origin to their current manifestations through the critical juncture, i.e., 1988-1992, mentioned above; and it evaluates the developing situation in the Sahel through a framework of analysis drawn from the Algerian experience—before drawing some conclusions.

1 THE VIEW FROM ALGERIA

In contrast to Col. Kaddafi's Libya, Algeria lacks structural relations with the countries of the Sahel. By favouring labour migration from west Africa, Kaddafi had created a form of economic integration between Libya and countries in that region. Those in the Sahel were first in line, particularly Niger, which had the largest foreign community in the country under his reign. In contrast, Algeria mostly attracted mendicant migration from the Sahel, a little-studied phenomenon that seems, here again, especially typical of Niger.[1] There are intense social connections within the Tuareg populations that live across the borders between Algeria and the Sahel countries. But these are community relations, shaped by family ties and tribal obligations, not allegiance to a state. They are inscribed within the context of the Sahara rather than that of any state territory. Indeed, relations between Algeria and the Sahel are primarily determined by the sharing of the Saharan space. Algeria is not interested in the Sahel countries as objects of a policy that would aim at projecting power and influencing their government, in the manner of Col. Kaddafi—but as representing a potentially destabilising region for its vast Saharan hinterland.

1.1 The Petrostate's Pact

If the Sahel is a shoreline—that is the meaning of the Arabic etymon, ***sahil***—one can apply the island metaphor to Algeria—the meaning of the country's name in Arabic.

Geographically, the country is divided between a narrow coastal strip that makes up just about 15% of the territory and a large desert fringe that encompasses the remaining 85%. The bulk of the population is concentrated in the coastal strip, a highly urbanised area that gives the state its socio-economic base. Much of the rest of the territory is inhabited by nomadic or semi-settled communities that have reduced linkages with the state. In this sea of sand, borders lack the substance that comes from infrastructure and population and exist only insofar as there is active state authority behind the line, i.e., episodically and transiently. Algeria has more of these sand borders than any of its neighbours. At the same time, the Sahara is a huge stake for the country because of the enormous wealth that it contains. A recent review assessed that the Algerian Sahara holds two billion tons of phosphates, the world's third largest reserves; 3.5 billion tons of proven iron reserves; 29,000 tons of uranium; 121 tons of gold; and gigantic supplies of fossil fuels including 9.2 billion barrels of oil—third largest of Africa, fifteenth largest in the world—; 4,500 billion cubic metres of natural gas; and vast, untapped basins of shale gas and shale oil.[2]

1 Nigerien mendicants also migrate across west Africa. In March 2022, Senegal deported hundreds of them onboard a plane chartered by the Nigerien government.

2 See Tahchi Belgacem. 'Les Ressources de l'Algérie,' in Outre-terre, 2016/2, No. 47: 152-164.

The hydrocarbons are of critical importance. Since the reign of Col. Houari Boumediene (1965-78), they are the material linchpin of Algeria's political settlement. For some years after independence in 1962, it was not clear where Algeria was heading (books with the title '***Où va l'Algérie?***', i.e., 'Where is Algeria heading?' seem to be a niche genre of their own [3]). The country had fought its way to freedom through a 'front,' the National Liberation Front (FLN), and a fighting force, the National Liberation Army (ALN). Both entities were militant hubs to which all revolutionaries—the most common self-identification of the independence fighters—reported to varying degrees, which means they were loose collectives rather than cohesive organisations. An alliance between two leaders, Ahmed Ben Bella, who had control over the politburo of the FLN, and Col. Houari Boumediene, who led the so-called 'army of the borders,' the most cohesive section of the ALN—which had by then become the National Popular Army, ANP—, stationed at the borders with Morocco and Tunisia, took over the government. Ben Bella tried turning the FLN into an integrated ruling party of the ruthlessly efficient type that was then on the rise in many places in the South. In 1963, he purged dissenters and adopted a rallying constitution that gave him extensive powers as head of state. But the Boumediene-led ANP had already taken control of strategic apparatuses within the state and deposed Ben Bella in a bloodless coup in June 1965.

This coup d'état inaugurated a nearly uninterrupted constant in Algeria's domestic politics, namely the unconstitutional but efficient political power that the army and associated security services wield in the wings, within the state system.[4] Once in charge, Boumediene nationalised the hydrocarbons sector and turned Algeria into a petrostate. This enabled him to propose a pact to the Algerian population whereby oil revenues would be used to develop the economy through accelerated industrialisation, and Algerians, in return, would mobilise to support the work of national construction that was thus propelled. The programme did not pan out, due to (1) governance flaws, and (2) the rapidly changing sociopolitical conditions of a nascent country. Population is the case in point in that regard. At independence, a significant fraction of the population benefited from the dividends of liberation, either by taking over the farms and other property of the departing European settlers; or by enlisting into the guest workers schemes that were part of the independence agreements with France. (Ten years after independence, there were well over 800,000 Algerians in the former metropole). By the late 1970s, such opportunities were long gone, but the population had nearly doubled (from 11 million at independence to 19 million twenty years later) and the sacrificing of agricultural development to failed industrialisation projects had pauperised the countryside,[5] which set off the phenomenon of rural exodus, i.e., the transformation of rural indigence into urban poverty. Politically speaking, that was a dangerous development.

3 The first of these is Mohamed Boudiaf's Où va l'Algérie ?, out in 1964, a personal complaint that implicitly addressed the fact that Algeria lacked a viable political settlement at the time. An edited volume with the same title was published in 2013, under editors Ahmed Mahiou and Jean-Robert Henry, and was a study of the state of crisis of the Boumediene political settlement and possible transitions toward a new political settlement. The latest offering, published in 2019, is Mohamed Sifaoui's critique of the revived political settlement.

4 See Madjid Benchikh, 'Le Système politique au cœur de la crise en Algérie,' in Pouvoirs, 176, 2021: 27-39, who writes, 'The practices of this [military] command and the permanence of [its] hold prevent us from considering that the apparent form of the regime is the only framework within which power is exercised.' (p. 29).

5 See Ghazi Hidouci, Algérie, la libération inachevée, Paris : La Découverte, 1995.

1.2 The Pact fails

Boumediene died in 1978 and the leadership sought to preserve the pact by amending it along 'pragmatic' lines. Much of the flow of the oil rent was diverted from ineffectual industrialisation projects into the fostering of a consumer society on the back of public-sector spending and an overvalued currency (this was called 'anti-penury programme' or PAP). Development projects, meanwhile, were now funded through agreements with the World Bank. The adjustment to the pact aimed more at protecting, and indeed, boosting the vested interests that had grown through the control of the state system than at improving conditions in society and the economy. In the mid-1980s, the stopgap 'solution' faltered after oil prices fell abruptly and the economy was beset by a plague of problems: high inflation, metastasising unemployment, penury, structural blockages—in particular, the fact that entrenched public sector dominance in most sectors of the economy stifled private initiative.[6] The crisis affected especially the youth, who revolted in early October 1988 in mass urban riots, first out of economic pain, then through more targeted political protest. The police were overwhelmed and the army intervened at the cost of 159 dead officially, over 500 according to medical sources.[7]

Those 'events of October' (as they are known in Algeria) forced a reckoning on a political settlement that had clearly ceased to function, and Algeria began groping towards a new one. On the advice of reformers assembled by President Chadli Bendjedid,[8] the new political settlement would be based on competitive elections and would thus entail a democratisation of the political system, and perhaps a liberalisation of the economy. The FLN became one party among others, the ANP was 'depoliticised,' at least in theory, i.e., removed from its nests within the state system. In this new dispensation, the forces in charge would be determined by the Algerian electorate. But a series of unexpected outcomes in the reform process led to catastrophe.

When building his political settlement in the late 1960s, President Boumediene drew liberally on Algeria's liberationist ideology, forged in the crucibles of the independence war, and which gave its subjective bases of legitimacy to the new state. At its high point, in the decade between the adoption of Ben Bella's constitution of 1963—which formalised liberationist tenets—and the Non-Aligned Algiers Conference of 1973—which gave it its international street cred as it were—Algeria's liberationism grew into a fusion of Marxism-Leninism, revolutionary Third-Worldism, Pan-Arabism, Islamism, all melded in a grand narrative of the independence war, in which the diversity of actors and motivations was baked into national pridefulness. This heady ideological broth became the message of the Algerian state to its population and to the world. Louisa Dris-Ait Hamadouche gives its canonical description when she writes that 'the War of Independence is called the "liberation revolution" in reference to an ideal that begins with the end of colonial military occupation and culminates with the establishment of a just order, both nationally and internationally.[9]'

6 In a speech in September 1986, President Chadli Bendjedid deplored this 'immobilism' (C. Bendjedid, 'La Riposte à la crise est l'affaire de tous,' in Le Monde diplomatique of November 1986, p. 33.).

7 Julien Mangold, 'Pourquoi les Algériens se sont-ils révoltés le 5 octobre 1988 ?', in Orient XXI, 11 October 2021. https://orientxxi.info/va-comprendre/algerie-les-manifestations-du-5-octobre-1988,5102

8 Ghazi Hidouci, op. cit.

9 Louisa Dris-Ait Hamadouche, 'L'Algérie et la sécurité au Sahel: lecture critique d'une approche paradoxale,' in Confluences Méditerranée, 90, Summer 2014, p. 107.

But as the years passed, these grand ideals lost traction on the domestic stage. By the late 1980s, their promoters had been in power since independence and many Algerians considered that their time was up and an alternative was needed. This was after two great religious-political disruptions, Iran's Islamic Revolution and the Wahhabi hardening of Saudi policy, have created a zeitgeist in which Islamist radicalism grew into a potentially viable political project in the Muslim world. The reformers did not anticipate this issue. At that point, most Islamist groupings adhered to the old political settlement, which recognised social leadership roles to them, and none showed any intent to enter the electoral fray. None, but a maverick group, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which already proved its clout when its appeals for calm helped end the riots on 7 October 1988.

1.3 Taghut

There is an element of bad luck, and a lot of miscalculation, in what then happened to Algeria.

First, the FIS, unfortunately, was a radical party, meaning, it did not intend, should it come to power, to run Algeria along the constitutional rules of the game that everyone else (including the ANP) had accepted. Instead, it wanted to subvert them in favour of its own Islamist project. Second, a two-round first past the post voting system was designed for the major polls of the electoral cycle, the legislative elections, at the behest of the FLN, which thought it would guarantee its victory: instead, it gave an unchecked momentum to the FIS' electoral triumph. Although the electorate wanted change, their aggregate desire was not radical. But in December 1991, with just 47.7% of the vote, the FIS took 82% of the seats attributed through the first round of the legislative polls, and which made up over 53% of parliament. The second round, scheduled for January 1992, was ineluctably going to bring in the seats the Islamists would need if they wanted to change the constitution. A voting system that distributed seats in proportion to the voices in the electorate would have produced a balanced parliament in which the radical agenda of the FIS would have been restricted—and it was likely the ANP would have lived with that. But in the instance, the electoral cycle was rushing the country toward an Islamic state, emphatically not the outcome the reformers and the ANP had envisioned (and not one which much of the burgeoning civil society wanted either).

By then, it was clear to all what a FIS reign would look like. Before and through the early electoral cycle, the party had mobilised its supporters by invoking a jihad, i.e., a transformative, revolutionary fight against the ***taghut***, i.e., a term of Islamic theology that refers to the cult of idols and then by derivation ungodly tyranny, and in modern times, any group accused of betraying Islam in favour of Western dominance. Islamic salvationism—the FIS' response to the old FLN's liberationism—meant an end of 'decadence,' i.e. 'permissive' mass secular/liberal culture, Western-accented, that stimulated 'depravation,' gender mixing, and other Satanic (***taghut***) signs of 'moral decline' (e.g., concerts and other 'buffoonish and irreverent [cultural] events').[10] In the regions that they controlled after the local elections

10 This prude and controlling salvationist discourse traces back to the association Al Qiyam ('The Values'), founded in the 1960s, and in which the founders of the FIS honed their doctrines. See Mohamed al-Ahnaf, Bernard Botiveau, Frank Frégosi, L'Algérie par ses islamistes, Paris: Karthala, 1991.

of 1990—62% of all municipalities, 66% of all provinces—an Islamist moral order entailing the veiling of women, closing of bars, and sundry other invasive prescriptions, had been swiftly established. So when a FIS electoral takeover of the whole country became imminent, panic ensued in many quarters. Ali Haroun, then minister of human rights, said he 'received in [his] office leaders of women's associations who begged [him] to act to save them. Some fainted. Another pleaded: "I have three daughters. I can't live in a country that would become Sudan or Iran. I have nowhere else to go. Please don't abandon us![11]'

Eventually, the electoral cycle was suspended through a constitutional stratagem, and the army stepped in and aggressively dismantled the FIS. The country returned to a (heavily controlled) constitutional process two years later, but by then, it was engulfed in a violent conflict that pitted Islamist insurgents against the state. Thus it came that the attempt to solve the crisis of the Boumediene political settlement led to the deadly violence of what will be known in Algeria as 'the black decade'.

The conflict is sometimes tentatively depicted as a civil war, but the Islamist armed groups saw it as a war of liberation—against ***taghut***. The FIS was after all a 'front,' like the FLN of the early days, i.e., a militant hub to which all revolutionary Islamists were supposed to report; and the first armed group that fought for its cause was the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), conceived as a counterpart of the ALN of the time of the war of liberation. Abassi Madani, the chief founder of FIS, was an independence fighter in the 1950s and an FLN activist in the 1960s. He accused the FLN

11 Interview led by Jean-Paul Chagnollaud, 'Il fallait arrêter le processus électoral,' in Confluences Méditerranée, No. 40, Winter 2001-2002, p. 217.

rulers of having betrayed the Declaration of 1 November 1954, i.e., the manifesto of national liberation, whose first article proclaims that the goal of the struggle was national independence 'through the restoration of a sovereign, democratic and social Algerian state ***within the framework of Islamic principles***.' (My emphasis).

Despite its liberationist pedigree, the ANP was thus viewed in this perspective as a quasi-colonial force, indeed, connected to the ***hizb Fransa***, the 'French party,' a concept used in Algerian politics to cast aspersions on any adversary one wants to define as an enemy of the nation.[12] (It is not unlike the concept of ***Françafrique*** that is used for similar purposes in former Sub-Saharan colonies of France). But in response, the military command upped the ideological ante and treated the Islamist militants as if they were out to destroy the Algerian nation and put an end to the everlasting dream of liberation. The organisation put in place to stop their electoral march to state control was called the National Committee for the Safeguarding of Algeria (CNSA) and those who fought the Islamist militants, including the militias set up by the military command, were styled 'resistance fighters' (like during the war of liberation) and 'patriots.' Such double features, which mix characteristics of civil war and war of national liberation, will later come to characterise the conflicts in the Sahel as well.

Toward the end of the 1990s, the intensity of the conflict decreased in the coastal strip but redoubled in the southern fringe, where, following the logic of the borders of sand, it tended to become a cross-Saharan rather than a purely Algerian affair. This geopolitical shift was expressed in the divergence that developed from the mid-1990s onward in the positioning of the antagonists. On the one hand, the Algerian leadership turned to considering that the military side of the conflict, i.e., suppressing a violent rebellion, could be phased out in favour of a political solution. This included offers of full amnesty (1999) and an appeal to the electorate (2005 referendum) to build support for a contested peace and reconciliation policy. On the other hand, the armed Islamist groups were finding ways to carry on and expand the fight, including by trying to build linkages with Oussama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, then operating out of Khartoum, Sudan; [13]and by recruiting militants in other countries, both in north Africa (Morocco, Tunisia) and, crucially, in the Sahel.

1.4 Into the Sahel

The Sahel was initially a refuge and a hunting ground for Western hostages, a key source of income. As a refuge, it became a place of incubation for a new fighting force whereby some of the dynamics that allowed the FIS to grow into a political force in Algeria in the late 1990s transpired, in particular the 'pre-constituted networks[14]' born from the social relations that the transplanted militants cultivated in the southern Sahara—at first especially among the Arab and Tuareg populations of northern Mali and Mauritania. As a hunting ground for hostages, the region turned into a

12 This is ironic given that the ruling regime used the accusation extensively in the past. In 1992, largely in reaction to criticism of being hizb Fransa, the ruling regime enacted a law generalising the use of Arabic in the school system. See Tristan Leperlier, 'L'arabisation, un mythe? Pouvoirs et langues dans l'Algérie indépendante,' La Vie des idées, 28 March 2012.

13 Just as Algiers had positioned itself, under Boumediene, as the 'Mecca of the (Third World) revolutionaries' in the 1970s, Khartoum had become the home of the 'Islamist international' under Omar al-Bashir and Hassan al-Turabi, in the 1990s.

14 See Myriam Aït-Aoudia, 'La Naissance du Front Islamique du Salut : une politisation conflictuelle (1988-1989),' in Critique internationale, No. 30, Jan.-March 2006: 129-144.

flashpoint in the terrorism concerns of the Western powers, especially the US and France

As a result of the latter development, Western policymakers proceeded to enlist, with varying degrees of success, the Sahel countries and Algeria in their counterterrorism efforts, which, in turn, made of Sahelian state forces a legitimate target for the militants. This was particularly the case because the armed groups had long been endeavouring to affiliate themselves with Al Qaeda, an organisation that had primarily the West in its sights, and confrontation with Western-supported forces was favourable for those efforts. The bulk of the members of the GIA (Islamic Armed Group), a late avatar of Algeria's Jihadist legions, had adhered to Al Qaeda's Salafi theory of Jihad in 1998 by founding the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), but Bin Laden remained suspicious of them until the successful attack (15 soldiers killed, dozens taken prisoner) of a Mauritanian military barrack, in June 2005. The attack was made in response to both the arrest of several Mauritanian Islamists and Mauritania's announcement that it would work with the US military in manoeuvres in the Sahara. In January 2007, Bin Laden accepted GSPC's letter of allegiance and the organisation became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

The name indicates that the Maghreb—Algeria especially—remained the target, not the Sahel. Indeed, attacks in Algeria multiplied through 2007, including a series of murderous suicide bombings in Algiers and other places from April to December of that year. And although the violence abated afterward, Algeria will still be hit into the 2010s, including in a spectacular attack on a gas plant in January 2013, conducted by the 'Veiled Ones' (***Al-Mulathamin***), a brigade of AQIM helmed by Algerian Jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar. But the collapse of Col. Kaddafi's regime in late 2011, the return (from Libya) of Tuareg militants intent on secession in northern Mali, and the subsequent outbreak of a separatist cum Jihadist conflict in that country started a shift of militant violence southward into the Sahel. The conflict that began from a miscarried democracy transition in Algeria thus evolved quite abruptly into a raging Sahelian conflict in which many of the features of the earlier Algerian crisis are found, mixed with, and shaped by the peculiarities of the region.

1.5 Hogra

But if Algeria now enjoys broadly peaceable conditions, it has frozen rather than resolved the crisis of its political settlement. Stung by the misadventure of 1992, the ANP-securocratic-FLN combine has reinstated the mechanisms of control installed by Boumediene. Although the new pact lacks the mobilising thrust that was at the heart of the developmental project of the 1960s, it is buoyed by rises in the market price of fossil fuels since the 2000s, and it is plastered with the formalities of multiparty democracy. A constitution was adopted in 1996, in which were embedded some authoritarian checks, notably an exorbitantly powerful presidency that appoints a segment of the higher house of parliament (an opponent called the resulting regime a 'constitutional dictatorship'[15]). The goal is not to prevent change, but to control and direct it with no risk of it getting out of hand, like in 1991. But the outcome is a continuing crisis of the political settlement as defined by the contradiction between a system of power that stifles change—which is what state-mandated

15 José Garçon, 'Algérie : Zéroual verrouille les institutions. Le référendum du 29 novembre enterre la Constitution libérale de 1989,' in Libération, 16 October 1996. https://www.liberation.fr/planete/1996/10/16/algerie-zeroual-verrouille-les-institutionsle-referendum-du-28-novembre-enterre-la-constitution-libe_186756/

attempts to control change amounts to in practice—and a dynamic society rife with pluralism and labouring through its own contradictions, not the least of which is the tension between large sections of the youth who are hungry for social change and freedom of initiative, and a cross-section of the population that holds dear conservative religious and social values.

The constitution of 1996 includes attempts at accommodating some of the pluralism and a lot of the conservatism: Islam was proclaimed state religion, even as Islamist parties were banned, and revisions voted in 2002 and 2016 made of Tamazight, the Berber language, a national, then an official language. Repeated constitutional amendments have indeed become the method for defusing

periodic eruptions of the underlying political crisis without giving in to the more radical demands, those which call for an end of the 'military state' (i.e., the military-controlled regime) and the establishment of a 'civil state' (i.e., a liberal democracy). In 2001, protests demanding liberal democracy against the ***hogra*** (contempt) of a ***pouvoir assassin*** (killer power) were repressed but led to the better status given to Tamazight. In 2019, democracy demands asserted by a movement known as the ***Hirak*** ('movement') hobbled the regime for months on end until the Covid-19 health emergency put a damper on protests. But so long as the contradiction between the regime's need for immobility—starkly exemplified by the advanced age of many of its high officials—and society's need for change has not been solved, the political settlement will be in a state of crisis, with periodic bursts of revolt and risky recourse to violent repression. This shaky situation renders the Algiers regime extremely cautious about foreign entanglements, and goes some way toward explaining its diffidence regarding a Sahel policy. I describe Algeria's lack of a Sahel policy at one point in the next section.

2 THE VIEW FROM THE SAHEL

Unlike Algeria, the Sahelian countries managed a transition to democracy in the same time period that it tried, i.e., between 1988 and 1991. The structural parallelisms are striking in many respects, though there are differences in the details and Algeria's economy was, of course, much larger than that of Mali and Niger, even back then. Taking into account this difference of proportions, it is the case that, in the immediate post-independence period, there was in Mali and Niger as much as in Algeria a developmental pact underlying the national political settlement. In all three countries, that pact was called into question in the 1980s when development failed and the state became bankrupt and heavily indebted. A new political settlement, based on the electorate, was achieved in the two Sahelian countries in 1991-92, violently in Mali, more peacefully in Niger. Thus, unlike in Algeria where the army took back control in 1992 and managed to organise constitutional government in such a way that elected officials would be effectively beholden to its unofficial authority, the military in Mali and Niger were evicted from the leadership structure, and the two countries became 'civil states,' to use the Algerian phrase.

2.1 Democratisation

The failure to achieve economic development under the militarised political settlement, both in Algeria and in the Sahel, was at bottom a consequence of governance malfunction. The economist critique of the developmental pacts of the 1960s-70s finds fault in their design and objectives, such as emphasis on productivism, public-sector dominance, market protections, the misguided goal of accelerated industrialisation, etc. But such critique assumes the plans that embodied these policies were implemented, and then failed. In fact, much of what was planned was never implemented. In the case of the Sahel countries, this is ascribed to insufficient funding and lack of adequate development aid, but this does not apply to Algeria. In fact, in the case of all three countries, the basic problem was governance. On the one hand, coming out of the colonial era, when governance was administered from the outside, the countries lacked a critical mass of qualified, modern-trained and diverse staff (Niger, for instance, did not have a staff for its national treasury until the early 1970s, leaving that agency in the hands of a French administrator in the intervening period); and on the other hand, this objective weakness of the governance infrastructure favoured the rapid propagation of corruption and other factors of bad governance (nepotism, cronyism, regionalism, and so on). Thus, although the pacts did mean well, they lacked the required governance capacities to prove their worth and were, instead, delegitimised by bad governance.

Democracy, it was hoped, would bring remedies. Not only would the leadership no longer be monopolised by one group, i.e., members of a single ruling party or a military clique, but its power would be checked by the rule of law and balanced institutions, and it would be accountable to the electorate and civil society. Thus, issues of governance would be solved in the public square. Some of this

probably did come to pass in the Sahel, but governance problems specific to the rivalrous nature of multiparty democracy—partisanship, politicisation, polarisation—got in the way of the best operation of democratic institutions. Moreover, not all elected leaders were democratic leaders. If Mali's Alpha Oumar Konaré can certainly be considered one, Niger's Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara, Tandja Mamadou, and Mahamadou Issoufou were not. In different ways, all of these three leaders attempted to restore authoritarian or (in the case of Issoufou) establish monopolistic rule under cover of democracy. [16] Finally, it might be that governance under the democratic political settlement was not worse than before, but it was not better either, and its failings were more in evidence in a context of free expression and political use of scandals and outrage. In popular expectations, government needed to provide directly, or through regulation and policy, the sort of public goods that a population values; there was a conviction in the Sahel—and indeed, in many democratised African countries—that bad governance under democracy blocked the way for that outcome.

Thus, the democratic political settlement rested on shaky grounds of legitimacy, and was further fragilized by shocks coming from within the regime—the repeated political crises set off by civilian politicians in Niger for example—and without—the national crisis of the ongoing separatist cum Jihadist conflicts in Mali. In both cases, the army was prompt to intervene. The Niger coups of 1996, 1999 and 2010 responded each to political crisis, and those in Mali in 2012 and 2020, to national crisis. This means that, although it was formally excluded from the leadership structure, the military, in Mali and Niger, still played a role in politics whenever the opportunity allowed. Before 2020, existing conditions meant the opportunity could not last, but a potential pathway toward military rule was dangerously opened at each turn.

2.2 Militarisation

In 1996, the year that Algeria's military returned the country to a regime of praetorian democracy, Niger witnessed a military coup. But characteristically, the coup-maker, Col. Baré Maïnassara, resigned from the army and ran for office as a civilian, thus adhering to the democratic political settlement. Baré Maïnassara imposed a constitution which gave large powers to the president, but as shown by ensuing events in the course of his brief reign, it was not by any means an instrument toward a constitutional dictatorship; in 1999, the coup-maker Daouda Malam Wanké returned power to the civilians after a transitional period of just nine months, shorter than what was allowed him; and in 2010, the coup-maker Salou Djibo did the same within the prescribed twelvemonth period.

But at that point, the mass of Nigeriens would have accepted a military regime. The Salou Djibo coup was made against President Mamadou Tandja, himself a former military, who had tried to establish an authoritarian constitution—and Tandja's project was in fact welcomed by a majority of Nigeriens. By then, the common Nigerien opinion on democracy was that it created a governance

16 The difference between authoritarian and monopolistic rule is that the first would change the constitution to increase the level of control of the top leader, whereas the second would use the institutional privileges of the incumbent to exclude rivals from positions of political relevance. In Niger, the monopolistic strategy of President Issoufou in the 2010s received the energetic name 'concassage,' i.e., the breaking into bits and pieces of rival parties.

mess through the shenanigans of its key spawn, the political class, and a strongman was needed. Salou Djibo could well have exploited these predispositions and end the democratic experiment altogether. However, the international context was unfavourable. The West's then hegemonic influence, the activism of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) in support of the democracy norm enshrined in its treaty since 2001, and Niger's heavy dependence on foreign aid, combined to shore up the position of those who saw the coup as merely an unorthodox means to save democracy, i.e., the political class and civil society activists.

In Mali, two years later, the coup-maker Amadou Haya Sanogo had less qualms than Salou Djibo but the international context again proved an overwhelming obstacle, and he left power under the sustained pressure of Ecowas, supported by the 'international community,' i.e., Western states and the United Nations. Given the context of national crisis, a majority of Malians, particularly those in the south—where most of the population is concentrated—may well have accepted his leadership at that juncture. Thus, in both Niger and Mali, a highly successful narrative grew at that point that claimed that the West, often reduced to France—that has more bite—, had foisted a corrupt democracy on reluctant nations and deprived them of military saviours. Although the resentment caused by such perceptions was subdued through the rest of the 2010s, it never went away and was indeed stoked by the unprecedented unpopularity of presidents Mahamadou Issoufou (Niger) and Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (Mali).

So, to sum up: in this period, the military did not play as much of a central role in the Sahel as they did in Algeria. In the Sahel, a democratic political settlement did take shape in the early 1990s; the military were formally and even effectively excluded from the leadership structure; and they could act only as temporary rulers brought to power in a time of crisis. In Algeria, a democratic political settlement failed to transpire in the early 1990s; the military were formally excluded from the leadership structure but effectively stayed at its heart; and they were (are) the permanent rulers behind the temporary authority of civilian heads of state. On the other hand, when comparing the two Sahel countries with other west African states, it appears—as the foregoing account suggests—that the military had kept an unusually central role in their political operation, one that put them on a fragile balance between civilian and military rule. If the balance was long weighted toward the former, to the point that they took their position for granted, the combination of domestic crisis and changes in the international context finally tipped it in the direction of the latter in the early 2020s.

At that stage, a militarised political settlement, more extreme and less sophisticated than the Algerian,[17] rapidly began to take shape in Mali and Niger (and Burkina Faso) on the ruins of the democratic regime.

2.3 The Conflict zone and disposable democracy

In a strange but perhaps apposite way, this rough 'Algerianisation' of the Sahel began with the 'Saharianisation' of the Algerian conflict of the 1990s, as explored in the previous section of this study.

17 For a study of Algeria's military rule, see Madjid Benchikh, Algérie: un système politique militarisé, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003.

The Saharan populations of Mali, Arabs and Tuareg, played a central role in the localisation of the militancy of the north African Islamist fighters in the context of Mali. The Tuareg have been pivotal in the three countries. At 1.5 million, they are the majority population in the central Sahara and the liminal Sahel. On paper, most of them are Nigeriens (over 53%) and Malians (over 33%). They are a much smaller minority in Algeria, where they have little of the political weight that they have in the Sahel countries. Indeed, although their recurrent rebellions in Mali and Niger are usually ascribed to marginalisation, it is because they are much more marginalised in Algeria that they are less able to defy the state in that country. The Tuareg malaise in the Sahel is more complex than a simple issue of marginalisation. It is rather a peculiar Tuareg response to a broader issue that affects nearly all African countries, i.e., the very low level of national integration between the various ethnic and, sometimes, religious communities in the post-colonial nation-state. This issue is more pervasive in Sub-Saharan Africa than in north Africa—and it is certainly more pronounced in the Sahel than in Algeria, the Kabyle question notwithstanding.

As we have seen above, the Algerian armed groups had turned northern Mali into a refuge and built social connections with local communities in the 2000s. Given their north African orientation, they were not perceived as a threat by the Malian state at that point. The Algerian state, on the other hand, tried to stem the menace in part based on human intelligence collected through its own networks in northern Mali, which relied on the trans-Saharan relations between Malian and Algerian Tuareg (bi-nationality, even three-nationality, i.e., including Nigerien nationality, is not uncommon in the Tuareg communities). But the crisis set off by Tuareg rebellion in 2012 scrambled the calculations of both states, particularly when it appeared that the activities of the north African militants had stimulated the emergence of Malian militants. The radical criticism that the FIS and its armed avatars levelled at the Algerian state, accusing it to promote an un-Islamic or anti-Islamic frame of life, and promising to destroy it and liberate the Algerian nation from ***taghut*** oppression, was now addressed to the Sahelian states as well. But there are differences.

In the context of Algeria, Madjid Benchikh notes, apropos the violent conflict in the 1990s, that 'the development of terrorism exacerbates the internal conflict and gives it the characteristics of a civil war in the sense of a war by one section of the people against a political power supported by other sections. Armed groups exist in all regions of the country, which indicates that significant sections of the population give them enduring support in their fight against the political power.[18]' ' The same can be said of the Sahel only to an extent. Even though the militant, 'terrorist' groups recruit across all communities, they have disproportionately mobilised members of the Fulani community, for reasons I have analysed elsewhere.[19] As a result, the conflicts do not just pit one section of the people against the political power, nor is it transpiring everywhere in the countries: it rages more intensively in regions with strong Fulani communities, but chiefly those that have been exposed to the missionary activity of the north Africans. Niger is a case in point. All of its eastern regions, which have large Fulani populations and are the larger part of the country, are unaffected by the conflict—since the north African militants were neither present nor influential there. In contrast, those in the west, close to northern Mali, and indeed, with a foothold in pasturelands within Malian territory, have supplied the legions who entrenched the Jihadist conflict of central Mali around 2013-14. (The centre of Mali is the region with the highest concentration of Fulani in that country). In any case, the expansion of the conflict zone in the Sahel is driven primarily by Arab, Tuareg, and

18 Benchikh, op. cit., p. 12.

19 Rahmane Idrissa, 'Mapping the Sahel,' The New Left Review, No. 132, Nov.-Dec. 2021.

Fulani fighters—the latter, more significantly the further to the south one goes, i.e., outside the Sahara and the liminal Sahel.

But other factors also play a role. Jihadism, i.e., a struggle for the sake of God, is not an ethnic ideology, meaning that it is capable of drawing in Islamist militants from other ethnic communities than the three mentioned above. And the Sahel states have a very weak grip, in terms of administration and security, over their territory. Vast stretches of countryside are left practically ungoverned by the feeble state in any meaningful way, a failing that has grown more hazardous in recent decades with the rapid population increases of the late twentieth century and the ensuing social problems (unemployment, crime) and competition over natural resources (land, water). The border region between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which has turned into one of the three epicentres of Jihadism in the Sahel (the two others being northern and central Mali) was already a troubled area through the 1990s-2000s, marked by deadly inter-community quarrels over natural resources (at the Mali-Niger border) and armed banditry (in eastern Burkina Faso). This state of affairs explains why the Jihadist groups, especially after they have consolidated into two large units affiliated to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, have inexorably entrenched their control in the rural areas.

This weakness of the Sahel states had another consequence that distinguishes their case from that of Algeria—and yet circuitously brought them to a situation of militarisation of governance reminiscent of the Algerian political situation.

Algeria confronted its Jihadist crisis alone. There were no foreign help, 'friendly' interventions, United Nations mission. The policies for grappling with the conflict were defined entirely within the Algerian state system. In the case of the Sahel, by contrast, there was a glut of foreign interference, to the extent that the nature and objectives of the conflict were defined by outsiders, most notably by France. Mindful above all of European security, which was repeatedly assailed by high-profile Islamist attacks in many countries in the 2010s, the French imposed the notion that the enemy were 'the terrorists' and reduced all policies to one, war—'war on terror,' as the Americans once put it. Yet, with the force that they had (never more than 5,000 troops), and given the forbidding immensities of the central Sahara-Sahel, such a war on terror was unwinnable. (Its general tack was not unlike that of the failed American war in Afghanistan, although the French squandered less blood and money). A policy of stabilisation was also propounded, but was equally an object of importation that was kept at a diplomatic distance from the turmoil of expectations and aspirations in domestic politics in the region.

This was the objective basis of the Malians feeling robbed of their sovereignty—a feeling that already stung in 2012, when Ecowas proposed to help the country fight the Jihadists. This natural feeling could and did take different expressions, some level-headed, other hysterical. In the end, the hysteria prevailed, amid French transgressions (when they sided for a time with the Tuareg rebels, as allies against 'the terrorists') and blunders, and the shocking shenanigans of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (in off. 2013-2020) and his son Karim Keita. The hysteria was also stoked by Russian 'black propaganda,' a topic of its own into which I will not go here—short of mentioning that if the stabilisation policy of the 'international community' (i.e., the West and the UN) eventually failed, it was largely as a result of Russia's anti-stabilisation operations. But this Russian success transpired because the Kremlin's anti-Western (anti-French) disinformation campaigns converged with a Sahelian nationalist reaction to the West's interventions, which they helped radicalise. This is not unlike the radicalising zeitgeist that favoured the rise of Islamism in the 1980s.

IIn the months following his first coup (August 2020), Col. Assimi Goita of Mali realised the opportunity that radical Malian nationalism represented for the entrenchment of military rule, i.e., the project that Captain Sanogo was unable to achieve in 2012. Radical nationalism portrayed the Western intervention as 'occupation,' democratically elected leaders as 'prefects of ***Françafrique***,' and the Sahel as a victim of aggression. The fact that this discourse mobilised a broad spectrum of civil society, including strange bedfellows such as self-proclaimed progressives and Salafi ideologues, created a political situation in which democracy became disposable. In May 2021, with the support of large segments of civil society, Goita and his associates made a second coup against the democratic interim government installed after their first coup, and Mali effectively transitioned into a military rule sustained on the inside by nationalist groupthink, and on the outside by Russian patronage.

2.4 Interlude: back to the point of view from Algiers

Through the two phases of tribulations of the Sahel, Algeria did not develop a policy for the region. The first phase was when the troubles were in fact Saharan. It engaged Algeria's national security because the armed groups that had refused the peace and reconciliation policy of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika had found refuge in the southern Sahara, within the territories of Niger and above all Mali. It also, in theory, engaged the security of those countries due to the kidnappings of Western nationals and the trafficking of drugs and small arms. The issue of drugs and small arms was also of concern to Ecowas, backed in this by the international community. Thus, a regional problem was identified, with the Sahel virtually at its centre, and Algeria was well positioned to provide a regional solution. It had the (unused) capacities of a regional power, a vital interest in a solution, and principles of foreign policy that underscored a preference for regional solutions over international ones. But in the 2000s, Libya's Sahel policy trumped any Algerian leadership, because Libya actually had one, and, after an episode of Tuareg rebellion in Niger and Mali in 2006-2008, its actions were more directly useful to the governments in Niamey and Bamako, as they helped end the rebellion.

Still, in 2010, Algiers managed to put together a partnership with Sahelian and west African countries in two regional security agreements, the Joint Operational Staff Committee (Cemoc, in the French acronym), which gathered Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania; and the awkwardly named, and short-lived Liaisons and Fusion Union, which, in addition to these four states, included Burkina Faso, Libya, Chad, and Nigeria. But this was a limited leadership. Perhaps faithful to its core foreign policy of respect for national sovereignty, Algeria pursued this partnership through relying on partner countries for keeping their house in order in terms of security capability and political stability. In other words, it did not try to help them do that, as Libya was doing. Moreover, Libyan activism, particularly in northern Mali, and its strong influence among the Tuareg—those in Algeria included—was cause for discomfort.

But after the sudden end of that Libyan activism, in 2011, the Sahel entered a second phase in which the troubles went south—literally, i.e., they expanded from the Sahara into the Sahel; and figuratively, i.e., they intensified. In the new context, Algerian policy was buffeted into becoming a subsidiary of that of the international community. In particular, there were convergences with

French policy in the sense that both Algiers and Paris wanted a political solution to Tuareg separatism and a military solution to 'terrorism,' and both were focused on the Sahara (i.e., northern Mali) rather than the Sahel (central Mali). But with Malian suspicions—sometimes inflamed by unofficial French public commentary—that the French were supportive of the separatist project 'Azawad,' this Algerian congruence with France planted an element of distrust vis-à-vis Algiers in Bamako. Still, Algeria was instrumental in brokering the political solution enshrined in peace and reconciliation agreements signed in Bamako by the Malian state and the separatists, in the Spring of 2015 (though signed in Bamako, the agreements are informally known as 'the Algiers Accords'). From the vantage of Algiers, these agreements managed to conciliate two of its three core foreign-policy principles, respect for national sovereignty, in the instance, that of Mali; and respect for the rights of peoples, in the instance, those of the Tuareg of northern Mali. (The third principle is positive neutrality).

The Algiers Accords were a centrepiece of the stabilisation effort of the international community in the Sahel, which means that Algerian policy was, as noted above, effectively tailing the one that the international community was defining. Even in terms of security policy, Algiers had to partner with Paris, if informally, in a pragmatic alliance against the Jihadists of the Sahara—even as it held tight to principles of sovereignty and non-intervention abroad and went through bouts of tensions with Paris that are a hallmark of Algerian foreign policy. A renovated Algerian foreign policy, one which would be able to harness the nation's capacities, hinges on a renovated political settlement, an unlikely proposition at the moment. With regard to the Sahel, an Algerian Sahel policy may seem all the less on the cards after the Sahel countries have militarised their own regimes on nationalist operating principles similar to those of Algeria, i.e., with a stress on autonomy and isolation.

2.5 The Juntas set in

The Sahel is not the only African region to have experienced military takeovers in recent years. The Sahel coups—two by the same coup-makers in Mali, two different coups in less than a year in Burkina Faso, and the coup of July 2023 in Niger—were interspersed, as it were, by coups in Guinea and Gabon and a violent coup attempt in Guinea Bissau. But the coups in the Sahel are no mere military takeovers, they have incorporated strong ideological elements that may sustain the project of a new political settlement, in a potential reversal of the civilian takeovers of the early 1990s. As mentioned before, this was made possible by changes in the international context.

In the international context polarised by the zero-sum competition between the West and Russia that emerged in the early 2020s, small states have acquired more leeway to define their relations with the great powers, and that includes putschists who have captured the state by force of arms. Under the hegemonic influence of the West, coups in west Africa have led back to democracy through formal 'transition' processes, such as the one interrupted by Goita and his associates in May 2021. But, especially from 2022 onwards, the reality of Russian influence has kept the West on its toes, giving to coup-makers like Mamadou Doumbouya in Guinea and Brice Oligui Nguema in Gabon the freedom to shape the transition processes in some unconventional and even—particularly in the case of Guinea—transgressive ways. Still, Doumbouya and Nguema are committed to a formal transition process and have not caved to nationalist sirens that also exist in their countries. The Sahel juntas, on the other hand, seized power thanks to those nationalist sirens.

The Sahel's nationalism is a mixture of anti-imperialist romance, which, incidentally appeals to leftist publics in the West and to Pan-African enthusiasts on the continent; and a powerful strand of traditionalist and religious conservatism that was already active in public opinion during the democratic era. There used to be a belief that, in American politics, liberalism was the only game in town. In a similar way, in recent years, traditionalist-religious conservatism has tended to be the only game in town in the politics of many African countries, and certainly those in the Sahel. The democratisation era of the 1990s did not spawn a critical mass of adherents to the liberal culture on which substantive—as opposed to merely formal—democracy relies to grow in a society. This is perhaps little surprising given that Sahelian societies are highly rural, lack a sizeable modern middle class, and are much less 'colonised' (i.e., assimilated into French-accented modernity) than, say, Côte d'Ivoire or Senegal. As a result, liberal influence mostly came from the outside, often through ham-fisted sensitisation and social-reform programmes funded by the cooperation agencies of Western states or promoted by the United Nations system. As such, they appeared to many as Western impositions.

In contrast, traditionalist-religious conservative leaders, such as Mali's Imam Mahmoud Dicko (a religious leader) or Burkina Faso's Laurent Bado (a traditionalist author), could mobilise the masses or (in the case of Bado) influence the intellectuals in their crusades against societal causes favoured by the liberal West, such as the promotion of the status of women or respect for the rights of homosexuals. In the 2000s, religious (Islamic) conservatives successfully mobilised the populace against family codes and pro-women international conventions in Mali and Niger, and Laurent Bado once declared that homosexuality was a crime against humanity. Such stances point to the fact that the opinions of the Sahel's jihadists and those of the region's traditionalist-religious conservative voices align on most societal subjects, particularly those pertaining to women, sexuality, and human rights more generally. Both are 'anti-imperialist' in the concrete sense of wanting to do away with extraneous liberal influences and the idea of the open society (***boko***, ***taghut***, 'France,' 'the Whites');); and both are set against progressist social and political change. The apple, the saying goes, does not fall far from the tree.

Indeed, while the juntas, particularly those of Ouagadougou and Niamey, cultivate an image of old-left anti-imperialism, with dramatic, stage-managed symbolic gestures and a string of anti-imperialist 'international conferences' (guests from old-school socialist regimes such as Cuba and Venezuela are flown in), they have systematically sidelined their local progressist activists, who are either persecuted, or forced into silence or exile. After implementing the few 'anti-imperialist' policies available, which generally involved suppressing the most obvious French interests, curtailing French diplomacy, and ending all meaningful ties with France, the juntas have been busier on promoting the traditionalist-religious agenda than on taking up any progressist issue. They have all predictably criminalised homosexuality. In Niger, the junta has recently ordered wide-ranging cuts in the school curriculum that removes from it every teaching remotely connected to sexuality, including child birth and child health care, sexual education of any kind, information on sexually transmitted diseases, and so on. The lineaments of the new 'decolonisation' of the Sahel thus includes the expulsion of the key representative of liberal Western values (France) and a promotion of 'our socio-cultural values,' to quote from the Nigerien decree cited above—referring to traditionalist-religious convictions. In short, the juntas have come full circle to a programme for society that could be labelled, in its own way, ***boko haram***.

Given that these changes reflect the views and sentiments of a probable majority of Sahelians, give and take some nuances here and there, the work of the juntas in this area is more popular than the promotion of Western-backed social-change programmes defended, perhaps not always sincerely, by elected rulers in the past. In any case, this populist streak gives to the juntas a stronger

basis of stability (in terms of popular support) than their democratic rivals had—which, in turn, explains both the nonchalance with which they treat the question of a return to formal democracy, and the increasingly freewheeling despotism of their governance. Yet, the need for political repression, nervous surveillance of social medias (with regular citizens being harassed for banal political commentary in private WhatsApp groups for example), bullying of the press, and closure of the public square—transformed into an exclusive platform for junta supporters—suggest that they are unsure of their legitimacy. This is the case because militarisation excludes a functional political settlement and relies on a chain of command and coercion to maintain its course. Thus, the Sahel under the juntas labours under the same crisis of the political settlement as Algeria, but in a starker form.

2.6 Looking for the unworkable

Indeed, the case of Algeria indicates the reasons for doubting the success or sustainability of a militarised political settlement in the Sahel.

As the first part of this study suggests, the Algerian regime relies on resources, both political and economic, that are absent from the Sahel. On the political level, Algeria's liberationist ideology is a well-established matrix of political culture forged in a trial of will of myth-making proportions and that has enduring ramifications. 'The Algerian political system,' Benchikh writes, 'was built on a constant recourse to the idea of the nation. The national liberation struggle is constantly used to call for national cohesion and to legitimise the holding and exercise of power by those in power.'[20] This has been going on for over sixty years. Moreover, as Omar Akalay claims, the Algerian regime also draws on legacies of the 'arts of power' that run back to the times of the Ottoman regency, and that parallel the Moroccan ***Makhzen*** system, i.e., soft control through the use of fear and blandishment, and the allure of paths of enrichment controlled by the centre of power. (Makhzen is originally the word for a store and treasury).[21] By and large, the Algerian state has been a careful steward of the nation's oil wealth, chiefly because of its vital political uses, including as regard the military-controlled ***Makhzen*** system. Overtime, this has helped the Algerian economy grow to a size that has expanded the regime's means of delivering public goods and growing a middle class.

Regarding a mobilising political ideology, the popular Sahelian sovereigntist excitement of the early 2020s is a one-time flare rather than a sustainable combustion similar to Algerian liberationism. Indeed, to keep it alight, the juntas are forced to fabricate French-led 'destabilisation' plots, contrive media campaigns about imaginary conspiracies, and forbid anyone to question their narratives—as the grotesque case of Mali's Joliba TV shows.[22] TThe complex of ethnic communities and traditions in the Sahel is little suited to a ***Makhzen***-style system of control, and the Sahel states lack the resource base for developing the massive, sociologically smart clientelism that underlies a ***Makhzen*** system.

In that regard, the states depend a lot on extractive resources, but these do not generate enough

20 Benchikh, op. cit., p. 9.

21 Omar Akalay, 'L'Économie algérienne, de l'ère des réformes (1989-1991) à celle de l'ajustement structurel (1994-1998),' in Où va l'Algérie ?, Ahmed Mahiou and Jean-Robert Henry (eds.), Paris : Karthala, 2001.

22 Joliba TV, one of the few remaining free media of Mali, was forced to shut down after a commentator questioned, during a show, an outlandish tale of destabilisation cooked up by the Ouagadougou junta. The commentator was subsequently jailed for having insulted a 'foreign head of state.'

revenue to guarantee their autonomy and support strategic public investment, as is the case in Algeria, hence the additional reliance on development aid for the provision of public goods. By breaking ranks with the international community, i.e., the source of development aid, the juntas are seeking an autonomy similar to that of Algeria, but do not have the means to pay for it. In practical terms, this means that they survive by monopolising as much as possible of the revenue from extractive resources, including at the expense of mining companies,[23] while at the same time asking the populations to give up much of the benefits of development aid, in the name of sovereignty. This is the opposite approach to that taken in Algeria, where the regime uses the delivery of public goods as a means of preserving public support for its political choices. This particular difference could be traced to the fact that Algeria has more of a social contract than the Sahel countries. The highly urbanised Algerian society, with a higher level of general education and a more political sense of nationhood—to the extent that even protest movements, such as the ***Hirak*** of 2019, insist on their Algerian character and keep their distances from the 'Arab Spring'—would resist the kind of perverse sacrifices that the Sahel juntas impose on their population. The latter, at close to 80%, are scattered and isolated in far-flung villages and nomadic camps—not to mention that a high percentage of those villages are under control of Jihadists in Mali and Burkina Faso—which makes it seem that harmful decisions about them have little consequences for those who make them. As a remedy to the lack of a viable material base for autonomous governance, the Sahel juntas plan to integrate their markets and resources in a confederation and spawn an economy with a size that would match such autonomy aspirations. But they are doing this in a context where the borders between their three countries are effectively controlled by Jihadist groups, while their isolationist policies, rejection of international norms and standards, blackout on surveys and information—Niger, for example, has barred Afrobarometer research—are driving away investors who, even in normal times, were not particularly drawn to the region.

Thus, the juntas of the Sahel could last in their present unfathomable course by maximizing repression and amplifying surveillance, control, and propaganda to totalitarian levels—which is what they are trying at the moment. They also rely on nationalist supporters and a contented traditionalist-religious conservative constituency. That is not a political settlement, not even a political settlement ***in crisis***, but it is an arrangement that is sustainable in the short term, a transition indeed, though it is not known toward what.

23 Mali and Burkina Faso have both changed their mining codes to increase the income for the state, cracking down on mining companies—including through the arrest of corporate workers—to enforce the new rules.

CONCLUSION

In the era of militarisation, which saw the eviction of France and the international community, the Sahel conflicts, which carry on unabated, enter a third phase—which has begun with hostility between Algeria and the Mali junta and friendlier, though empty, relations between Algeria and the Niger junta. With regard to Mali, Algeria is a victim of its role in the stabilisation policy attempted in the second phase, i.e., the Algiers Accords, which the Bamako junta has recently rejected, but which Algiers still upholds. From the point of view of Bamako, this makes of Algeria an objective ally of the Tuareg separatists and thus an enemy of Mali. A development similar to Algeria's longstanding quarrel with Morocco, which is fed by Algiers' support for the Sahraouis of the Western Sahara that Morocco claims as part of its territory, is thus in the offing—and one should not expect Algeria to respond to it by a Sahel policy.

The authoritarian blockage in the Sahel will be affected by two factors. It is at present hard to see how the juntas will find their way back down into the drab valleys of political compromise, pacts and bargaining through which a viable political settlement is established, after they have ascended so high into the rarefied political air of radical ideology and a sense of unchecked power. Yet, in the short to medium term, one might expect a groping toward concessions to forces that have survived authoritarian attacks, such as the political class in Mali, which, unlike that of Niger and Burkina Faso, has remained somewhat active and vocal; or Saharan insurrectionists in Niger. In the particular case of Niger, the junta will also be subject to pressures coming from within the military, especially as public disillusionment deepens, and the economic situation worsens. The recent reactivation of a 'transition' process (in February 2025), though heavily controlled by the junta, is very likely a response to such pressures. However, unless there is a popular pushback similar to those sometimes seen in Algeria, such concessions will be insignificant. Popular anger is more unlikely in the Sahel than in Algeria, but if it were to occur, the Sahelian juntas would not survive it, unlike the Algerian regime, which has weathered two such episodes since 2000. The other factor is the international context, which includes some significant unknowns: the response of Ecowas to the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in January 2025; and the effects on the cohesiveness of the international community, and on Russia's standing, of a revisionist US foreign policy under the incoming Trump administration. (Regarding Ecowas, the bloc accepted the juntas' 'Sahelexit' with a grace period of 'reflection' running to July 2025, and thus the drama is yet not over).

Whatever the case, it is safe to say that in terms of peace, democracy, and a viable political settlement suitable for progress and development, the outlook in the Sahel is not good.