

The Malian Tinderbox: Looking Beyond Bamako

Written by Abdelkader Abderrahmane

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ABDELKADER ABDERRAHMANE, JUL 19 2012

On March 22nd, the Malian army conducted a coup d'état against president Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT). According to the military junta, the coup was motivated by the Touareg Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) rebellion calling for Northern Mali's autonomy. An interim civilian government has since been established, but it remains unclear as to who actually governs Mali. Since then, the situation across the country has worsened and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) and Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) forces have strengthened their presence in the Northern region. Moreover, some intelligence reports indicate a growing link between AQMI and Nigeria's terrorist group, Boko Haram. Furthermore, the MNLA, which was initially in favour of a peaceful solution through dialogue with Bamako, is increasingly becoming trapped between the "rock" and the "hard place" of AQMI and Ansar Dine. In the meantime, Ansar Dine and AQMI forces have willfully begun destroying centuries-old mausoleums, libraries and mosques classified by UNESCO as world heritage sites. As a result of such blatant acts of vandalism, comparable to the Taliban's destruction of ancient Hindu temples in Afghanistan, invaluable Islamic and African artefacts have been lost forever.

In this crisis, a number of voices have begun to question Algeria's refusal to intervene, arguing that as the pivotal state of the region and with the best equipped army, Algeria could easily step into this Sahel vipers' nest and crush the terrorist and rebel forces of AQMI and Ansar Dine. Some officials and analysts have even expressed doubt about Algiers' willingness to genuinely fight terrorism in the Sahel. However, Algeria's position has been made very clear. Due to its own history and doctrine of non-intervention, Algiers categorically refuses to become involved militarily, calling instead for a peaceful solution through dialogue. Indeed, since its independence in 1962, Algiers has always adhered to its consistently clear doctrine, avoiding any opportunity to intervene militarily in the absence of any threat to Algerian sovereignty. History bears a large weight on Algeria's current strategic thinking: having been attacked, colonized and subjugated for a very long length of time itself, Algeria sees little merit in getting involved in the domestic affairs of any other country.

In analyzing this crisis, we ought to widen our analytical scope and adopt a holistic approach in order to fully understand what is at stake in the Sahel. Pieces of this regional jigsaw have yet to be assembled to present the thorough picture we need to be able to grasp the ramifications for the Malian crisis.

Historically, the Sahel has been the theatre of multiple demographic, military, financial and religious disturbances. These have resulted in general insecurity and geo-political and strategic confrontation between different external protagonists. Many of the Sahel States were not only colonized by France, but their politics still remain highly influenced by Paris. Moreover, some of these countries are rich in natural resources and minerals such as uranium and gold. Niger is the second largest producer of uranium in the world and Mali is believed to be the third largest gold producer in Africa. Indicatively, France's giant company Areva, has the quasi monopoly in terms of uranium production in Niger. Areva's uranium is extracted from two Nigerien mines, with a third to be exploited from 2013[i]. Similarly, the French oil giant Total is planning to drill two wells in neighbouring Mauritania, West of Mali.

Moreover, there remain some loopholes concerning the obscure Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa (under its French acronym, MUJAO) terrorist group. Based in the Sahel, it has made headlines by exclusively targeting Algeria on four occasions in the past year. Indeed, it made an attack on the refugees' camp of Tindouf where it kidnapped three foreign humanitarian aid workers; it then attacked a gendarmerie barracks in the southern city of Tamanrasset.

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and finally abducted 7 Algerian diplomats in April in the Malian city of Gao. More recently, last week, MUJAO also attacked another gendarmerie barracks in Ouargla. However, according to the French secret service, the DGSE (*Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure*) and the French military secret services, the DRM (*Direction du Renseignement Militaire*), AQMI, MUJAO and Ansar Dine have in recent months received financial assistance from Qatar^[ii]. By the same token, according to Malian sources, members of the Qatari Red Crescent recently sojourned in Northern Mali under the protection of the MUJAO group^[iii].

Additionally, Qaddafi was a real thorn in the side of French foreign policy and France's relations vis-à-vis its former African colonies. By pouring petro-dollars into the CEN-SAD^[iv] he created and financed, Qaddafi sought to reduce Paris' influence on these countries. Following Qaddafi's overthrow, however, the CEN-SAD has now been deprived of much of its financing. Meanwhile, Tripoli has become an ally of Paris, which can pursue its old policy in the Sahel, its hunting ground for France's business enterprises. Paris can do so with the assistance of Morocco and Qatar. Indeed, Rabat is now trying to lead, possibly control, the Sahel group^[v]. In early June 2012, a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the CEN-SAD took place in Morocco^[vi]. This was the occasion for Rabat to reiterate its ambition to pilot the Sahel group, which may eventually provide Morocco with sufficient support to ultimately take over the leadership of the North African region. Last but not least, since the election of the new French president, François Hollande, there appears to have been a rapid shift in the bilateral relations between France and Mauritania, which points to even closer ties in the near future.

With Morocco, France's old ally, leading the CEN-SAD, Paris could control and influence the Sahel group even more closely than before. This strategy may furthermore be facilitated through the financial handouts by Qatar and perhaps other Gulf States. In return for this financial gift, Paris, which has close relations with Doha^[vii], can actively sponsor the Gulf state in its quest for diplomatic success on the international stage. It is here important to recall that Qatar has a 5% share in the French oil company TOTAL and owns 12.80% of the French EADS military and civilian aeronautical jewel^[viii].

Additionally, by increasing its political presence in the Sahel region, Qatar, which is ruled by Sunni Muslims, may also intend to counterbalance the growing influence of Iran in Africa. Indeed, the latter has in past years embarked on a subtle policy to not only create economic ties with some West African states, such as Senegal, but is also ambitious to spread Shi'a Islam in Africa^[ix]. It is also important to underline that there is an important Shi'a Lebanese community living in West Africa who could effectively preach the word according to Tehran.

Such an Iranian strategy is therefore a danger for the Gulf States with their Shi'a population minorities, and even a majority in the case of Bahrain, who may someday overthrow their respective Sunni rulers. Furthermore, Iran, the enemy par excellence of both Israel and the West, is also interested in African uranium which would enable Teheran to pursue its alleged nuclear programme. Besides the Gulf States' concern, a deep-rooted Shi'a presence in Africa could therefore become a real challenge to the strategic political and economic interests of countries such as France, the USA and even China.

Also, what we may be witnessing today is that a politico-economic and strategic axis is being formed in the Sahel region which involves Qatar, France, the USA and Morocco. In 2011 Morocco opened its military base of Guelmim to US military forces^[x]. These forces can be added to the already massive American presence in sub-Saharan Africa as well as the French troops in the region, and more precisely in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Gabon and Djibouti. With such a strategic advantage, this alliance can easily strengthen its position and may soon become the dominant force in the region.

In looking closely at a map of Africa and the CEN-SAD region, one may derive a different picture of what is at stake, not only in Mali, but in the entire Sahel, a vast region that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of Somalia and the Red Sea. What is also important is that a clear analysis demands a long-term vision that also takes into account the complex history of the region.

As early as 1910, the Christian missionary Charles de Foucauld- who was more than a religious man- understood the strategic significance of the Sahel and drew the attention of the French government to the region's importance. His

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advice to the French military at the time was to pit the whites of the Sahel [the Tuaregs] who appeared to be more receptive to Western civilization in his opinion, against the blacks [Africans in Southern Mali] in order for France to control the Sahel[xi].

This region has undeniably been the battlefield for different regional and international actors with divergent interests, but a convergent strategy. The Sahel which is at the crossroads of many regional dangers will therefore remain, for a long time, a sensitive geographical zone where an important phase in the history of Africa, perhaps the world, will yet be played out.

Furthermore, a military intervention, as in the case of Afghanistan shown, might merely render the situation in the country and even the region more complex, with dramatic repercussions. There would undoubtedly be a spill-over effect, where weak states such as Niger and Mauritania would be most affected. Moreover, fighting an asymmetrical war against *guerrillas* in the northern part of Mali would surely need more than the 3300 soldiers that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is prepared to send to the region.

Meanwhile, the solution to the Malian crisis remains first and foremost in Bamako where the military establishment and civilian political leaders urgently need to sort out their quarrel in order to find a lasting solution to the crisis in Northern Mali to avoid the creation of a secessionist *Maliland* state any time soon. A purely Manichean analysis of this crisis would be undoubtedly misleading due, in part, to the involvement of so many protagonists.

In the meantime, the crisis in Mali, and the Sahel in general, seems to be heading dramatically towards an eco-strategic-religious international power struggle in which the indigenous population may well become the first victim.

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[i] <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/news/Blogs/nuclear-reaction/left-in-the-dust-arevas-uranium-mining-in-nig/blog/11734/>

[ii] <http://www.slateafrique.com/88719/mali-qatar-accuse-soutenir-financierement-rebelles-nord>; see also Le Canard enchaîné, no. 4780, June 6th, 2012

[iii] <http://www.slateafrique.com/89959/mali-des-humanitaires-du-qatar-sejourment-dans-le-nord-du-pays>; <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20120626090318/mali-aqmi-rebellion-touaregue-qatarle-croissant-rouge-du-qatar-a-l-oeuvre-au-nord-mali.html>

[iv] The CEN-SAD Regional Economic Community, founded in 1998, is composed of 28 member states, of which more than half are Francophone.

[v] <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2664p008-009.xml10/>

[vi] <http://www.panapress.com/CEN-SAD-FMs-to-meet-in-Morocco-in-June-12-816531-29-lang2-index.html>

[vii] Qatar owns the historical Parisian football club, the PSG, the handball team of the same city and has invested in numerous real estate projects and luxury hotels in France. It also has shares in numerous French groups such as LVMH, Vinci, Veolia Environnement and the water provider, Vivendi. A branch of the Louvre museum was inaugurated in Doha a few years ago as well as the prestigious HEC (École des Hautes Études Commerciales) or French International Business School school.

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[viii] <http://www.slate.fr/story/52287/eads-lagardere-cheval-de-troie-du-qatar>

[ix] http://www.economist.com/node/15453225?story_id=15453225

[x] <http://www.algerie-focus.com/blog/2011/05/04/lus-air-force-met-un-pied-au-maroc/>

[xi] http://hoggar.org/index.php?option=com_flexicontent&view=items&cid=573:geographie-&id=3177:sahara-espace-geostrategique-et-enjeux-politiques-niger