PRACTICE NOTE

The Malian crisis and the challenge of regional security cooperation

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The weakness of regional security cooperation has been a key factor in the gradual desta-bilization of the Sahel-Sahara region over the past decade. While organized crime, extremist activity, and the cross-border movements of arms and fighters have strengthened link-ages among non-state actors in the region, state policies have failed to keep up. With the escalation of the crisis in Mali, West African states have adopted an approach to tackling the conflict that diverged strongly from that of Mali's North African neighbours. Western governments' tendency to understand insecurity in the region through the notion of the Sahel has compounded the problem. Insecurity in the region, including criminal and extrem-ist networks, is more Saharan than Sahelian in scope. North African states are part of the problem, and need to be part of the solution. A new framework for regional cooperation is needed – and while this can only be established on the initiative of regional states them-selves, external actors need to adapt their policies to help such a framework emerge.

The current conflict in northern Mali is rooted first and foremost in its specific national and local context. Regional developments are only one aspect of this crisis. But the regional context of conflict in Northern Mali has been widely misunderstood, or at least misnamed, as being Sahel-specific (that is, comprising the southern fringe of the Sahara, generally taken to include Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad). A more accurate anal-ysis of the conflict's regional context, and therefore of the actors that need to be part of any approach to tackle destabilization in the region, would define it as including the Sahel and North Africa – essentially, incorporating the Sahel-Sahara region.

Extremist activity in the region is more Saharan than Sahelian. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb (AQIM) emerged out of the Alge-rian conflict of the 1990s. Although it has recruited among, and struck alliances with, local groups in northern Mali, the majority of its leadership remains Algerian. At the peak of its influence over northern Mali in late 2012, Mauritanians and Algerians were the two largest groups of non-Malian members within AQIM. In addition, several dozen fight-ers from northeastern Libya joined AQIM in northern Mali from mid-2012 onwards. In the face of the Franco-African-Malian offen-sive, it is plausible to expect many of the foreign members of the extremist groups in northern Mali to escape to neighbouring countries. They are likely to go either where they came from (i.e. Mauritania and Algeria), or where they find an environment that is characterized by both a weak state and exist-ing extremist networks – in which case Libya will be relatively attractive.

The smuggling networks on which the war economy of northern Mali partly relied are

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predominantly Saharan. Traders in northern Mali and Niger have long exploited discrepancies in regional economic policies to supply their areas with subsidized food and petrol from Algeria and Libya. Cigarette smuggling grew into a major business in northern Mali and Niger during the 1990s, the main destinations being Algeria and Libya. Moroccan cannabis resin is smuggled from west to east, traversing southern Algeria or Mauritania, Niger, northern Tchad or Libya to reach Europe, Egypt and Israel, or the Arabian Peninsula (Julien, 2011). None of these activities are necessarily directly linked to armed conflict, although rivalries over the control of drug smuggling caused tensions to rise in northern Mali during 2009–11. But at the least, businessmen involved in smuggling are prominent players on all sides of the current conflict.

The close links between the conflict in northern Mali and developments in North Africa are also apparent in the event that triggered the rebellion in January 2012: the return to their home countries of hundreds – likely over 1,500 – Malian and Nigerian Tuareg who had fought on the side of the Qadhafi regime in Libya. The majority of these fighters had been recruited into Qadhafi's forces years, if not decades ago. While tensions had already been on the rise in northern Mali in the months before the rebellion, the return of these fighters, in whole convoys of vehicles with heavy machine guns and rocket launchers, tilted the balance of power. This encouraged the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) to make its maximalist demand of an independent state at the beginning of the conflict. By contrast, in Niger, the government managed to partly disarm returning fighters, and to accommodate their leading figures with prestigious positions.

Since the collapse of the Qadhafi regime, southern Libya has become an integral part of the security conundrum in the Sahel-Sahara region. A variety of units and forces vie for control of southern Libya, many of which are nominally part of the emerging security apparatus, but are really pursuing their own interests and are often recruited from particular ethnic and tribal groups. Units that are officially tasked with controlling the border are frequently themselves engaging in lucrative cross-border activities. Smuggling in arms, drugs, alcohol and subsidized goods is thriving, and northern Niger is gaining in importance as a transit area for these activities. Armed groups are able to organize in southern Libya, or use it as a staging area. Just how close the links are was demonstrated by the attack on the In Amenas gasfield in southern Algeria, in January 2013. Credible reports suggest that the attackers came from northern Mali via northern Niger and southern Libya, and acquired their weapons in Libya (Reuters 2013). During the first half of 2013, former Tuareg rebels from Niger moved into the Libya-Niger border region, and so did members of the extremist groups escaping northern Mali, according to an increasing number of local and regional sources.

Regional Relations: Rivalries and Mutual Distrust

A key reason why the developments outlined above were able to destabilize northern Mali was a lack of regional cooperation. As extremist and criminal networks centered on northern Mali strengthened their presence from around 2006 onwards, little progress was made in coordonating a regional approach to the problem. Under the Algerian-led *pays du champ* (core countries) initiative, an intelligence sharing centre (*unité de fusion et de liaison*, UFL) and a joint military operations centre (*comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint*, CEMOC) were established in 2010, both of them based in Algeria. However, the initiative by and large failed to translate into operational security cooperation on the ground, as representatives of its Sahelian members repeatedly pointed out. The initiative was dominated by Algeria, and included Mauritania,

Mali and Niger. Qadhafi's Libya reportedly refused to join, while Morocco was deliberately excluded by Algeria. Rivalries between the three North African states had long been an obstacle to regional integration: Libya and Algeria each sought to mediate in the conflicts in northern Mali and Niger in 2006/7, and Libya's ties to rebel factions allowed it to torpedo Algerian efforts. Algerian rivalry with Morocco over the deadlocked Western Sahara conflict played an equally important role; Moroccan diplomacy in Mali and Mauritania sought to prevent the emergence of an effective regional security framework from which Morocco was excluded (Chena, 2011).

Even more significant were the growing tensions between the Malian leadership of Amadou Toumani Touré on the one hand, and Mauritania and Algeria on the other hand. Touré was clearly reluctant to move against AQIM and criminal networks in northern Mali, partly because his northern allies were benefiting from drug smuggling and taking cuts in ransom payments negotiated with AQIM. This led to increasing exasperation in Algiers and Nouakchott. Álgerian newspapers close to the military intelligence service began publishing reports accusing Touré of complicity in organized crime.[1] In 2010, the Mauritanian army unilaterally began an offensive against AQIM on Malian territory. After concluding that senior officers of northern Malian origin were leaking information to AQIM, the Mauritanians routinely withheld information from the Malian army about their movements. European governments contributed to such tensions. Ransom payments by European governments to AQIM for the release of their hostages, negotiated with support from figures close to Touré, were a major source of discord between Algeria and the Malian government. Moreover, on several occasions, European governments successfully pressured the Malian government into releasing suspects in the abductions, among them convicted AQIM members. When two Algerians and a

Mauritanian were released in one such deal in 2010, Nouakchott and Algiers recalled their ambassadors from Bamako to protest (Jeune Afrique, 2010).

Since then, two obstacles to an improvement in regional relations have been removed with the fall of Qadhafi and the coup d'état against Touré. However, the problem of regional cooperation persists, and became even more acute with the escalation of the crisis in Mali. Throughout 2012, a clear rift ran through the region, with members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), supported by France, pushing plans for military intervention in Mali, and Algeria as well as Mauritania opposing such plans. Both states were worried about a blowback from an ECOWAS intervention in the form of returning extremists. Algeria was also opposed to a French military presence in what it considers its strategic backyard. Algeria was courted by the US and European states to take a leading role in coordinating a regional response to the conflict. There were obvious reasons for this. Algeria is not only the military heavyweight in the region; it is also the regional player with the most direct influence in northern Mali. It has been mediating in northern Mali's conflicts since the 1990s; it functions as a lifeline for northern Mali for supplies in food and petrol; and it is believed to have an extensive intelligence presence in the area.

In 2012, however, Algeria remained largely on the sidelines of the international efforts on Mali. It continued to insist on a political solution to the conflict, its main initiative being an attempt to mediate between the two armed groups led by Tuareg notables, Ansar Dine and the MNLA. As during previous mediation efforts, Algeria championed selected players in northern Mali – in this case, the Ansar Dine leadership and individual figures within the MNLA. Algeria sought, in vain, to get Ansar Dine's leaders to distance themselves from the extremist groups, AQIM and the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). However,

Algerian mediation efforts had little chance of succeeding in the absence of military pressure, especially without an effective government in Bamako that could act as a credible negotiating partner.

With the extremist offensive towards central Mali in January 2013 and the ensuing French-led offensive, the Algerian strategy had clearly failed. Neither Algeria nor Mauritania joined the intervention, although they did not openly oppose it anymore. Since late 2012, they had already dispatched representatives to the meetings of ECOWAS military officials planning for the African-led International Support Mission for Mali (AFISMA). Mauritania announced that it would contribute to the UN Stabilization Mission (UNISMA) that is due to take over from AFISMA (AFP, 2013). But the prospects for real cooperation among the states concerned by insecurity in the Sahara has taken a hit as a result of the intervention. The intervention is clearly a French-led effort, and as such runs counter to Algeria's regional ambitions. The *pays du champ* initiative now has even less operational relevance than before. ECOWAS has cemented its position as the key regional partner institution for Western states. The reactivation of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) is also unlikely to be constructive. CEN-SAD had been created by Qadhafi as a vehicle for his ambitions to exert regional influence, and beyond that had largely remained an empty shell. After Qadhafi's fall, Morocco began pushing for a resurrection of the organization, leading to the signature of a revised treaty for the organization in February 2013. Morocco was supported in its initiative by the new Libyan authorities – however, the weakness of the emerging Libyan state will prevent Libya from playing any meaningful role in regional security for the foreseeable future. For Morocco, CEN-SAD's primary attraction lies in the fact that Algeria, as the only Saharan state, is not a member. Algerian-Moroccan rivalry therefore promises to continue to act

as an obstacle for security cooperation in the region. A workable framework for such cooperation remains elusive.

The role of external actors

Effective regional security cooperation will emerge only on the initiative of regional states themselves. Without an Algerian shift towards closer engagement with its Saharan and Sahelian neighbours, and as long as Morocco seeks to obstruct such Algerian efforts, the prospects for a workable framework are limited. Yet the ways in which external actors work with regional states also has an impact. As Saharan insecurity has increasingly become a source of international concern over the past decade, Western states have framed this insecurity and their response through the notion of the Sahel. The EU's Sahel strategy focuses on 'Mauritania, Mali and Niger, though the geographical conditions – and therefore challenges – also affect parts of Burkina Faso and Chad' (European External Action Service 2011). (By appointing a Sahel envoy and developing a Sahel strategy, the UN has emulated this approach.) France's choice to work primarily with and through ECOWAS in crafting a military response to the conflict in Mali has followed the same lines.

The rationale behind this approach to Saharan insecurity is clear: for Western governments, it is much easier to engage with the Sahel states – which are weak and dependent on external assistance – than with Algeria and Libya, which are suspicious of foreign agendas on their southern borders, and jealous of their sovereignty. European officials frequently express their perplexity when it comes to Algerian regional policies, and Algeria's reluctance to solicit European assistance for its existing cooperation mechanisms. Moreover, ECOWAS offers an existing and effective regional framework for action, whereas no such framework exists that straddles the Saharan divide. Nevertheless, supporting ECOWAS as the framework

for regional security undoubtedly deepens the rift between the ECOWAS members and their northern and western neighbours – that is, Mauritania, Libya and Algeria. In the medium term, this makes it less likely for effective regional cooperation in the Sahel-Sahara region to emerge. Much the same goes for the activities of the EU in the context of its Sahel strategy, which are primarily targeted towards the three Sahelian states. The risk is that Sahel states see security cooperation with the EU or EU members as an alternative to regional cooperation.

Would a new framework for cooperation require establishing yet another organization that would later prove to be an empty shell, as the Maghreb Arab Union or CEN-SAD have done? Probably not – one option would be to use the framework of the African Union, or to expand the *pays du champ* initiative to include Chad and Libya (and ideally also Morocco, Nigeria and Burkina Faso). The main challenge, however, would be to operationalize whatever framework is established. This requires first and foremost a shift in Algeria's approach to regional cooperation, as well as much stronger commitment by the Libyan authorities. Foreign governments and international organizations could – and should – encourage and support such an initiative, but they cannot induce it.

Notes
[1] See, for example, Salima Tlemçani, "Au Sahel, narcotrafiquants et terroristes se partagent le terrain," *El Watan*, 1 November 2010.

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