

ARTICLE

Algeria's Role in the Sahelian Security Crisis

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While Mali is confronting a deep political crisis with a still serious risk of territorial split and Libya is descending into increasing instability, Algeria appears reluctant to assume the responsibilities of a hegemonic power. Algeria's refusal to consider any joint strategy with its neighbors and other international actors towards the Malian crisis shows it has once again succumbed to the fear of encirclement that characterized its policies in the 1970s.

Behind this refusal, there lies a desire to maintain its position as a pivotal actor in regional security matters while conducting a wait-and-see diplomacy, an approach which many observers and regional leaders have deemed incomprehensible. Internal power struggles at the highest levels of government have also without a doubt permeated Algeria's policy vis-à-vis the regional crisis, hampering Algiers' ability to act regionally and weakening its position as a regional leader. The initial lack of commitment could in fact be the result of conflicting positions and divergent interests within the regime and of the lack of transparency in decision-making. These factors are crippling its diplomatic power. Today, three revealing events are symptomatic of Algeria's loss of hegemony within the region: The Arab Spring, the crisis in Mali and the attack against the Tiguentourine gas plant.

The Strategic Surprise of the "Arab Spring"

In the context of the Arab uprisings, the Algerian regime repeatedly emphasized the country's differences compared to its neighbors, a statement which aimed to underscore both Algeria's traditionally strong nationalistic sentiments and its self-defined exceptionalism. "We don't need lessons from outside", declared the then Algerian Prime Minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, in a speech delivered at a mass rally held in Algiers a day before the 2012 May elections. In the same speech he also described the Arab Spring as a "plague" and the revolutions that followed it the "work of Zionism and NATO", while adding that "our spring is Algerian, our revolution of 1st November 1954".¹

Nationalist rhetoric has also been used by the government to warn the Algerian people that foreign entities intend to destabilize the country, and was thus also employed to frame the discussions concerning a possible military intervention in northern Mali. At the same time, continued pressure from different countries and actors (France, the US, Qatar, ECOWAS) may delight the Algerian authorities since they can use this to reaffirm the regional importance of Algeria. For instance, the new Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal, has called for "an internal strong front able to protect the country from malicious hands" (Matarese 2012). Calls for national unity have also been taken up by President Bouteflika in his May 2012 speeches: "Young people will know how to face the enemies of the country and the pro-

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tagonists of the *Fitna* [discord among Muslims] who try to divide us and try to support the foreign intervention”(Matarese 2012).

This conspiracy ideology is deeply rooted in the fear of borders' internationalization that goes back to the genesis of the sovereign Algerian territory (Ammour 2013). A continuing need to resort to a nationalistic narrative illustrates both the regime's internal fragility and its regional weakness. By using rhetoric that seems to highlight the external threats to the Nation's survival, the Algerian government shows that it has no hold over its regional environment.

At the regional level, Algeria was simultaneously trying to create a “refusal front” by garnering allies who would support a local political solution to the Sahelian conflict.² In October 2012, Algerian Minister for Maghrebi and African Affairs Abdelkader Messahel together with a military delegation, started a tour in Mauritania (which at that time was still opposed to any military intervention), Niger (which always asked for French government to act quickly against “terrorism” in Mali and calling for an active role from Algeria), and Mali.

Yet, instability within Libya has exposed Algeria to many uncertainties and unexpected threats that have paralyzed the government. Algiers fears that popular protests may spread to Algeria and that, combined with years of demonstrations and protests (10,000 in 2011 according to the Minister of Interior), the regime would very well collapse. The inertia of the Algerian government and its ambiguity prior to the popular uprising in Libya explain the very late recognition of the Libyan National Transitional Council, leading to the increased isolation of Algeria on the regional scene. This position clearly showed to what extent the regional uprisings had taken the Algerian authorities by surprise. It also showed that the political matrix of Algeria has not changed; President Abdelaziz Bouteflika belongs to the same generation of Arab leaders as Muammar Gaddafi.³ This may explain why Algiers supported the

Libyan regime with military equipment and personnel in 2011 (Reuters 2011).⁴

The Mali Crisis

Algeria has long positioned itself as a traditional mediator of conflicts in the Sahel, at times in apparent competition with Gadhafi. Algeria mediated peace processes that brought a precarious end to previous Tuareg uprisings in Mali in 1991–1995 and 2006. Indeed, the Algerian treatment of the Tuareg issue was always motivated by the fear of contagion among Algerian Tuaregs and by the desire to contain Libya or any other neighboring state's influence. Algeria knows what is expected on it in this crisis, given its status as the regional military power, its influence in the far northern part of Mali (Kidal), as intermediary in previous crises in northern Mali, and as the original home of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁵

Algeria also attempted to utilize this influential role to convince Tuaregs to fight against the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) groups in the Sahel. Many former Malian Tuareg rebels offered their services and join the specialized unit settled after the 2006 “Tamanrasset Accords” (Accords de Tamanrasset) signed under the auspices of Algiers, which were supposed to maintain security in northern Mali.

After condemning the military coup in Bamako in March 2012, Algeria opted for a low profile, and the government remained silent in the following months, issuing occasional statements of concern about Mali's growing instability. This relative absence from the international policy response was first interpreted as a cautious position related to the 2012 April abduction of seven Algerian diplomats in the Malian city of Gao by the radical group Movement of Uniqueness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). Algiers' wait-and-see attitude can also be attributed to political internal preoccupation with domestic affairs and the internal competition within the elite over the upcoming 2014 presidential elections.⁶ It would seem

that Algeria has been waiting to see how the regional situation plays out before making any decision and thus leaving the risks of resolving the crisis to others.

Algiers' opposition to participation in a regional intervention force is formally expressed in a constitutional article which forbids its forces from taking part in military action outside its own territory. Algeria has been continually invoking this constitutional principle, thus justifying why its forces have not crossed into Mali to eradicate AQIM, even when invited to do so by its Sahelian neighbours, particularly by Niger. Yet the Algeria-led CEMOC (Joint Military Chief-of-staff Committee) was created in 2010 for precisely this purpose. However, on 20 December 2011, a few weeks before the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) proclaimed the independence of Azawad, Algerian army forces crossed into Mali. This move occurred exactly five days before Iyad ag Ghaly announced the creation of a new jihadist group called Ansar al-Dine (defenders of the faith) in Northern Mali. The question then is why Algeria had some forces entered in Mali if Algeria is so keen not to intervene militarily on foreign soil? It is not clear what kind of forces were sent, but according to the official Algerian statements, Malian military elements were reported to be training with Algerian military counterparts in Kidal Region. Algeria withdrew its so-called military advisors from Mali and cut off military assistance at the end of 2011 when the conflict was clearly about to begin (Keenan 2012).

In the summer 2012 context of entrenchment of radical groups in northern Mali with uncertain implications, Algeria has first maintained contacts with a wide range of actors, and seemed to be prioritizing access to information and influence over a clearly formulated strategy. On the international front, the situation was immensely embarrassing for Algeria who was accused of passivity and perceived it had little choice, but to try and negotiate a deal with all Tuareg

rebels in order to calm down a potentially explosive situation.

The Mali dossier (as well as the Western Sahara one) has always been led by the Algerian intelligence services, the Département de la Sécurité et du Renseignement (DRS) (Ammour 2013). Convinced that it should hold the monopoly of mediation with regards to the northern Mali crisis, Algeria's attitude was no longer necessarily to wait and see: Algeria has expressed its preference for a political solution in Mali.⁷ ECOWAS and Mali transitional authorities were wondering how Algiers could contribute to a negotiation process with the armed groups, particularly Ansar al-Dine, whose head Iyad Ag Ghali is well known in Algeria. He is among those leaders of the Tuareg rebellion working closely with the DRS.⁸

He came to prominence in 1988 when he founded a Tuareg secessionist movement in northern Mali. Moreover, he was the main leader of the Tuareg rebellion that began in 1990 and ended with the peace ceremony at Timbuktu in 1996. During that period, Iyad came under the eye of the DRS who were concerned that the rebellion might spread into Algeria. His first involvement with the GSPC/AQIM was in 2003 when he facilitated the liberation of the 14 out of 32 hostages abducted in the Algerian Sahara by Abderazak Lamari (a.k.a El Para), a former Algerian parachutist to be said a DRS agent.⁹ As a local notable, Iyad ag-Ghaly recycled himself in the hostage liberation business, taking large percentages of the ransoms, and playing all sides of the table.

That may explain the off-the-record set of talks Algiers led along the 2012 summer. In July, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika discreetly received envoys from Ansar al-Dine, MNLA, and even from MUJWA (the kidnapper of Algerian diplomats in Gao). Few days after, the MNLA publicly excluded the mediation of Algiers and accused the Algerian government of expelling the injured Tuaregs who are seeking a shelter in southern Algeria, and of infiltrating the MNLA with agents

from the DRS. The Algerian authorities never officially acknowledged that meeting took place. In October 2012, another secret delegation of Ansar al-Dine visited Algiers. The same month the Algerian government sent a humanitarian convoy and three military vehicles to Kidal, under the control of Ansar al-Dine. Another Algerian convoy reached Gao under the control of MUJWA. In both cases, Islamist organizations were in charge of distributing the food to local populations. The same month, French intelligence services assessed that Iyad Ag Ghali received a medical treatment in Aïn-Naadja military hospital in Algiers, thus confirming that the Islamist leader is at home in Algeria.

It seemed then more profitable for Algiers to portray the MNLA as a destabilizing force, but one which was unable to found a State according the sacrosanct principle of self-determination. Algiers had more interest in dealing and negotiating with a familiar interlocutor, who would be easier to manage (to manipulate), whom ideological principles fluctuate, and whose interests might be limited to a consistent financial gain. Thanks to Algiers, Iyad ag-Ghaly was imposed as an unavoidable interlocutor in the regional conflict exit strategy plan, to such an extent that even the ECOWAS representative eventually held talks with him in Ouagadougou in November 2012. But even if Iyad ag-Ghaly announced he had given up implementing *Sharia* law throughout Mali (but in Kidal), some Malian and Western observers would still have been suspicious of such sudden reversal.

The longstanding ties between the DRS and some key-individuals of Ansar al-Dine, the blood ties between Iyad ag Ghaly and Abdelkrim al-Targui who leads the AQIM-katiba al-Ansar, and the presence of Ansar al-Dine men in southern Algeria's supply base and base camp, demonstrated that Algeria was apparently monitoring the Mali crisis dossier through the use of personal contacts.¹⁰ Keen to avoid criticism related to this connection, Algiers would later on refuse the

legalization of a Salafi party in Algeria (the Front of the Free Awakening). Paradoxically, however, Algiers still permitted a Malian Salafist to build up his credibility among other protagonists of the peace process.

At first, Algeria's stance on the Mali crisis appeared to echo a greater number of stakeholders: the UN Secretary General's report dated 29 November 2012, for instance, urged caution and dialogue. On the other hand, West African officials condemned the UN for being "out of touch" over its lack of urgency in taking action in Mali, and were pushing the Mali government to cut an autonomy deal with Tuaregs in exchange for their joining the fight against al-Qaeda.

It seemed then that Algeria succeeded in finding out an opportunity to regain its traditional role as regional power-broker and mediator in any Tuareg conflict. By using Ansar al-Dine as a proxy in northern Mali, Algeria could pretend to provide an apparent peacemaker foreign policy, and retrieve a consistent leadership after decades of diplomatic decline. However, further serious setbacks came to contradict the Algerian strategy and prove that it was far from being wise in dealing with such a complex interlocking context.

First, on the ground, the jihadist groups have strengthened their hold on the northern part of Mali and were preparing themselves for the possible military confrontation with the African forces. On November 28, 2012, AQIM announced the creation of a 6th brigade called "*Youssef ben Tachfine*", made up mainly of Tuaregs residing in northern Mali. It was headed by El Kairuani Abu Abdelhamid al-Kidali ("from Kidal"), a local Tuareg member of the group's al-Ansar brigade, whose leader is Abdelkrim al-Targui, the cousin of Iyad ag-Ghaly. Such a new ethnic distribution system was the result of growing resentment by non-Algerians after they were denied leadership positions. It was also an alarming sign that locally-rooted djihadist katibas had consolidated prior to the French military intervention in January 2013. More-

over, at that time, concerns were raised about the extension of jihadism in West Africa by Oumar Ould Hamaha, a former associate of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, then head of MUJWA in Gao, and future leader of Ansar al-Sharia.¹¹ Hamaha declared: "We want to enlarge our zone of operation throughout the entire Sahara, going from Niger through to Chad and Burkina Faso" (Joscelyn 2013).

Second, Iyad ag-Ghaly's apparent negotiations' agenda revealed other hidden political ambitions, related to his coordinating projects with AQIM: just after the signature of an agreement with the MNLA under Algiers' auspices (21 December 2012), Iyad-ag-Ghaly broke off the accord at the end of December, and took the lead of the Islamists offensive towards southern Mali cities (Konna and Dyabali). The confidential letter from Abdelmalek Droukdel (head of the AQIM northern Algeria katiba) to the islamists leaders in northern Mali found out in Timbuktu in February 2013, proves that a real synchronisation between AQIM and Ansar al-Dine did exist, and that the gathering of all the radical forces was part of a long-term strategy of entrenchment in the Azawad region:

"We must not go too far or take risks in our decisions or imagine that this project is a stable Islamic state. It is too early for that, God knows. Instead, it is necessary to be cautious in the matter and we must be more realistic and look at it from a broader and more complete perspective to see a historic opportunity that must be exploited to interact with the Azawad people, including all its sectors, with the aim of uniting it and rallying it behind our Islamic project, by adopting its just cause and achieving its legitimate goals, while giving it an authentic Islamist tinge. ... That demands of us to establish a new framework regulating the organizational relationship with Ansar Dine and defining the nature of the appropriate activities, in a way that combines the

*continuation of our global jihadi project and the preserving of the Azawad Islamic project, while developing it and avoiding its failure. ... As for internal activity, in this we would be under the emirate of Ansar Dine. Our emir would follow their emir and our opinion would follow their opinion. By internal activity, we mean all activity connected to participating in bearing the responsibilities of the liberated areas."*¹²

Third, on 30 September 2012, the US Africa Command chief, General Carter F. Ham, clearly aligned his view with the political solution route favored by the Algerian government saying "One of the key aspects of seeking a resolution to the security challenges in northern Mali will be to separate terrorist organizations from non-terrorist organizations". This US alignment with Algerian stance is to be understood in the light of the strong partnership that emerged after 9/11 when Algeria needed to be firmly integrated into the new dynamic and the North-South security system in order to retrieve a place on the international scene after almost ten years of isolation due to the civil war. By joining the "Global War on Terrorism" the Algerian government found the opportunity to regain its international legitimacy and transform its foreign policy into a new source of legitimacy for its domestic policy. The strengthening of ties with Washington resulted in a flurry of visits to Algiers by American officials and regular invitations to the White House for Algerian ministers and President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. On the security level, there has been an increase in the number of joint operations and initiatives. The FBI has opened a field office in Algiers, Algerian officers have been trained in the United States, and there has been a series of joint intelligence missions between high-ranking DRS officers and their American counterparts. The two countries have therefore established relations that are primarily focused on the security issue, with Washing-

ton formulating and determining the principles, methods, and strategies.

On February 2013, the US State Department designated Iyad ag-Ghaly as a wanted terrorist (US Department of State 2013). One month later, Ansar al-Dine, was designated a foreign terrorist organization by the State Department, because of its close cooperation with al-Qaeda's affiliate in North Africa. This move not only shows the contradictions and the incoherencies of the US administration policy, but points out the difficulties Washington D. C. has had in understanding the complexity of the Malian situation from the start.

The decision to designate Iyad ag-Ghaly and its organization as terrorist may have been interpreted as a move to distance itself from the Algerian government strategy of compromise, and be seen as an implicit disavowal of Algiers' short-term vision. It remains to be seen if the Algerian authorities will draw the lessons of their rapprochement with a Salafist organisation, even if it is a Tuareg one.

The attack against the Tiguentourine gas plant

The attack against a Saharan strategic industrial plant by the Mokhtar Belmokhtar *katiba* (combat unit)¹³ on 16 January 2013, represented not only another strategic surprise but also a tipping point for the Algerian government, since it dragged Algeria straight into the Sahelian crisis. This came after two critical suicide attacks in 2012 orchestrated by MUJWA: in March against the Gendarmerie nationale barracks in Tamanrasset, and on 29 June 2012 against the 4th Regional Command of the Gendarmerie nationale in Ouar-gla. This town is a mere 86 kilometers from Hassi Messaoud oil field, the central node of national production.¹⁴

Ten days after the attack against In Amenas, the Bouira gas pipeline (125 kilometers from Algiers) that dispatches the gas from the Hassi R'mel field, was also the target by armed Islamist groups. Located 126 km from the town of Laghouat, Hassi R'mel is the big-

gest natural gas field and the hub of the Algerian gas industry. All the gas pipelines to Italy (Transmed), to Europe through Tunisia and/or through the Gibraltar Strait (The Maghreb-Europe pipelines), and to the Mediterranean liquefied natural gas terminals, come from Hassi R'Mel.

These dramatic events that occurred within six-month of each other, suggest Algiers was unable to evaluate the threat environment and revealed strong failures in the territorial security, in particular in the Sahara region which acts as the heartland of the Algerian economy.¹⁵

Algeria is not used to being on the front line and the government was embarrassed by the criticisms coming from Western partners regarding the management of the In Amenas operation. As a result, the hostage crisis shook up the internal political scene. Harsh criticisms about President Bouteflika's passive approach to the Sahelian crisis led some military individuals to loudly state that Bouteflika's choice to negotiate with Islamists from northern Mali had not led at all to the neutralization of the threat on the southern borders of the country.

Yet the way the In Amenas counter-offensive has been conducted reflects the way the Algerian power structure greatly differs from its neighbors. The complex distribution of power not only makes it hard to assess personal responsibility, but also shows that a handful of military officers have enjoyed a monopoly over domestic and foreign politics and have benefited disproportionately from oil and gas revenues. The regime and the army are in fact two sides of the same coin (Cook 2007).

Moreover, the power struggle within the military and security apparatus, created many different nodes of decision-making which are difficult to identify. In fact, during the In Amenas hostages crisis, the high military command, namely General Othman Tartag (number two of the DRS)¹⁶, ardent supporter of forceful actions, ended up taking the lead of the operations in Tiguentourine, opposing the decision of the other local mili-

tary commands (Gendarmerie, Special Forces and Parachutists) (Intelligence Online 2013).

Surprisingly, the aftermath of the crisis resulted in an unexpected rapprochement between Algiers and Washington in the field of intelligence and defense. The United States proposed to share with Algeria some intelligence data provided by their drones, in order to facilitate the securitization of the southern borders, and under the condition of accepting the opening of a cross border Algeria-Mali fly-zone (Schmitt, Sayare 2013; Campbell 2013):¹⁷

“Under one plan, information from American surveillance drones would be provided to Algerian forces to enable them to engage in operations both inside Algeria and possibly, in a limited way, across its borders. The United States is already providing surveillance information to the French-led military operation in Mali to help combat militants there who last year seized the northern half of the country. In a cable to the State Department last week, according to administration officials, Henry S. Ensher, the United States envoy in Algiers, urged that the pursuit of the Algerian militant Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the mastermind of the gas field attack, be made a priority. Toward that end, he recommended that the Obama administration tell the Algerians that if they allowed the United States to fly unarmed drones over the border area of Algeria as well as over Mali, the Americans would share the information with the Algerian government”. (Gordon, Schmitt 2013)

On the other hand, in the frame of a growing US effort to bolster Algerian military forces, the US intended to provide Algeria with advanced surveillance satellite (UPI 2013). “It still remains unclear whether the satellite would be operated by Algeria or under the command of American military and intelligence officials in the region” (Muñoz 2013).

In return, Algeria should play a more proactive role in the region, a role of proxy state. The aim of this deal is to limit as much as possible the interference of other western actors in Sahelian affairs, especially since the Serval Operation was activated in emergency and has caught the two countries by surprise.

Does this mean that we will see an uptick in Algerian operations in the border areas in return for an increasing aid from Washington? This is what some recent assessments by Algerian officials to the Pentagon suggest: “American officials also sense a possible change of heart by Algerian officials to move away from their longstanding policy not to conduct military operations outside the national borders. Algerian officials recently told the United States that they were prepared to conduct operations in border areas, one American official said” (Gordon, Schmitt 2013).

Conclusion

Two years of turbulence in the Sahel have shown to what extent the Algerian government has difficulties to adapt to the new regional and international relations environment. Without a clear geostrategic vision that would forge a more realistic foreign policy, Algeria still carries a blind spot in diplomatic activity on the Sahel question. As Ahmed Adimi, a professor of political sciences describes, Algeria's diplomacy is not a state diplomacy but a regime diplomacy.

Algeria's position is the subject of much speculation. Many neighbors think the country is playing a double game that seeks, first, to perpetuate a domestic terrorist threat that could be used to demonize a possible Algerian Spring, and second, to ensure external military funding (Ammour 2012). That should also give the DRS the continuous opportunity to play a key-role in the issue of terrorism and all security related regional dossiers, including in the southern part of the Algerian territory and beyond.

The diplomacy which once was once a key pillar of Algeria's prestige has become outdated amidst today's new regional geostra-

tegic challenges. The old elites whose principles are still rooted in the 1960s and 1970s ignore the effects of the globalization, and the way the Arab uprisings have dramatically altered the regional framework. The choice of a routine diplomacy, in the absence of any strategic vision, is not viable in the long term since it causes more damages to the credibility of the State's regional policy than a strident position and/or a real soft power strategy that addresses key Sahelian concerns such as economic development.

Algeria remains reluctant to accept the new regional balance and has thereby failed to take advantage of the power vacuum created by Gaddhafi's elimination. Instead, Algeria tries to keep on with old solutions for new and more complex problems.

Notes

¹ This date refers to the first day of the independence war against French colonial rule.

² This phrasing alludes to the group of Arab nations first called "The Firmness Front" and composed of Algeria, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Southern Yemen and PLO, created in 1977 at the Tripoli Summit in memory of the 6-day war defeat, and in opposition to any peace agreement or negotiations with Israel. In 1979, in Baghdad, the Front became the Refusal Front and cut its diplomatic relations with Egypt at a time when the Camp David agreement were about to be signed. This term is still striking in the Arab world since it underlays the official stance of most Arab states not only against Israel but also against western interference in Arab affairs.

³ As well as the former Syrian President Hafez al Assad, and his son Bashir today supported by Algiers.

⁴ In 2011, Hafez Ghoga, the spokesperson of the Libyan National Transitional Council, suggested reinforcements were sent to Gaddhafi from Niger, Mali, Kenya and Algeria. The asylum offered by Algeria to some members of Muammar Gaddhafi's

family has been seen as added proof of the Algerian support to the Libyan regime. Even if Algeria and Libya were long-standing competitors on the Sahelian scene, Algeria preferred the preservation of an authoritarian but familiar regime in its immediate vicinity to the uncertainties of an unknown leadership.

⁵ The Kidal region (Adrar of Ifoghas mountains) where most of the leaders of the MNLA, the MIA (Movement of Islamic Azawad, a splinter group from Ansar al-Dine created in January 2013), and Ansar al-Dine come from, is locally renowned to be the influence zone of Algeria where cross border trafficking of food, oil, and various licit goods has been common practice since the 1960s. The Algerian subsidised foodstuffs sold illicitly in north Mali have created a shadow economy that allows the poor region of Kidal to maintain a degree of food security. Even the Malian President Amadou Amani Touré admitted this to be the case in 2009 by saying Northern Mali is Algeria's 49th province. See Ammour 2012.

⁶ Today opacity within the regime has worsened after the President's stroke and his hospitalization in Paris in April. Despite promises to step down from power, internal speculations over the future power struggles over an eventual fourth term in the next presidential election have heightened concerns about the stability of the country.

⁷ A position reiterated five months later (Le Soir d'Algérie 2012; Yacoub H 2012, La Tribune).

⁸ After the French military intervention in Mali, three leaders of Ansar al-Dine found shelter in Tamanrasset after some negotiations with the DRS. (Boufatah 2013). On the links between Iyad ag-Ghaly and the DRS see (Keenan 2013). See also (Nossiter A, MacFarquhar N 2013).

⁹ His real name is Amari Saifi. He joined the armed Islamist movement in 1992 and later on became the second-in-command

of the GSPC. He came to prominence through the kidnapping of 32 tourists in the Sahara. After the release of the hostages he flew to northern Chad where he was captured by a rebel Chadian group. Today he is believed to be imprisoned in Algeria. An investigation led by Salima Mellah et Jean-Baptiste Rivoire asserts that Saifi was in fact a DRS agent. See their article from 2005. See also Keenan 2009.

¹⁰ Not only Iyad ag-Ghaly, but also Ahmada Ag-Bibi, a.k.a. "the man of Algiers" who lives in Tamanrasset and was in charge of the food supplying of Ansar al-Dine; Senda Ould Bouamama, former right-hand of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who was the leader of Ansar al-Dine in Timbuktu (in May 2013 he surrendered to the Mauritanian authorities); Deity Ag-Sidamou, who was based in southern Algeria where he managed the gas supplying for Ansar al-Dine through his own local illicit networks; and finally Nabil Jazairi (The Algerian), who previously served in the Algerian army, and was chief of the Kidal area and in charge of the training camps of Ansar al-Dine.

¹¹ He is known as the man with the red beard. He was one of the most active founders of MUJWA and was responsible for the kidnapping of three humanitarian workers in the Rabouni-Tindouf Sahrawi refugees camp (Algeria) in 2011. Early December 2012, he created a new armed movement, Ansar al-Sharia, mainly composed of Azawad Arabs and Berabish (like him) from Timbuktu. He is also the brother in law of Mokhtar Belmokhtar. He is said to have been killed in March 2013 by Arabs of the Kunta tribe in the Gao region.

¹² This letter has been translated in English by the *Associated Press*. Only three out of six chapters are readable. The other chapters are missing. It has been written after a meeting on 18 March 2012 between A. Droukdel and five Sahelian commanders.

See Associated Press 2013. Another 79 page-document written by Abdelmalek Droukdel, entitled "Roadmap relating to Islamic Jihad in Azawad" was discovered in a television station in Timbuktu by a French journalist of Libération. It has not yet been translated.

¹³ Three groups operated in the Sahara-Sahel: two of them under the control of Abdelhakim Abu Zeid (who was killed in March 2013 during the fights with the Chadian forces in the Adrar of Ifoghas mountains) and AQIM central structure led by Abdelhamid Droukdel in northern Algeria; the third one operating independently under the command of Mokhtar Belmokhtar. The three groups were engaged in a sort of emulation at kidnapping and criminal activities. This competition led Mokhtar Belmokhtar to found his own katiba, « The Signatories with Blood », in December 2012. Well equipped with arms bought in Libya in March 2012, he met at least twice with the leaders of Ansar al-Dine and MUJWA in Timbuktu in April and May 2012. He already knew Iyad Ag Ghali who is likely to have rubbed in negotiations for the release of hostages. Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, the new leader of MUJWA, is a former friend of him in AQIM. And all of them have shared functions and areas of influence in northern Mali.

¹⁴ The 18th Parachutists Regiment is also based in Hassi Messaoud.

¹⁵ However, in order to better secure the oil and gas fields, in June 2012, the government had already announced the creation of two new military Regions: one associated to the 4th Military Region (Ouargla) and the other associated to the wider under-equipped 6th Region (Tamanrasset) that hosts the Joint Operational Chief of Staff Committee (CEMOC), and where an attack against the Gendarmerie barracks occurred in March 2012. Their main missions consist in the borders monitoring (an electronic surveillance system is

announced to be set-up soon) and the oil and gas fields security under autonomous commands.

- ¹⁶ On 21 December 2011 he was appointed to the Interior Security Department (Direction de la Sécurité Intérieure). Between 1990 and 2001, Othman Tartag (then commander) headed up the Centre Principal Militaire d'Investigation (Main Military Investigation Center, or CPMI in Algiers), one of the main centers where opponents were tortured and killed, which was under a branch of the DRS. He is seen as the probable successor of the DRS current Chief, Mohamed Médiène, a.k.a. Tewkik.
- ¹⁷ On 22 February 2013, President Obama announced that about 40 United States military service members arrived in Niger, bringing the total number of those deployed in the country to about 100 people (mainly Air Force logistics specialists, intelligence analysts and security officers). The new drone base, located for now in the capital, Niamey, will be soon transferred in Agadez (northern Niger) in order to conduct surveillance of the Sahel through unarmed Predator aircrafts that may be armed if necessary. This did not prevent Bemokhtar katiba and the MUJWA from perpetrating a double suicide attacks against a military base and the Arlit uranium plant in Northern Niger on 23 May 2013.

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