



New threats in Maghreb and Sahel **REGIONAL SECURITY DETERIORATION AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF LIBYA**


Four years after the NATO intervention in Libya, the states in the Maghreb and in the Sahel increasingly respond to shared security concerns. Addressing these new dynamics, European leaders must work to contain regional competition and to push for economic and political integration.

The Maghreb and the Sahel have traditionally been treated as two distinct regions with little significant policy and security interaction. While the Maghreb has been treated in relation to the broader Arab World and to the Mediterranean, the Sahel has typically been seen in relation to the Sub-Saharan East and West African regions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- European policies in Maghreb and in the Sahel must respond to the strengthened security interdependence between countries in the Maghreb region and countries in the Sahel region
- Europe should strengthen efforts to curtail competition and proxy warfare between great powers in Libya and in the Sahel
- Europe should complement antiterrorism efforts with political and socio-economic development assistance and stabilisation

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Over the past decade, and increasingly in the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2011, these distinctions have grown obsolete. Indeed, the Sahel has become a primary security concern for the Maghreb and vice-versa. While the two regions continue to generate and resonate their own specific security dynamics, a series of sequences of events over the past years have illustrated the strengthened security dependencies between the two regions.

Following the collapse of Gaddafi's regime in Libya in the summer of 2011, Tuaregs who had been employed in the Libyan security apparatus returned to Mali where they took part in organizing the insurrection that contributed to the partial state collapse in 2012–2013. Subsequently the Malian security concerns became a central issue in the Maghreb when the French-led UN-sanctioned intervention in Mali further undermined Algerian and Libyan counter-insurgency policies that since the late 1990s had facilitated the relocation of Islamist rebels from the Maghreb towards the Sahel. From 2013 jihadists and rebels known to operate in the Sahel have become active in the Maghreb; most spectacularly in the attack on the oil and gas refinery at Amenas in southeast Algeria in 2013 carried out by jihadists based in Mali. During 2014 and 2015 jihadists known to have operated in the Sahel region over the past decade have furthermore been reported to operate in Libya.

These new security threats resonate intensely throughout the Maghreb and the Sahel due to a series of local long term structural factors that make the two regions conducive to conflict escalation. In the Sahel these include low capacity and low legitimacy of the postcolonial states, the structural and long-term

exploiting of the natural resources located in the peripheral areas to the benefit of the urban centers hundreds of kilometers away, a culturally rooted system of undocumented labor migration linked to trafficking networks between the Sahel states and the Maghreb, and a threatening jihadi presence. In the Maghreb region the key factors conducive to conflict escalation revolve around the authoritarian regime structures. In particular political marginalization of civil society and perpetual repression of political challengers to the incumbent regimes have undermined the legitimacy of the regimes and the ability of governments to mobilize support from substantial parts of society in times of increasing crisis. They also reflect the long-term economic and bureaucratic underperformance of the post-colonial state apparatuses.

Increased regional power competition

The new security situation also invites for further escalation due to the rapid increase in great power competition and proxy conflict dynamics in Libya and Mali.

Since the fall of Gaddafi, Libya has evolved into a potent battleground for competing Arab and Middle Eastern great powers. Parallel to the escalation of the Libyan conflict, Middle East great powers have increased their proxy and direct engagement. The UN-recognized al-Thinni government – appointed by the exiled parliament in Tobruk near the Egyptian border – has mobilized support from the anti-Muslim Brotherhood axis of Arab states that includes Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. The al-Thinni government's army chief is the controversial general Khalifa Haftar, who once served as Gaddafi's military chief of staff but was repudiated

by the dictator after the failed Libyan campaign in Chad.

Perceived as the actor most capable of combating transnational jihadism under the banner of the Islamic State and of controlling undocumented migration across the Mediterranean, the Tobruk alliance has also been able to mobilize support from Southern European powers like France and Italy.

The Tobruk alliance continues, however, to confront a competing domestic and regional alliance formed around the resurrected GNC government in Tripoli that grew out of the 2014 conflict between Misrata and Zintan rebels over control of Tripoli. Forces loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood dominate GNC and its military backbone consists of the Misrata rebel alliance. The Tripoli government has received support by a host of other Middle Eastern and African regional powers including Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan. In contrast to Egypt, Algeria, while not openly supporting GNC, has

been very insisting that the GNC should play a part in the future of Libya.

The best long-term solution for the conflict in Libya remains rooted in a strong compromise between Tobruk and Tripoli and in the parallel exclusion of all extremist and terrorist militias. Any direct intervention



Top: A Danish MINUSMA peacekeeper helps prepare a transport aircraft for service in Northern Mali © UN Photo/Marco Dormino

Bottom: Fighters from Islamist group Ansar Dine stand guard in Timbuktu, Mali, as they prepare to publicly lash a member of the Islamic Police found guilty of adultery © AP

from international society on behalf of one of these parts is likely to jeopardize the attempts to find local compromises and threatens to toss Libya further into the politics of the radical fringes and extremist camps drawing support from each their set of regional great powers.

In Mali, conflict dynamics are still mainly driven by local conflict agendas. Yet, the conflict does include an aspect of regional and international power competition between Algeria and France. The inauguration of the French military operation Serval in early 2013 was in part a consequence of the failure of several Algerian-led regional counter-terrorism initiatives such as the CEMOC (Comité d'État-Major Operationnel conjoint) that brings together Algerian, Nigerien, Mauritanian and Malian security forces. Algeria's strong stance against the French military intervention in Mali and its long-term covert engagement with jihadist in the Sahel have introduced an element of competition between the two states in the Sahel. Indeed, the Tuaregs disillusioned with the results of Algeria's 2006 peace negotiations joined forces with the French soldiers against jihadists in northern Mali in 2013 and 2014, an alliance that gave Tuareg

separatists a temporary stronghold vis-a-vis the Malian state.

The regional competition in the Sahel to some extent also reflects the traditional struggles over regional domination between Algeria and Morocco. Indeed, the absence of a regional forum bringing together Algeria and Morocco, led to the creation of the Sahel G5 forum by Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso in an attempt to strengthen regional cooperation in the Sahel. This forum now forms the framework of the European Unions security and development policies in the Sahel.

The strengthened security interconnection between the Maghreb and the Sahel regions resonate with both local and regional conflict patterns. This generates a potential for further conflict escalation, but it also holds a potential for conflict resolution. Regional and international great powers involved in the region have a shared interest in and responsibility for ensuring that the new situation is handled through increased regional incorporation that curtails further great power competition in the two regions.

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Cover photo: A convoy of Malian troops makes a stop to test some of their weapons on the road to Gao in Northern Mali © AP/Jerome Delay

