Evidence to Parliament

The UK’s Response to Extremism and Political Instability in North and West Africa

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Summary

- This evidence seeks to put the Malian intervention into a regional focus, discussing the role of key stakeholders in the region, with emphasis on Algeria.

- The Tiguentourine gas plant attack, and the prime minister’s robust response, has potentially launched a new relationship between Britain and Algeria, and other players in the region, for which clear policy terms should be articulated.

- The collapse of the Malian state, problems of communication with Algeria and shifting trends in regional instability pose a range of questions with ramifications for British development policy, intelligence-gathering and regional diplomacy.

Introduction

I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to submit evidence on this important subject. Having followed events in North Africa for more than three decades, I feel it is very necessary for parliament to scrutinise questions of extremism and political instability in North and West Africa, during a period when the British government has made commitments to bringing stability to Mali and consolidating regional relationship, notably with Algeria.

My professional life has been focused on understanding North African politics and economics. I first arrived in Algeria in 1980 (as a teacher), subsequently studied the country and taught its history, before working as a journalist and consultant in the Maghreb region (since 1984). My work is now carried out as an Associate Fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), specialising in North Africa, and as chairman of Cross-border Information Ltd, a business intelligence company specialising in Africa and the Middle East, with a significant research practise and publishing record in the Maghreb.

Any inquiry into extremism and stability in North and West Africa is bound to focus on the collapse in 2012 of the Malian state, the occupation of northern Mali by jihadist groups and the subsequent French-led intervention. The mid-January attack on the BP/Statoil-operated Tiguentourine gas plant at In Aménas in south-eastern Algeria, various kidnappings and other events pitting jihadist groups and other non-state actors (NSAs) against the forces of established states show that this is a wider regional issue, with major potential repercussions for the region’s diverse countries, the African state order and also the United Kingdom and its European neighbours.

The potential that the ‘spectacular’ Tiguentourine attack could be replicated, and the impact that such an event would have on Algeria and its hydrocarbons sector, as well as any
implications it might have for domestic UK energy security, are important issues, as are wider questions of partnership with Algeria and other regional governments.

State failure and fragility: Mali

The chain of events that catapulted the Sahara/Sahel region to the global front page in January 2013 followed a build-up of tensions, focused on the collapse of the Malian state and occupation of northern Mali by an alliance of Islamist groups: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine and Mujao. They had been building up their strength in the region, aided by an inflow of arms and men from the fallout of the Libyan revolution and other regional conflicts. These violent NSAs exploited the vacuum created by political crisis in Mali following Captain Amadou Sanogo’s coup d’état in March 2012 and the failure of its military to maintain national security.

These events involve a cast of players who are familiar to Sahara/Sahel watchers, including Al-Qaeda affiliates, Touareg rebels, the region’s former colonial power France and the Algerian military/security establishment. They are set in an environment where fast-growing but poverty-prone populations – in a region now suffering the negative impacts of climate change and decades of poor governance – have increasingly turned to violence against their rulers (the case for Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Touareg groups in Mali and Niger). However, the perspectives, personnel and methods of operation of each of these actors are subject to subtle (and not so subtle) changes that took policy-makers and strategic planners by surprise as events unfolded during January.

Long praised as a rare state in the region that had maintained democratic institutions since the early 1990s, Mali’s internal crises proved more acute than most analysis predicted. Despite increased training support from France, the United States and other partners, the Malian military was unfit for purpose; hopes that it could be strengthened and hold back the jihadist advances in the north while an Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) force was assembled proved over-optimistic.

France and alleged ‘neo-colonial’ impulses

Critics have suggested that the French intervention marked a modern expression of the ‘neo-colonialist’ tradition, with Paris acting to protect its own interests (known since the Gaullist period as ‘Franceafrique’). Indeed, some critics have suggested that Mali is a new theatre in the ‘global war on terror’ (some adding that it is ‘really about oil’). This narrative does not work in this case. The Mali economy does not produce a drop of crude; some oil exploration companies that had entered in recent years pulled out well before the jihadists moved in. Mali
has gold and other mineral reserves, but protecting these did not cause the intervention. Rather, it was intended to avert a catastrophic situation in which emboldened jihadists seemed poised to attack Bamako.

Given its large migrant population, there were fears in Paris that this challenge could find expression in violence on the French mainland. In a post-election reappraisal of regional threats, President François Hollande had already raised Mali to a priority of its security policy (to a greater extent than the previous Sarkozy administration). France was ready to act when Malian military resistance to the Islamist insurgency folded. French troops were available for a speedy intervention, being based across the region. However, the response seems to have reflected a new policy approach in Paris (rather than a classic Franceafrique reflex), to which the British government gave speedy and appropriate support.

**Other stakeholders had lost control**

Other key players in the region had also lost control of events, notably the Algerian military/security establishment, which remains a key element in that country’s power elite, widely known as les décideurs or le pouvoir (‘the powers that be’).

The Algerian military intelligence service, the Department du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS), its commander Lieutenant-General Mohammed Mediène (known as ‘Tewfik’) and his senior officers, including external intelligence chief Major-General Rachid Laâlali (known as ‘Attafi’), have long exerted influence over Mali and other Sahel states. This has led to claims that the DRS had cultivated jihadist elements – including Mokhtar Belmokhtar (MBM) – as ‘assets’ in their efforts to control the region. The DRS has significant links to the region south of Algeria, but it has probably never been fully in control, and with the Tiguentourine gas plant attack was forced into reacting to ‘blowback’ from conflicts elsewhere in the region.

**Short-term policy questions**

The Malian intervention raises a number of questions, including the following:

1) The extent to which France and the Ecowas force need more intense (or less) support from western partners – specifically the UK – to achieve the aim of eradicating the Jihadist alliance in Mali and its neighbours, and to put in place more long-term security and development structures that will stop these NSAs simply moving into other fragile jurisdictions.

2) The extent to which the intelligence available is sufficient to make balanced, credible judgements that will allow us to shape policy. Western intelligence on the region has been found rather wanting.
3) How the UK can best benchmark progress and failure in this conflict, to support proactive (rather than knee-jerk) policy responses.

Longer term policy questions
Other questions that should test policy-makers include:

4) reinforcing fragile and repairing failed states – the development community, governments and commentariat have, in the last decade, gained a deeper understanding of the dynamics and risks associated with the emergence of ‘failed states’. Considerable resources have been put into rebuilding failed states and strengthening ‘fragile states’ – a process in which the UK has played a leadership role in articulating policy and allocating resources to the Department for International Development and Foreign and Commonwealth Office. But analysis of the Malian crisis suggests a reappraisal of policies towards military training, aid programmes and international alliances is required; and

5) how to work with regional partners – the need for western intervention in Mali says much about the limits of purely regional initiatives. France felt constrained to intervene after the planned Ecowas force failed to materialise, while Algeria was unable to control events in Mali, and suffered ‘blowback’ with a major terrorist ‘spectacular’ on its territory.

Dealing with Algeria
Algeria is arguably the most powerful player in the Sahel, with a regime rooted in a military/security tradition, and a body of diplomatic and ‘securocrat’ expertise at dealing with the region. These strengths in January led the Prime Minister, David Cameron, to announce that the authorities in Algiers were partners of choice in tackling crisis in the Sahel.

Algeria itself has come into the firing line of a fast-moving Sahara/Sahel conflict, with a radical Islamist khatiba (battalion), Al-Mouakioune Bi Dam (The Blood Signatories), attacking the Tiguentourine gas plant on 16-20 January. There is not room here to go into great detail, however it is necessary to recapitulate on some elements:

- the ambitious attack could only have taken place against the wider context of burgeoning conflict in the Saharan/Sahel region. Even during the 1990s conflict that pitted the Algerian state against radical Islamists, the southern ‘hydrocarbons fortress’ was largely untouched. Levels of security in Algeria have reduced since then, but In
Aménas was still a challenging target; MBM, who commanded to attack, had built his reputation by attacking softer targets;

- the assault on Aménas seems to have been a predominantly Algerian (or rather North African) affair, even if events in Mali provided a political narrative to initially help explain the attack. The attackers’ knowledge and penetration of the facility suggests the attack was planned well before the French intervention in Mali. Militant groups had been stepping up their attacks against Algerian targets over the last year (for example, attacking a police barracks in Tamanrasset). MBM’s group had placed drivers and other employees into the complex months before;

- Al-Mouakioune Bi Dam was created only recently by erstwhile AQIM leader and trans-Saharan smuggler MBM, whose ‘business model’ has been based on taking hostages for ransom (for example, the 2003 kidnapping of 32 German and Austrian tourists). MBM needed resources and kudos having split (in time-honoured fashion of fusion and fission) from rival leaders in the AQIM setup in Mali. But at least part of the group that attacked Aménas were equipped as suicide bombers, which points to a different kind of ‘spectacular’ being planned, which might have destroyed the plant;

- the attackers were initially successful because of lax security, but once events were under way the Algerian military reacted quickly and ruthlessly. This contributed to the high number of deaths. While Japan, the UK and other western governments emphasised the priority of a ‘duty of care’ towards foreign workers – favouring negotiation and, as an ultimate resort, targeted special forces activity – the Algerians were focused on reasserting their authority as emphatically as possible. After their initial shock, partner governments seem to have understood this uncomfortable fact; and

- Algeria will continue to insist that it takes a lead in reinforcing its national security (resisting any foreign security operations within Algeria) and that its voice is heard in regional councils.

**British response**

David Cameron’s statements on Algeria have focused on security co-operation. Mr Cameron’s commitment to intensified co-operation was shown on 30 January, when he paid the first visit to Algeria by a UK premier since independence in 1962. (Not even Margaret
Thatcher visited after the Algerian authorities found her son, Mark, when he was lost in the desert during the 1982 Paris-Dakar rally. Queen Elizabeth did visit, in October 1980).

While hard security considerations have dominated the debate, other forms of security are also at stake. The contribution that Algerian gas makes to the European energy balance is considerable; its exports are an important element in the French, Italian and Spanish fuel supply, and add to other importers ability to diversify their suppliers. Supplies of Algerian gas in the UK and other European grids serves to diminish the EU’s heavy dependence on Russian gas. (This is a strategic issue as was highlighted by the Europe-wide fallout from Moscow’s decision in 2009 to cut off gas supplies to Ukraine.)

There has not previously been a major challenge to Algerian gas supply, although the potential threat is of concern to strategic planners across the EU. Were jihadist activity to cut supply lines – or, more subtly, to influence the thinking of major European companies, changing their orientations towards their sources of supply – this would be of considerable consequence.

**Algeria: a complex partner**

Algeria is an important country that the UK needs to engage on as many fronts as possible. But it is not an easy ally. While Mr Cameron and other leaders have decided to align their policy with President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, it is necessary to ask questions about Algeria’s command and compliance structures, which influence its suitability as a key strategic partner.

While the human rights situation has improved during President Bouteflika’s mandate (from 1998), Algeria remains something of a troubled polity. Despite displaying the trappings of a modern democracy – with an elected president, parliament and local administrations, and (in formal terms) independent judiciary and other structures – critical decision-making remains in the hands of unelected power-brokers, *les décideurs*. Most narratives proposed by analysts to explain how Algerian policy-making works, and why a course of action may be followed, take into account the *décideur* factor to explain outcomes. A form of ‘Deep State’ operates with decision-making – including the In Aménas crisis response – being handled in power centres dominated by the military/security establishment (*le pouvoir*).

Mr Bouteflika (who is ageing and prone to illness) was absent as the In Aménas crisis unfolded; other civilian government officials seemed unable to give Western governments the answers they required. This may be explained by the lack of a government structure that was able to answer questions from Downing Street and others about a military operation run by Algerian security officials. To borrow Henry Kissinger’s formula, Western officials did not know who to call – or among officials in Algiers, how to answer the calls they received.
This seems to have been a universal problem: British ambassador Martin Roper leads one of the most proactive and dynamic embassies in Algiers, so there is no question of the UK representation not having the necessary formal political contacts. It is the opacity of the Algerian system that is in question.

**Hard security and asymmetric warfare**

A narrative has developed in which Mali and Algeria fit into a wider regional crisis in an ‘arc of instability’ stretching from Sudan and Somalia to Mauritania and the Atlantic Coast. There is some substance to this, given the range of conflicts, the fragility of established polities, the strength of new actors and the region’s economic, demographic and environmental weaknesses.

It is in this unpromising terrain that the prime minister warned the House of Commons on 21 January that Britain was engaged in a “generational struggle” against terrorism. In response to this, there needed to be a “patient, intelligent but tough approach” to defeat terrorism and ensure national security. However, this tough talking begs the question of the extent to which Algeria and the Sahel pose a direct security threat to the UK.

More events like the Tiguentourine gas plant incident would directly impact on Britons, given the number of UK companies and citizens operating in the Algerian energy sector. Since Tiguentourine there has been a basically harmless, ‘conventional’ mortar attack on an Algerian pipeline, which had no impact on operations and exports, but little more. With increased security being put in place around key gas installations, there is no immediate security crisis in Algeria – although there are suggestions of ‘blowback’ elsewhere from jihadists push out of Mali, such as in Libya.

The Algerian jihadist movement is now very small; violent Islamism in Algeria, as in other countries, has been on the wane and shows no signs of a major revival. Were the jihadist campaign to maintain its pre-Mali intervention momentum it is possible the conflict might have spread north, and some ‘asymmetric warfare’ might still follow, with the potential for targeting expatriate populations. But so far there has been no sign of this.

**Saharan violence on UK streets?**

Could these developments in the Sahara/Sahel bring new terrorist activity to British streets? Given the nature of asymmetric warfare, an outgunned enemy might turn to terrorist attacks to gain parity with its much more conventionally powerful foe.
There are precedents, going back to the 1990s conflict, for Algerians to have been organising in the UK, and this has included suspects being held on alleged terrorist offences. However, it should be noted that the 7/7 attacks had no North African input, and efforts to prosecute other alleged terrorist activity have proved extremely difficult to conclude. In the 2005 ricin conspiracy trial, only one of several Algerian defendants was convicted, Kamel Bourgass, who had earlier been convicted of murdering a police officer, when a flat in Manchester was raided in January 2003.

**Recommendations and questions**

Sahara/Sahel turbulence is an issue that British policy-makers cannot ignore, but any larger commitment will require a clear understanding of the partners involved, as well as the issues, to feed into policy decisions that fall under a range of headings, from intelligence-gathering to mitigating climate change. Some of these issues are rounded up below.

Each country should be weighed on its own merits – the ‘arc of instability’ narrative gives a region-wide narrative, and as noted below, jihadist recruitment is across borders, but this should not obscure the marked differences between each national polity: policy should continue to be made on a country-by-country basis if serious mistakes are to be avoided.

A concerted effort to engage with Algeria requires closer understanding of its power structures – while Algeria has so far avoided an ‘Arab Spring’ uprising, widespread remains apparent across the country. Decision-makers need to assess the extent to which the UK should commit to new arrangements with the government. Engagement with this major player is essential, but some forms of commitment may be less prudent.

Understanding how Jihadist activity in the region has evolved is essential – recent events show important shifts in these groups’ make up, aims and support base; we need to know our current and future ‘enemy’. Most intelligence suggests that jihadist groups were strengthened by fallout from the overthrow of Muammar Qadhafi in Libya; the subsequent flow of arms and men may not have been decisive, but neither is it a negligible factor. The majority of fighters at In Aménas came from Libya and Tunisia, not Algeria or Mali.

The UK and its various partners need a clear understanding of the limits to Britain’s commitment to become a guarantor of North and West African security – domestic security agencies have monitored and acted against the Islamist underground for two decades; UK diplomats have promoted relations with large potential markets, led by Algeria. But our projection of resources and understanding of the region have so far been limited, meaning a bigger commitment requires considerable scaling up.
A reappraisal of policies towards training and other military co-operation is required – given that Mali collapsed and Algeria specifically wants material support.

Policy-makers should reflect on the potentials and limits for regional alliances – to what extent can we count of Ecowas, the African Union and other bodies to lead in containing threats? How can these partners be strengthened to avoid the need for direct Western intervention?