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NIGERIEN PRESIDENT MAHAMADOU ISSOUFOU

Coup d'état averted in Niger - Or was it?

Political tensions in Niger have been rising ahead of the 21 February presidential election, barely two months away. The incumbent, **Mahamadou Issoufou**, has long been regarded as the clear favourite, but that picture is changing.

Political tension has been increasing over the past two years in the face of widespread opposition to the poll calendar drawn up by the national electoral commission. Opposition groups have criticised the constitutional court, which validates candidacies and election results, for its apparent allegiance to Issoufou.

Opposition to Issoufou has been gathering pace, especially since the several opposition

party leaders have coordinated their campaigns and as the local media have thrown increasing doubt on his record, especially on the economic front. Until this week, it seemed that his calamitous economic record might well threaten his re-election and that he might have to resort to electoral dirty tricks - as several prospective opposition candidates were beginning to accuse him of doing.

Then on the morning of 17 December, the president issued a statement on television that the government had just foiled an attempted coup d'état. Issoufou told the country that four senior military officers had been arrested and taken into custody two days earlier, on 15 December.

According to local reports, those arrested were air force General **Souleymane Salou**; **Djibo Salou**, a former chief of staff of the armed forces under the previous military regime; Lieutenant Colonel **Idi Abdou Dan Haoua**, commander of the air base in Niamey; and **Nare Maidoka**, head of the 1st Artillery Battalion in the western town of Tillaberi.

Military coups d'état are no new thing in Niger. Issoufou himself was first elected in 2011 in a vote organised by a military junta that in 2010 had overthrown President **Mamadou Tandja**, who was seeking to stay in power beyond the two-term limit set by Niger's constitution.

Later that year, Issoufou announced that

another coup plot had been thwarted. Ten military figures were arrested at the time, accused of attempting to overthrow the regime and assassinate the head of state.

This time round, in his television address, Issoufou called the coup attempt high treason and asserted that the situation was under control and all the main actors had been arrested, except one who had fled. Issoufou said the objective had been 'to overthrow the democratically elected power.'

He also averred, 'They envisaged using aerial firepower and they have for some weeks deliberately blocked [the military assets] in Niamey that I was pressing them to send >>>

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to Diffa to the front for the struggle against **Boko Haram**.'

As *Sahara Focus* goes to press, the situation in Niger is very unclear and the political atmosphere is being described as tense. The opposition has recently accused Issoufou and his government of using repressive tactics ahead of the vote. It now looks as if such repression might increase further.

The real question is whether Issoufou's account of events is true or whether the arrests are part of a dirty tricks campaign as the election draws closer. It is too early to say what effect the alleged foiled coup will have on his re-election chances.

Issoufou's re-election prospects

A 17 November ruling by a Beninese court halting work on a project led by French company **Bolloré** to build a rail link between Cotonou in Benin and Niamey in Niger reportedly caused panic at the Nigerien presidency. Issoufou had been hoping the high-profile project would provide him with something positive to show for his term in office.

His record, which has been overshadowed by security concerns, has become increasingly shrouded by economic gloom on almost all fronts. Hopes that the mining sector would generate much-needed revenues have been dashed. The acquisition by Nigerien national mining company **Société du patrimoine des mines du Niger (SOPAMIN)** of 80% of the **Société des mines du Liptako (SML)** from Canadian-based **SEMAFO** in December 2013 has proved to be disastrous.

Moreover, the government's efforts to find a suitable foreign buyer for SOPAMIN have so far come up with nothing much.

Hopes that government revenues would be boosted by uranium have likewise failed to materialise.

The price of yellow cake has fallen since Issoufou came to power in 2011, while the opening of the potentially giant Imouraren uranium mine, initially planned for 2014, has been pushed back to 2018 at the earliest. **Imouraren SA**, a subsidiary of French nuclear giant **Areva**, has also laid off all its local staff in Niger.

The country's oil sector has proven to be no more successful. The government has had to deal with falling oil prices and a string of internal difficulties at its **SORAZ** refinery, which posted losses of US\$21 million in 2014.

Perhaps worst of all for Issoufou is that the Kandadji dam in southwestern Niger, originally scheduled for inauguration this year, is not going to be finished any time soon. After two years of delay and millions down the drain, the contract has been taken away from Russian **Zarubezhvodstroy (ZVS)**, which obtained the business during the brief reign of military junta leader **Salou Djibo**. It has not yet been re-awarded.

One consequence is that the much-vaunted 'Les Nigériens nourrissent les Nigériens' (3N) agricultural self-sufficiency project has become something of a white elephant.

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THE MAGHREB

The Qatari role in Libya

Last summer, conflict developed between the Tuareg and Tebu tribes in southern Libya, and some Tuareg blamed it on the French, who, they claimed, wanted to expand their oil interests in the Fezzan.

What almost no Tuareg knew at that time was that moves were afoot in Qatar to initiate a peace agreement between the two tribes. That agreement, for what it is worth, was signed in Doha on 22 November by **Ali Sidi Adam**, the head of a Tebu delegation, and **Abu-Bakr Ngdathn al-Fageh** (or, according to many outlets, **Abu Bakr al-Faqi**), the head of a Tuareg delegation.

At face value the agreement, although short on detail, is at least in principle better than nothing. As one Libyan analyst remarked, anything that even talks of peace is better than nothing.

The accord got very little press coverage, partly because it is difficult to ascertain what it contains and perhaps more so because many of the people involved in the process have little credibility. In fact, several of them have criminal records that stretch from one side of the Sahara to the other.

Many Tebu are apparently hostile to the intervention of Qatar. Not only do they distrust Qatari motives but they also dispute the way in which Qatar selected and invited Tebu ➤➤➤

representatives to Doha. Tuareg fully concur with the Tebu on those points.

Qatari deeds in the Sahara make it an extremely suspect party to any agreement. In 2012, for example, widespread reports surfaced of a Qatari aircraft landing at Ouagadougou airport and off-loading vast sums of cash for the Islamist groups that had taken over northern Mali.

Although there appears to be no photographic record of the plane and its cargo, several well-known local sources insist that they saw it.

Since then, there have been several other, largely unverified reports of Islamists in the Sahel receiving Qatari funding. Indeed, shortly after the plane episode, a suitcase containing substantial Qatari funds was delivered overland across Algeria by courier to northern Mali.

After being inadvertently intercepted by local security forces at Ghardaia, the courier and the funds were allowed to proceed after political intervention from the highest level.

An Algerian proxy?

The question of why Qatar wishes to promote the peace deal is thus nowhere near being answered.

Tuareg representatives from Ubari believe that the country is acting as a proxy for Algeria, but they have not provided a convincing rationale other than that they believe, rather speculatively, that Qatar sees Ubari as a future hub for the Fezzan oil and gas industry and that it also wants to get its hands on the Libyan banking sector.

It is known that Algerian President **Abdelaziz Bouteflika** has extremely close relations with the Qatari ruling **al-Thani** family. Bouteflika on occasion saved Qatar from considerable embarrassment in the Arab League; he has also invested an estimated US\$12 billion of Algerian money in Qatar's sovereign fund; and the al-Thani family granted him 10,000 acres of exclusive hunting rights in Algeria's northern desert.

While these deals may say much about Bouteflika's style of diplomacy, however, they do not explain what interest either Qatar or Algeria might have in the current peace agreement.

The return of Ali Kanna

Responsible representatives of the Tuareg community in Ubari allege that Qatar held secret talks in Algeria in June to plan the management and coordination of their intervention

in Libya. The key figure in these talks seems to have been General **Ali Kanna**, whom many Tuareg now suspect of being an Algerian agent after being given protection by Algeria after the 2011 rebellion against Libyan leader **Muammar Qadhafi**.

Even though Ali Kanna has a decidedly chequered history, he could become a major player in the future of the Fezzan. He is a Tuareg who had close relations with Qadhafi. In 2004, Qadhafi gave him the rank of general and placed him in command of the newly created 3,000-strong **Maghawir Brigade**, which was based in Ubari and made up exclusively of Tuareg of Malian and Nigerien origins.

Defectors from the Maghawir Brigade set up the first 'revolutionary' Tuareg armed group after Tripoli's fall, known as the **Ténéré**. When the brigade entered Ubari in September 2011, it was considered the town's liberator and was, with the original Maghawir Brigade, renamed the **Tendé Brigade**, one of the two largest fighting units in the town.

With the fall of Qadhafi, most members of the two brigades fled to Mali and they joined the **Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad (MNLA)**, or National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) in the Tuareg

rebellion against the Mali government. Kanna fled to Niger with several of Qadhafi's surviving family members and close aides.

By 2013, most of the Maghawir soldiers had returned to the unit, largely because their families had stayed in Libya, because extremist Islamist forces had overtaken the MNLA, and because the likelihood of retaliation against them had receded.

In January 2014, however, Kanna, as one of Qadhafi's generals, was on the brink of being deported from Niger to Mali, along with Qadhafi family members and stalwarts, to face revolutionary justice. France, however, saw the value of having Kanna back in Libya.

Following interventions by France in both Niger and Libya, Kanna was allowed to return to Libya, where he came under the protection of his former brigade. He began rebuilding it to assist France and Algeria in cleaning southern Libya of the terrorist groups that were attempting to establish a safe haven there.

Kanna then seems to have received Algerian backing to put together a Tuareg delegation to go to Doha. The delegation had no credible representation; each member, so Tuareg sources say, was given US\$22,000 on or around 2 June to conclude some sort of ceasefire agreement, which was not respected by anyone back in the Fezzan.

Calling in Chafi and Alembo

After this first botched episode, Qatar, apparently assisted again by Algeria, repeated its attempts to mediate. This time, it >>>

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QADHAFI VERY QUICKLY TURNED AGHALY ALEMBO INTO A RECRUITER OF MERCENARIES FROM NIGER

invited a group of Tuareg headed by a member of the Tuareg Social Council.

On arrival in Doha they were more than a little surprised to be greeted by Ali Kanna, the infamous **Aghaly Alembo**, and the equally disreputable **Mustapha Ould Limam Chafi**, a former adviser to the now deposed Burkina Faso ruler **Blaise Compaoré**.

Wanted in his home country of Mauritania on various charges, Chafi was one of the key players in the hostage-taking business that flourished in the western Sahel between 2008 and the Mali crisis of 2012. With several arrest warrants on his head, he was last reported holding a lavish wedding for his daughter in Morocco, where he was clearly trying to build a new home.

Alembo was once highly respected as the leader of the 2007-08 Tuareg rebellion in Niger. On visiting Tripoli to seek support from Qadhafi in 2008, however, he is reported to have fallen for the fast life of cars, women, wealth, and drugs lavished on him by the Libyan leader.

Qadhafi very quickly turned him into a recruiter

of mercenaries from Niger while also encouraging him to develop a increasingly successful cocaine-trafficking business from Niger to Tripoli. Alembo did not return home, the rebellion petered out, and his name became reviled.

With men like Alembo, Chafi, and Kanna working for the Qataris, it is hardly surprising that neither the Tebu nor the Tuareg gave the resulting 22 November agreement short shrift. Some local informants have alleged that the second delegation was held in Qatar and not allowed to return home until an agreement had been signed.

Sant'Egidio also intervenes

A further meeting was held in Rome on 26 November at which Italian NGO **Sant'Egidio** tried to negotiate the conditions for implementing the agreement, which provided for the deployment of a little-understood or -known 'neutral military force' (the Al-Hasawana), the withdrawal of armed groups from Ubari, the reopening of the road from Sebha to Ghat, and the exchange of prisoners.

On the ground, however, little has changed. Reports from Ubari around the beginning

of December suggested that the Tebu were continuing their aggression and trying unsuccessfully to enter the town.

Having again failed to overcome Tuareg resistance, Tebu fighters allegedly started raiding outlying farms and homesteads, killing 18 innocent Tuareg farmers and their families in a village approximately 40 km from Ubari. That massacre has been verified only by verbal reports from Tuareg in the region.

Setting peace conditions

The Tebu are demanding as basic conditions that the Tuareg lay down their weapons, evacuate their military camps and positions, open the road, permit full access to the nearby El Feel and El Sharara oil fields, and allow the Tebu their militia base in Ubari.

Those conditions are quite unacceptable to the Tuareg, whose conditions for peace in Ubari are very simple: all Tebu forces in Ubari should leave and the Tebu should return to the territorial positions originally agreed in the Midi-Midi treaty of 1893 (see SF 0815:3-7). That is a line running more or less north-south through Katrun.

The Midi-Midi treaty was reconfirmed and celebrated by both Tebu and Tuareg in 2012 after the fall of Qadhafi, with both tribes standing together in March 2013 in a Tuareg-Tebu Forum that stood for Libyan national cohesion.

The first serious breach of the Midi-Midi treaty in over 120 years came in September 2014, following the establishment of two

rival governments in northern Libya and Tebu reliance on the support of what the Tuareg call 'third forces' from the east to push into traditionally Tuareg territory around Ubari.

Difficulties for the Tuareg

The Tuareg now find themselves in a very difficult and dangerous position. They see themselves under threat from the Tebu, backed by the Tobruk government and an array of forces in Chad, Niger, and Algeria. The Tuareg believe that supposed alliance is being orchestrated by France, although that is questionable.

They also believe they are under pressure from the predominantly Misratan forces of Fajr Libya (Libya Dawn), which was formed in July 2014. They see the Libya Dawn and the Misratan forces as promoting a regional political Islam, which is not compatible with fundamental Tuareg values and aspirations, and which in any case is not strong enough to offset the third-force support behind the Tebu advance into the Ubari region.

They therefore see acceptance of support from the Misratans as ultimately resulting in the entry of the third force into Ubari.

The Qatari and Sant'Egidio interventions may lead to a temporary ceasefire, although there are so far few signs of one. The Tuareg see their only realistic salvation as a Libyan unity government following a successful outcome to the current peace process backed by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). >>>

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They do not want to become just another militia in a fragmented Libya, aspiring instead to be part of a professional official Libyan army, as they have always been, but with rights to their ancestral domain, which covers an approximate triangle between Ghadames in the north, Ghat in the south, and Ubari in the east.

They demand the right of ownership, protection and development of the region's natural resources (notably oil), political empowerment through the right to participate in decision making, and recognition of their cultural integrity. At present, the Tuareg perceive all these rights as being in the hands of others who are not expected to make concessions.

They therefore see the UN mission as their lifeline, but one whose effectiveness, if it comes, may still be some way off.

The Zintan-Tebu partnership

The Fezzan region of southern Libya remains unstable, insecure, and chaotic, and a key reason is the complex Zintan-Tebu partnership that currently provides both border and oil field guards. Most international maps of militia in Libya show the western Fezzan border with Algeria - from Ghadames down to Ghat - as in the hands of Tuareg militia. In theory that may be true, but not necessarily in practice.

Resisting the Zintanis

The Tuareg explanation of the current security situation on the border and around the oil

fields goes back, like almost everything in Libya these days, to the fall of **Muammar Qadhafi** in September 2011. At that time, the Zintanis saw their opportunity to control the region to their south and immediately sent brigades to protect the Algerian-Libyan border, the El Feel (Elephant) and El Sharara oil fields, and Ubari, where they tried to recruit Tuareg into their militia.

The Tuareg refused, however, preferring instead to be part of an official national army. They therefore fought the Zintanis, who were ousted from Ubari, and an official agreement to that effect was signed on 28 October 2011.

And the Misratans

The Misratans saw this rejection of the Zintanis as an opportunity to recruit Tuareg to their militia, but again the Tuareg wanted no part of that plan.

They saw all Libyan militias as emanating from Arab tribes in what was nothing but an Arab-Arab war for power and control over oil that the Tuareg saw as falling solidly within their own ancestral territory.

Control of the border

With the establishment of two governments in the north, the Zintanis and Tebu became allies, with the result that Tebu are now working with the Zintani brigades as both border and oil field guards along the Algerian border and at the Fezzan oil fields - a situation that is clearly unsustainable insofar as they are operating on Tuareg ancestral territory.

In practice, the extreme southern border of



FRENCH FORCES IN THE SAHEL CLAIM TO HAVE SECURED THE EXTREME SOUTHERN BORDER OF LIBYA

Libya from west of San Salvador to the Ghat region is still wide open to both traffickers and jihadists, in spite of French forces in the Sahel belonging to Operation Barkhan claiming to have secured that sector.

In the northern sector, from Ghadames south to what is known locally as Alaatshan, roughly between In Amenas and Tarat, the Libyan side of the border is controlled by Zintani brigades now assisted by Tebu. Between Alaatshan and Ghat, the situation on the Libyan side of border is unclear, with the Algerian army, in practice, taking control of it.

Drug trafficking

With the Algerian side of the border now heavily reinforced since the In Amenas terrorist attack of January 2013 - which is believed to have been launched from Al Awaynat in Libya - the Libyan side of the border now appears to be little more than a conduit of drug traffickers and militant jihadists travelling from south to north for the most part.

The Zintani brigades are making little more than token gestures at stopping them and are perpetually releasing videos of drug hauls they

have allegedly intercepted and burned - but never with pictures of the traffickers they have supposedly captured.

In fact, guarding this area seems to have become a lucrative business, thanks largely to **Aghaly Alembo's** establishment of a major cocaine route from Niger through to Tripoli.

Jihadist movements and links

The question of jihadist movements through this region is not so clear. Many media reports and security analysts assert that the extreme southwest of Libya, especially in and around the Acacus mountains, is a thriving safe haven for jihadists, most of whom have fled French military intervention in northern Mali.

That may have been the case immediately after the start of the French intervention in early 2013, but since then, it seems that many extremists have either been dislodged or travelled north to join jihadist groups in Tunisia or northern Libya. Indeed, local people report that the old town of Ghadames has become a shelter for **al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)** fighters returning from Mali and on their way to the Djebel Chaambi area of Tunisia. >>>



THE RADISSON BLU HOTEL IN BAMAKO

The same sources report that this route is supported and protected by the Algerian **Département du renseignement et de la sécurité (DRS)**, which at least prior to its recent dismemberment was suspected by various Tunisian sources of trying to destabilise the new government.

Adding to the potential insecurity on the Libyan side of the Algerian-Libyan border are links between several Tuareg militia groups operating in the Ghadames-Ubari-Ghat triangle and known jihadists in Mali. For example, the head of one Tuareg brigade, **Cheikh Ahmed Omar al-Ansari**, is the first cousin of **Iyad Ag Ghali**, the leader of the **Ansar al-Din**, who is incriminated in the 19 November terrorist attack on the **Radisson Blu** hotel in Bamako.

Tuareg in Ubari deny emphatically that these

links are actively used to support jihadists. Nevertheless, the link has been identified and the question raised.

There is also the disconcerting question of possible **Islamic State** group (**IS**) incursions into Libya's troubled southwest. Although both **Menas** analysts and many local sources see the IS threat as overblown for political and other strategic reasons, it nevertheless remains.

Indeed, reports that Nigerians thought to be members of **Boko Haram** have travelled from Chad to Kufra allegedly in support of an anticipated IS attack on Ajdabiya, only add to the concern.

It all comes down to oil

Given all these potential insecurities, the big issue remains Fezzan's oil resources. If the goal

of the Tebu push into the Fezzan is to control its oil fields, presumably as a proxy force for French, Qatari, Algerian, or other interests, as the Tuareg maintain, the recent Qatari peace agreement is likely to come to naught. Fighting and increased instability are likely to be the order of the day.

If that is the case, it underscores the urgent need for a successful outcome to the UN-backed peace negotiations. On the score, however, neither the Zintanis nor Tebu are likely to have any interest in a unity government that will probably strip them of the substantial incomes and influence they have acquired from their incursions into the Fezzan.

The demise of the DRS

The main story coming out of Algeria over the last month is the extraordinary rate at which the top generals of the secret service **Département du renseignement et de la sécurité (DRS)** have been dismissed and rushed through secret military courts into prison sentences – as if due legal process were little more than a supermarket car wash.

The court sessions are being held behind

closed doors, with no defence witnesses, no journalists, no family members or any members of the public present, and without the specific charges being made public.

The process of dismantling the command structure of the DRS – effected by the new power axis of the **Abdelaziz Bouteflika** presidency and General **Gaïd Salah**, chief of the general staff and deputy defence minister – has been going on since mid-2013, some six months after the terrorist attack on the massive Tiguentourine gas facility near In Amenas.

The DRS command is being undermined either because of its failure in intelligence, which enabled the In Amenas attack or, as some are now more inclined to believe, because it colluded with the attackers in an operation that went disastrously wrong.

Either way, the regime's Western allies, notably the US, UK, and France were not impressed and are alleged to have demanded of Algeria that changes be made to an intelligence service that had become a state within the state and, as In Amenas demonstrated, thoroughly unreliable.

Dismissals at the top

The final stages of dismantlement began in late July with the dismissal of General **Ali Bendaoud**, head of the internal security service, and General **Djamel Medjdoub**, in charge of the President Bouteflika's security.

Then on 27 August, General **Abdelkader Aït Ouarabi**, known as General **Hassan** – who headed both the **Service de coordination** >>>

opérationnelle et de renseignement antiterroriste (SCORAT) counter-terrorism service and the DRS Special Intervention Forces – was arrested, charged, and detained. That was clearly the precursor for the dismissal on 13 September of DRS boss General **Mohamed 'Toufik' Mediène**.

General **Athmane Tartag** was named as Mediène's replacement, evidently to help clear out the rest of the DRS top brass and put it behind bars. Tartag knows his way around the DRS and its files; he had earlier been Mediène's deputy but was dismissed in the wake of In Amenas and of Mediène's discovery that Tartag's son was involved in corrupt business dealings with the president's younger brother and gatekeeper, **Saïd Bouteflika**.

Saïd immediately took Tartag into the presidency as the president's security adviser, before arranging for him to take over from Mediène at the DRS.

Let the trials begin

With Mediène out of the way, the summary court trials began. The outspoken General **Hocine Benhadid**, merely a critic of the president, was given a one-year sentence for destroying the morale of the army. On 26 November, General Hassan was whisked through a secret military court and given five years' imprisonment.

Four days later, on 30 November, General Medjdoub was rushed at such short notice through a Constantine military court and sentenced to three years' imprisonment on unknown charges that most of the press were

unaware of the proceedings and did not report on the case until 3 December.

As *Sahara Focus* went to press, the infamous Colonel **Abdelkader 'Fawzi' Lounis**, dismissed as the DRS media and propaganda chief two and a half years ago, had been charged with offences that could see him get at least 20 years in prison.

The latest speculation is that General **M'henna Djebbar**, who was dismissed as head of the Directorate for Army Security (DCSA) back in 2013, is next in line for what is becoming an almost Stalinist procedure, while the question of whether even General Mediène might find himself behind bars can no longer be written off as a joke.

The story is, of course, a national issue and is being covered in detail in **Menas Associates *Algeria Politics and Security*** and ***Algeria Focus***. Nevertheless, this demise of the DRS is likely to have widespread regional ramifications through the rest of the Maghreb and Sahel – and perhaps even farther afield.

The long reach of the DRS

The big question is whether Mediène and his senior colleagues are being punished in what is unlikely to be the last act in a vendetta between the Bouteflika and Mediène clans, or whether we are seeing a complete restructuring of the fundamental nature and function of the DRS.

The answer will have major repercussions for all Algeria's neighbours because the DRS not only appointed and controlled most of



THE ATLAS ASNI HOTEL IN MARRAKESH WAS ATTACKED IN 1994

the diplomatic services in those countries, especially in the Sahel, but it was associated with almost every militant, jihadist, and criminal network from one side of the Sahara to the other.

Many terrorist acts across the region – the attack on the **Atlas Asni Hotel** in Marrakesh in 1994 that led to the closure of the Algerian-Moroccan border, the kidnap and murder of Tibherine monks in 1996, the kidnap of 32 European tourists in the Sahara in 2003, the more recent attack on In Amenas in 2013, and many more such incidents – have been linked to the DRS in one way or another.

Similarly, the DRS has been involved in protecting and taking a cut from the more high value trans-Saharan and other cross-border trafficking networks.

Paying attention to the homefront

Neighbouring countries will therefore wonder whether the new DRS will withdraw from some or all of these activities or continue its old ways. The early signs suggest a bit of both. Although the DRS leadership has been decapitated, most of its operational

directorates and units have simply transferred to the army high command.

That means Gaid Salah now has power unparalleled in the history of Algeria, in that he has notional control of the political, administrative, and operational power of both the intelligence services and the conventional forces.

With Algeria facing a deepening internal political crisis, however, it is already evident that these same units are being used to increase the already massive repressive powers of the regime.

The concerns of any new DRS structure or structures are likely to be predominantly domestic in the immediate future, meaning fewer resources going towards the infiltration and management of extremist and criminal groups, which have done so much to destabilise neighbouring countries in the past.

Regional developments over the next few months will probably offer clues to the extent to which Algeria's neighbours may or may not find themselves freed from the damaging meddling in their affairs.



PATCH BARRACKS NEAR STUTTART, GERMANY SERVES AS THE EUROPEAN COMMAND CENTRE OF USSOCOM

US boosts Tunisian cooperation

Although the US has never said anything publicly, it is generally known that Washington was highly displeased by the terrorist attack on In Amenas in January 2013. Since then, there has been a noticeable and on-going shift in US military links to Tunisia, seemingly at the expense of Algeria.

This trend is accompanied by an ever more important role in the US North African intelligence set-up for the US embassy in Tunisia. The latest development is that the US Defense Information Service Agency (DISA), which runs the IT infrastructure of the US armed forces, is reportedly planning to rent fast, secure Internet connections to

link the embassy to three US military bases in Europe. These are the US Navy bases in Sigonella and Capodichino in Italy and, above all, Patch Barracks near Stuttgart, Germany.

Patch Barracks are home to the National Security Agency's biggest European operation, which has responsibility for telecommunications interception and serves as the European command centre of the Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).

This development suggests that the centre of gravity of US North African military, and perhaps also counter-terrorist, operations from Algeria to Tunisia is shifting – almost certainly as a result of increasingly trying relations with the Algerian regime and its unreliable **Département du renseignement et de la sécurité (DRS)**.

MAURITANIA

Headlines for the wrong reasons

President **Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz** has put both himself and Mauritania into the global news headlines last month, for all the wrong reasons. On 28 November, the president became the first head of state to order a football referee to end a match and go straight to a penalty shootout.

According to the worldwide media reports, the president apparently got bored with the pace of the match he was attending, which was tied at 1-1, and so ordered it to be ended. It is perhaps a blessing that Mauritania is not a cricket-playing nation.

The match was Mauritania's Super Cup Final, being played between FC Teveragh-Zeina and ACS Ksar in Nouadhibou. Teveragh-Zeina won the shootout and lifted the trophy, leaving Mauritanian football fans in a state of uproar and ACS Ksar demanding a rematch.

Almost immediately, the head of the Mauritanian football federation, quoted in different media outlets as being either **Ahmed Ould Abderrahmane** or **Ahmed Ould Yahya**, issued a statement: 'I deny in the strongest terms the intervention of the President of the Republic. The decision was made due to organizational issues in accordance with the presidents and the coaches of the two teams.'

An alternative account of the incident, which

has not been widely broadcast and which might even be the truth, is that the president had an overly demanding schedule. The match was being held on Independence Day as part of the country's celebrations. Abdel Aziz and his spin doctors had hoped to score a PR victory by hosting the match and celebrations to coincide with the important visit of a group of French senators and journalists.

The main message the president and his advisers had hoped to get across was that although Mauritania may be economically in dire straits, Abdel Aziz has been doing a good job of keeping Islamic terrorism at bay.

Somehow, with the official military parade, the Independence Day celebrations, a celebratory meal for his French visitors, and the football match, both time and daylight were apparently running out. The solution was to cut short the match.

According to French media reports, the senators enjoyed their visit. They should have done, as they too shared in the global headlines. And to cap it, they were brought back to Paris on board the presidential plane taking Abdel Aziz to the COP 21 climate change conference.

Falling commodity revenues

While the truncated football match has been making headlines, a far more serious story is slowly unfolding.

The falling prices of commodities, the mainstay of the Mauritanian economy, are backing the country into a corner. Western powers see Mauritania's vast ungoverned spaces >>>

as strategically important locations in the fight against terrorism and have encouraged President Abdel Aziz to spend heavily on military and defence.

Since coming to power on the back of a coup d'état, Abdel Aziz has been doing just that: keeping defence spending, particularly military salaries, high. But with some 70% of Mauritanian export revenues coming from iron ore and the rest of the mining sector, the economy is deteriorating.

Mauritania needs an iron ore price of over US\$100 a tonne for its mining to be profitable, but by the end of November, ore was trading at US\$43.89 a tonne, compared to a record high of US\$190 a tonne in February 2011. The gold mining sector, in which **Kinross** has laid off 20% of its Tasiast mine as a result of the 30% drop in gold prices since 2012, faces similar difficulties.

The risk of a coup

The latest outlook brief from London-based risk analysts **PGI Intelligence** highlights Mauritania's vulnerability. It sees the current prolonged loss of mining revenues as having potentially destabilising consequences for a weak and fractious political system. The military has a long history of intervening in politics, largely by way of coups d'état, as in 2005 and 2008. So far, Abdel Aziz has been able to maintain civil-military relations in a delicate balance by keeping close allies in senior ranks and maintaining high defence spending.

Now, analysts consider that the weakness of the economy gives him 'less flexibility to

co-opt potential rivals within the military, increasing the possibility of a coup as his opponents attempt to exploit tensions relating to the succession process.'

PGI Intelligence's assessment puts the risk of a coup within the next four years at 'moderate.' Given Mauritania's penchant for changing governments by this means rather than at the ballot box, that conclusion seems conservative.

Economy in brief

A five-star first

The Mauritanian economy may be heading for hard times but not enough to stop the authorities from commissioning the country's first five-star hotel, in Nouakchott. President **Abdel Aziz** laid the cornerstone during Independence Day celebrations.

The new **Sheraton Hotel Nouakchott** belongs to the **Société nationale industrielle et minière (SNIM)**, or National Industrial and Mining Company) and is being financed up to US\$60 million in partnership with the Sheraton global hotel chain.

The expected opening date has not been announced, but it is part of Nouakchott's modernisation programme. The six-floor building will have 127 rooms, a presidential suite, 12 VIP suites, 20 ordinary suites, 39 meeting rooms, and two concert halls capable of accommodating up to 700 guests. It will also feature a swimming pool, two tennis courts, a garden, and a car park.

Wind energy plant commissioned

President **Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz** presided over the commissioning of a 30 MW wind energy plant in Nouakchott on 24 November, giving Mauritania a new source of what Energy Minister **Mohamed Salem Ould Bechir** called 'clean, safe, and affordable energy production.'

The plant - which is made up of 15 wind turbines of 2 MW each, a monitoring and control system, a voltage transformer of 33 kV, and two medium voltage lines of 33 kV each - will contribute up to 13.6% of national power needs in 2016. The project, estimated to cost US\$51 million, was jointly funded by Mauritania and the **Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD)**.

Sterling buys a stake

Sterling Energy confirmed on 30 November that it had completed the acquisition of a 13.5% working interest in the production-sharing contract for Mauritania's offshore block C-10.

The stakeholders are now **Tullow** (the operator) with 76.5%, Sterling with 13.5%, and **Société mauritanienne des hydrocarbures et de patrimoine minier (SMHPM)** with 10%.

Sterling has said that the joint venture expects to drill an exploration well to test this prospect in 2017 and that given market conditions, the gross cost of the well is likely to be substantially less than the US\$77 million (US\$11.55 million net to Sterling Energy) initially budgeted.

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WESTERN SAHEL

Terrorist recruitment

UN Special Envoy for the Sahel **Hiroute Guebre Sellassie** gave a grim warning to the UN Security Council at the end of November, saying that 41 million people under the age of 25 in the Sahel - Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger - 'face hopelessness' and that the 'the region will become a recruiting hub for terrorist organisations.'

She noted that 44% of children in the region lack access to primary education and only 36% of the population can read or write. 'If nothing is done to increase education, employment, and other opportunities for youths,' she said, the Sahel 'will become a hub of mass migration, and of recruitment and training of terrorist groups and individuals.'

Sellassie explained the region's governments 'are being forced to spend a significant percentage of their budgets on growing security threats, leaving little money for issues affecting young people.' The problem, said Sellassie, 'was compounded by drug traffickers increasingly colluding with armed groups and terrorist movements who grant them safe passage in exchange for money.'

All of what Sellassie said is depressingly true, but she did not mention an even more serious problem - namely that there is a high level of collusion between drug traffickers and regional business and political elites, including presidents and senior members of the security »»»



UN SPECIAL ENVOY FOR THE SAHEL HIROUTE GUEBRE SELASSIE GAVE A GRIM WARNING TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

forces. Nor that such collusion has also long extended to some of the 'terrorist movements.'

Whose hand is up?

News of a terrorist attack on the **Radisson Blu** hotel in Bamako on the morning of 20 November broke just before last month's *Sahara Focus* was published. A month later, the incident is not much clearer. The following is what is known:

Twenty-two people, including gunmen, died. The attack carried none of the hallmarks of a professional terrorist organisation.

Security at the hotel was woefully negligent. Mali was not geared up to face such an attack despite years of warnings and the fact that the Radisson Blu was probably the biggest target in the entire Sahel.

In addition to an average of at least one militant jihadist attack per week somewhere in the country, five people, including two Europeans, were killed at a popular restaurant

in Bamako on 7 March, while 12 people died in a hotel siege in the central town of Sevaré on 8 August. Why then was security at the Radisson Blu almost non-existent?

The 20 people who were killed, in addition to the two gunmen, were as follows:

- > six Malians, including one gendarme and three hotel workers
- > six Russian employees of **Volga-Dnepr Airlines**
- > three Chinese executives from the state-owned **China Railway Construction Corporation**
- > two Belgians
- > one US aid worker
- > one Israeli
- > one Senegalese
- > one Lebanese hotel employee
- > one Burkinabe hotel employee.

Within a few hours, a Twitter message said that the **al-Murabitoune** group, 'helped by **AQIM**,' was responsible. It seems most likely that the attack had no connection to the **Islamic State (IS)** group or to the previous week's Paris attacks. It was almost certainly

put together locally and mostly likely carried out by members of the **Force de libération du Macina (FLM)**, or Macina Liberation Front).

Statements later issued by **Al Jazeera** and the **Mauritanian Al Akhbar** on-line news service both gave the identities of the two dead gunmen as **Abdelhakim al-Ansari** and **Moez al-Ansari**, with the name 'al-Ansari' being an indigenous or local fighter. Two of three suspected accomplices sought by the police were arrested after a few days and identified as **Adama Maïga** and **Seidou Diepkilé**, who are both residents of the Bamako area.

Everyone wants to take credit

The claim by al-Murabitoune has still not been verified but is unlikely to be true because **Mokhtar ben Mokhtar (MBM)** may well have been killed at Gao in May 2012 – a year or so before he allegedly founded the group in August 2013. The name Murabitoune has become little more than a franchise for many small groups of fighters emerging out of the nexus of **Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'ouest (MUJAO)** and **al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)** after it was scattered by the French military intervention in the region in early 2013.

At least three other groups have since claimed responsibility for the attack. Al-Murabitoune claimed that AQIM had participated with it, and on 22 November, the FLM claimed responsibility, saying that it had undertaken the attack in collaboration with **Ansar al-Din**. It noted that besides the two gunmen killed in the hotel were 'three others who had got away safe and sound.'

On 4 December, alleged AQIM leader **Abdelmalek Droukdel** issued an audio recording confirming his shared responsibility for the attack, which he said, was conducted jointly by AQIM with al-Murabitoune, led by MBM. Droukdel gave the impression of having just got around to reading the previous month's newspapers and thinking it was an opportunity.

The FLM leader is **Hamadoun Kufa Diallo**, a fiery Fulani (Peul) preacher who is known throughout much of central Mali and the Niger Bend region for his virulent sermons. He is also known to be a close contact of **Iyad Ag Ghali**, the Tuareg leader of **Ansar al-Din**, which claims to have collaborated with FLM in the attack.

Kufa is known to have participated in the fighting against the Malian army in and around Konna in January 2013. He reappeared on the scene in January 2015 as leader of the FLM, a small group of extremists responsible for >>>





AT THE END OF NOVEMBER, THREE UN SOLDIERS WERE KILLED IN A ROCKET ATTACK ON THEIR BASE IN KIDAL

a number of attacks during 2015, mostly on police posts, throughout central Mali and as far south as the borders with Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

The amateurish nature of the attack, involving only two gunmen and showing no evidence of any planning or research into possible high-value targets in the hotel, suggests it may have been carried out in haste, possibly in retaliation for a reported Malian army assault on the FLM earlier in the week, which had resulted in the capture of its alleged financier, **Allaye Bocari Dia**, and six to eight other members of the group.

Violence continues in Mali

Mali continues to be subject a wide range of destabilising violence, with both UN soldiers and civilians being attacked and killed.

UN soldiers killed

At the end of November, three UN soldiers were killed in a rocket attack on their base in Kidal,

bringing the number of UN peacekeepers killed in Mali to 56. Reports on the number injured, some seriously, vary between 14 and 20.

Hamadou Ag Khallini, a spokesperson for the jihadist group **Ansar al-Din**, telephoned **Agence France Press** to claim responsibility for the attack: 'We claim responsibility in the name of all mujahedeen for the attack against Kidal camp as a response to the violation of our lands by the enemies of Islam.'

In the last two years, Ansar al-Din leader **Iyad Ag Ghali** has frequently denounced the presence of French and other foreign troops in Mali and the Sahel, exhorting his followers to launch a jihad against them. Addressing himself especially to young people, Iyad has urged them to respond to this offence by the infidels with suicide belts, remote-controlled charges, and IEDs.

Questions continue to be raised about why Iyad, an internationally recognised and wanted terrorist, is still able to travel about Mali and the wider region with such apparent ease.

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Migrants attacked

The day after the attack on the UN camp, a truck carrying more than 30 migrants from Gao to Algeria was attacked by bandits between Tabankort and Anefis. Four armed men, on two motorcycles, shot first at the truck's tyres and then the passengers, killing four and wounding six. The attackers then fled.

The dead were buried on site and the wounded flown to Gao by helicopter. Three of the dead were Malians, the fourth a Guinean. The truck was carrying Malians, Guineans, Nigerians, Nigerians, and other West African nationals.

AQIM in Timbuktu

Berabiche tribesmen received shock at a tribal reunion in Timbuktu over 25-27 November when **Abu Talha**, a local **al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)** fighter from Ber, showed up to announce that he was leading a mixed brigade of jihadist fighters in the region and claimed responsibility for many of the recent attacks in and around Timbuktu.

The purpose of Talha's appearance was to prove to his fellow tribesman that France has not weakened AQIM. He declared that his fighters were doing well and would continue their fight to prove the unbelievers wrong, and then showed his audience pictures to prove it.

His campaign is proving successful. Overwhelmed by continued terrorist attacks around the region, local people are beginning to question the effectiveness of the patrols by various security forces and, above all, the impact of the French intervention.

EASTERN SAHEL

Boko Haram fights on

Chad continues to suffer from the northwards insurgency of **Boko Haram**. The worst incidents in the last month were three suicide bombings at a weekly market on the island of Koufoua island on the Lake Chad. A reported 27 people were killed and at least 80 others were wounded. According to police, three women were responsible.

Meanwhile, unverified reports from Libya suggest that Boko Haram fighters from Nigeria may be transiting through Chad to join up with and support **Islamic State (IS)** fighters in Libya.

Surgery for Déby

Originally scheduled to be in Paris on 30 November for the COP 21 climate change summit, President **Idris Déby** of Chad arrived several days early accompanied by son, **Zakaria Déby**, so that he could undergo surgery at the American Hospital in Neuilly, where he stayed for several days up to 26 November.

Diplomatic sources say Déby was admitted for an operation, but no details were given other than a comment from his entourage that it was a 'routine check' and that it 'went well.' Apparently, Déby regularly visits the hospital for check-ups. Observers at the Sahel G5 summit in N'Djamena the previous week had commented that he looked tired.