

From Security Solutions to Political Resolution: The Innovative Algerian Counterterrorism Approach

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Nov 30, 2016

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Brief Analysis

In the war on terrorism, intelligence gathering is integral for any and all counterterrorism policies and/or operations. The effectiveness of this apparatus, however, is based largely on the sustained coordination of military, police, and judicial sectors of law-enforcement.

With the constant threat of al Qaeda looming domestically, Algeria has increased its level of international counterterrorism cooperation, gaining experience in handling terrorist networks internationally and locally. More importantly, Algeria has attained a special level of wisdom when dealing with these networks, advocating against military intervention in neighboring Mali and Libya. Algeria itself is home to a Tuareg population in its South, and Malian Tuareg separatism may encourage further separatist sentiments in the Sahel region, affecting the territorial integrity of a number of states besides Algeria.

Algeria thus called for a diplomatic solution to the Tuareg question in Mali, and urged action to isolate the two Tuareg formations from the two terrorist organizations, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Tawhid wa-l-Jihad Group. Such an action would have achieved two goals: addressing Tuareg demands and gaining new allies in the fight against terrorist groups, which have controlled two thirds of the Tuareg majority Azawad region of Mali.

Despite this advice, France, with US support, intervened militarily in Mali, which resulted in a new security problem. The intervention forced Algeria to re-assess its security policy along the Mali border, which was rife with refugees, organized crime, terrorist infiltration, and potential violence. The intervention in Libya had a clear impact on Algeria as well, where we saw an increased proliferation of contraband weapon trade and smuggling, and the transformation of its Eastern border into a major security threat.

Algeria's main reason for opposing intervention in Libya was that security personnel lacked the authority to conduct their own missions. For example, a routine security operation may degenerate into an armed conflict with potential victims; and the blame would invariably be assigned to the security officers, who may thus suffer retribution. As a result, many Libyan officers abstain from action even when faced with blatant security transgressions. Furthermore, the High Security Commission was doomed to failure when Qadhafi loyalists joined it and former military officers rejected it, while some of its members refused to integrate into the police force, deeming it a relic of the defunct regime.

Ultimately, the interventions justified Algerian fears as it saw an increase in AQIM operations in the south, culminating in the takeover of Tigantourine, the largest natural gas plant near the Southern Algerian town of In Amenas. Fortunately, the Special Forces of the Algerian National Popular Army succeeded in retaking the plant, freeing many hostages, and eradicating the terrorists, avoiding a potential economic crisis from the terrorist action.

Instability along Algeria's southern and eastern borders has clearly increased its exposure to terrorism, smuggling, and illegal immigration. The most ominous development was the convergence of human trafficking with terrorist networks – and it was clear that this development could not be handled unilaterally. Algeria has therefore pursued a multilateral approach through bilateral arrangements with Libya and Tunisia. While coordinating its border patrol operations with Tunisia, Algeria has provided assistance to the Libyan government in rebuilding its security apparatus while rejecting any engagement with Libyan militias.

Interventions have thus resulted in failed states near Algeria, threatening its security and raising both its national security concerns and its defense and security budget (to USD 20 Billion in 2014, up from USD 15 billion in 2013). While fitting these new circumstances, this large allocation, intended for defensive purposes and for upgrading weapon systems, together with Algeria's success in breaking an undeclared state of siege to which it has been subjected, were viewed by some states as directed against them.

Algeria has thus demonstrated its commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and its rejection of any external role for its military (as proven by its refusal to join the Mali operation). It is poised to continue its counterterrorism policy at the regional level in a multilateral framework consistent with the principle of non-interference. Thus, Algeria should be studied as a successful model of both socioeconomic-oriented counterterrorism and non-interventionist politics.

Algeria's Counterterrorism: Local and International

Algeria makes a clear distinction between domestic terrorism, which operates largely in its northern region, and AQIM, with its international criminal character. Moreover, Algeria, much like Tunisia, expresses increased concern about militants returning from Syria and Iraq, bolstered by their memory of the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1992. Even the United Nations has expressed its fear of this widespread strife in the Middle East, while US and European intelligence officers warn of a new terror threat coming from Western militants returning from Syria.

Algeria has curtailed domestic terrorism, displacing these groups beyond the Algerian borders, on account of the precarious regional conditions – lawlessness, poverty, and armed conflict. Subsequently, Algeria has deployed diplomatic efforts while remaining guided by the imperative of its national interest and the principles of international law.

In the Sahel, which constitutes its immediate vicinity, Algeria has acted as the central continental power, always opting for the diplomatic path and avoiding any military approaches in addressing pan-African issues such as terrorism. Algeria has also sought to convince the international community to suppress terrorist funding and criminalize ransom payments. These efforts succeeded in December 2009, when UN Security Council enacted Decision 1904 prohibiting ransom payment, as a supplement to Decisions 1373 and 1267 on terror financing.

At the local level, the first step in combating terrorism was the Civil Entente law, followed by the Peace and National Reconciliation compact. In assessing the efficacy of these political actions in achieving security, it is worth noting first that criticism is restricted, as enacted in Article 46 of associated Executive Decrees. The Algerian government considers the compulsory and bounded nature of the Peace and National Reconciliation compact a necessity to safeguard the achievement of civil peace against attempts at sedition and conflict. This has been stressed by President Bouteflika's statement that he "will not put Algeria's interest in the hands of those who have decided to undermine the security and hopes of the Algerian people."

National Reconciliation has been relatively successful in achieving its anticipated aims; civil peace has been restored in accordance with the stated conditions, ending the decade-long civil war that had plagued the Algerian people. But the increase in oil revenue has been one of the most important factors of National Reconciliation since 1999 as it has given President Bouteflika leverage, winning the support of leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, and even in exile (Anouar Haddam in the United States), including the prominent figure Rabeh Kebir. These leaders have endorsed National Reconciliation as a necessary and responsible step to restore civil peace, and have committed to aid its success by calling on insurgents to return from the mountains and surrender their weapons. Indeed, the general pace of violent operations has slowed across Algeria, and many of the leaders of the Islamic Armed Group (GIA) have retreated.

Through painful sacrifice and careful security efforts, the Algerian people have regained their citizenship: law and order has been restored, strides have been achieved in political and economic life, and solidarity has been revived across the various layers of society. Algeria has endeavored to formulate a comprehensive strategy for Africa to be carried by African states alone – as a primary means to interdict foreign intervention in the continent under the pretext of fighting terrorism. In all its diplomatic and military efforts at combating terrorism at the African level, Algeria has sought to stress the principle of the “Africanization of solutions” over foreign intervention.

The military approach in combating terrorism has proven counter-productive. Algeria today is a world-renowned state pioneering effective counterterrorism. Previously, for about a decade, Algeria had sought to eradicate terrorism by military might, further aggravating the problem, and driving the country closer towards foreign intervention to address the situation. Through a shift in strategy—namely, the adoption of peaceful, socioeconomic means—Algeria has achieved positive results, underlining the superiority of political resolution over security solutions. ❖

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