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THE EU, ALGERIA AND THE NORTHERN MALI QUESTION

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SUMMARY

Relations between the EU and Algeria have always been dominated by the bilateral ties that Algeria has with a cluster of member states, most notably France, based on strong energy and security, and historical links. In early 2012, when the EU appeared to be in the ascendant, it offered Algeria support for growth and enterprise in exchange for the promise of political reform. However, the violent Islamist takeover in northern Mali has turned the EU into the demandeur in the relationship and could put the progress made earlier this year in jeopardy. France and the United States firmly back a UN-mandated African intervention in Mali. But Algeria, which is viewed as a crucial partner, is reluctant to support intervention because it fears that this could increase instability in its immediate neighbourhood.

To keep Algeria engaged with the EU, member states should pool their resources in a joint European approach. European leaders should be more present and visible in Algiers and pursue the European interest as well as their own national interests. In particular, they should work with European businesses to encourage Algeria to reduce red tape and tackle corruption in order to diversify its economy and increase inward investment. Senior CSDP officials should also work to build trust and to manage Algerian concerns about spillover from instability in northern Mali.

Algeria – whose immediate neighbours include Libya, Tunisia, and Mali – has been notable in its region in recent years for its apparent lack of unrest. However, the limited nature of protests in Algiers at the beginning of 2011 belied a restive population that is frustrated with an aging and ineffective regime, and a socio-economic deal in which the proceeds from exporting oil and gas are invested only sporadically in public goods, such as housing, in order to buy social peace. Algeria is still the “insecure regime in an unstable neighbourhood” as it was last year.¹

However, while the regime remains insecure, the neighbourhood has become dramatically less stable as northern Mali has come under Islamist control. After a decade of internal armed conflict in the 1990s between Islamist groups and the military-backed government in Algeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika promised to keep Islamists out of power. After the trauma of a decade of conflict, the Algerian population largely accepted this, even when it came at the expense of political and personal freedoms. But with Islamist-dominated governments now in power in three of its neighbouring countries, the Algerian government’s worst fears about the Arab Awakening appear to be coming to life.

¹ Hakim Darbouche and Susi Dennison, “A Reset with Algeria: the Russia to the EU’s South”, European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2011, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR46_ALGERIA_BRIEF_AW.pdf (hereafter Darbouche and Dennison, “A Reset with Algeria”).

Last year, based on the increasing sense of isolation and the socio-economic challenges that Algeria faced, we called for a “reset” in EU–Algeria relations.² We recommended that the EU flesh out the purely transactional relationship that had developed between Algeria and member states – most notably France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, as clients of its energy resources – and create a more strategic partnership.³ Such a “reset”, we argued, would increase the EU’s ability to influence the course of domestic events in Algeria, using engagement to support economic modernisation and spread the rule of law. Over the longer term, once a more functional relationship had been established, the EU could push harder for political reform in Algeria. This memo reassesses this proposed strategy a year on, in light of the increased tensions in the region and the European and Algerian responses to them.

Mali and the EU–Algeria relationship

In the first months of 2012, EU–Algeria ties developed quite constructively. In May 2012, the EU was for the first time invited to deploy a mission in Algeria to observe the legislative elections. Many groups within the country reported serious concerns about fraud in the elections, which the government strenuously denied. The EU election observation mission was lenient in its assessment, but it did make a series of recommendations, the majority of which the Algerian government accepted.⁴ So while the conduct and response to the elections were far from perfect – and again in the municipal elections held last week the opposition reported multiple examples of fraud – Algeria for the first time accepted the EU as a partner in a gradual process of democratic development.

Co-operation at a technical level also expanded considerably, with Algeria becoming the biggest single user of the EU’s twinning instrument, offering support and training for the development of different sectors in Algeria, from national experts in EU member states. And after years of procrastination since the entry into force of the EU–Algeria Association Agreement in 2005, Algeria has begun negotiations on an Action Plan on domestic reform under the EU’s new Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Although these were all small steps, with a focus on process to begin with, they were promising signs that Algeria was taking the EU more seriously. It seemed that, over the long term, one of the goals of the new neighbourhood policy – strengthened relationships to enable effective spending of aid linked to genuine political reform – might be achievable with Algeria.

However, in the spring of 2012, Islamists took over northern Mali. The takeover began with a rebellion by the Tuareg, led by the secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) but with Islamist support, but control subsequently moved largely into the hands of the Islamist faction Ansar Dine. This has dramatically changed the relationship between the EU and Algeria. Relations with Algeria were already complex: Algeria was a key supplier of gas and oil to EU member states but also perhaps the most reluctant reformer in a North Africa undergoing a historical wave of political change. Now, as Mali has descended into turmoil, Algeria has also been launched into the position of being a key actor in a potential security operation in which EU member states have a very strong interest.

The situation in Mali is not static. The United Nations estimates that fighting in the north has displaced almost 400,000 people in 2012 and that millions of people in the region face diminishing food supplies as a result of the conflict.⁵ Week by week, there are reports of towns passing in or out of control of different Islamist factions. Since late November, Burkina Faso has been mediating in talks between Malian officials, the MNLA, and Ansar Dine, with a view to coming to an arrangement allowing the north of the country greater autonomy in return for an end to the violence. On 5 December, it was reported that tentative agreement to a ceasefire had been reached, although ECOWAS expressed concerns about the likelihood of this holding. In the meantime, with northern Mali largely under Islamist control, the implementation of sharia law spreading through large parts of the territory, and the state institutions in Bamako pushed to their limits, some kind of response will likely be needed to break the control of the terrorist groups.

UN Resolution 2071, in October 2012, mandated the development of military plans to recover the occupied northern territory of Mali. The resolution called on the government of Mali, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and regional partners to work together to develop a proposal for both the military intervention and transitional phases of this process within 45 days. Under the ECOWAS intervention plan, 3,300 African troops would support the government and army in Bamako. It has now been signed off by the African Union and, despite UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underlining in November that use of force must be an absolute last resort, is expected to be approved by the UN Security Council by the end of the year, unless the negotiations inspire greater confidence in a peaceful solution before then.⁶ Alongside the ECOWAS plan, the EU is drawing up plans for a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission to train and equip Malian troops with a view to retaking the north of

² Darbouche and Dennison, “A Reset with Algeria”.

³ For more on the energy relationship between the EU and Algeria, see also Nick Witney and Anthony Dworkin, “A Power Audit of EU–North Africa Relations”, European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2012, available at http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR62_NAPA_REPORT.pdf (hereafter Witney and Dworkin, “A Power Audit of EU–North Africa Relations”).

⁴ “Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following her meeting with Algerian President Bouteflika, Algiers, 6 November 2012”, available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/133320.pdf.

⁵ “ECHO factsheet: Mali crises 2012”, European Commission, November 2012, available at http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/mali_en.pdf.

⁶ “ECOWAS agrees to Mali intervention force”, *Al Jazeera*, 11 November 2012, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/11/20121111192710305682.html>.

the country.⁷ The foreign and defence ministers of France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Spain issued an endorsement of this initiative on 15 November 2012 and the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) gave agreement to it in principle on 19 November 2012.⁸

Given its proximity to the situation in Mali (the two countries share a border of more than 1,000 km) and its historic fear about Islamist-dominated government, Algeria might have been expected to support an international effort to stabilise the situation. In fact, however, they have done the opposite. Algeria's experience in tackling armed Islamist groups from its years of internal civil conflict and its direct intelligence on the Islamist groups involved in the takeover of northern Mali (which have strong links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)), make it a crucial partner for any prospective operation in Mali.⁹ However, since March, Algeria has expressed great reluctance to put its resources at the disposal of intervention planning and only coolly welcomed the UN resolution in October.

Theories about the Algerian government's reluctance to support an intervention in northern Mali abound. Some suggest it sees Ansar Dine as a more palatable option to the separatist MNLA controlling territory adjacent to Algeria; others argue that some instability in the area works in Algeria's favour as it excludes the feasibility of Mali exploiting oil sites in its north; others still say that Algeria fears that the involvement of its armed forces in any military operation would expose its relative weakness. What is certainly true is that the Algerian government is extremely nervous about the spillover effects of the takeover in northern Mali. Already, thousands of refugees have reportedly crossed the border into Algeria and there is a fear (based in part on last year's intervention in Libya) that refugee inflows could increase dramatically along with heightened terrorist activity in southern Algeria.¹⁰ The recent statement from the Algerian government that it "will take the necessary measures to guarantee the protection of its borders at the highest possible level" confirms this worry.¹¹

Algeria would be even more concerned if external – and in particular French – forces were to play a role in any intervention. Algeria's aversion to Western interference was central to its opposition to the idea of intervention in Libya and in Syria, where it has tried to cut across Turkish

and European efforts to isolate Iran by indicating support for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's backing of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad.¹² Even though current discussions about supporting intervention at the EU and UN level do not involve sending troops but rather supporting a Malian and ECOWAS-led intervention with training and intelligence, Algeria would prefer, if at all possible, to find a diplomatic solution to the situation in northern Mali without recourse to intervention.¹³ A delegation from Ansar Dine arrived in Algiers on 4 November for talks. Shortly after that, Ansar Dine began to issue statements on their willingness to hold elections, limit the coverage of sharia law in the territory, and other possible concessions.¹⁴ However, as the weeks pass, there are still reports of the implementation of extreme forms of sharia law spreading further into the region.¹⁵

Efforts to court Algeria

The diplomatic pressure that Algeria has come under to support the international community's efforts to resolve the situation in northern Mali has subtly shifted the balance of power within the EU–Algeria relationship in Algiers's favour. The driving forces behind international attention on the Mali question since the summer have been France and the US. Both countries have made efforts to court Algeria. But although they share an interest in avoiding the potential contamination effects of an Islamist-led state of Azawad in the north of Mali, they have taken different approaches.

Since François Hollande took over as French president in May 2012, Algeria has enjoyed considerable attention from the French government. A series of ministers has come through Algiers to prepare for Hollande's state visit to Algeria in December 2012.¹⁶ These visits have been accompanied by a series of significant statements from French politicians about the vexed French–Algerian relationship, which have been criticised by some at home but are likely to have won Hollande some sympathy in Algiers. In perhaps the most significant of these statements, Hollande for the first time acknowledged the attacks by French police on Algerians who protested in Paris during the war of independence: "On October 17th 1961, Algerians who were protesting for their right of independence, were killed in a brutal repression... Fifty-one years after this tragedy, I pay tribute to the memory of the victims."¹⁷

7 Foreign Affairs Council conclusions, Brussels, 19 November 2012, available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/133604.pdf.

8 "Meeting of the Foreign Affairs Ministers and Ministers of Defence of France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain", Paris, 15 November 2012, available at http://www.diplomatique.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/121114_Outcome_proposal_Final_cle821c1b.pdf.

9 For analysis on these links, see Anouar Boukhars, "The Paranoid Neighbour: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2012, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/10/22/paranoid-neighbor-algeria-and-conflict-in-mali/e4kt>, which traces the origins of Ansar Dine and its affiliation to AQIM back to Algerian government efforts to dissolve its parent organisation, the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat).

10 Beatrice Khadige, "Algeria may accept Mali intervention", *Morocco Tomorrow*, November 2012, available at <http://www.moroccotomorrow.org/algeria-may-accept-mali-intervention/>.

11 Amar Belani, Algerian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, in interview with *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 14 November 2012, available at <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12405&article=704304&featghjture>.

12 Sinem Cengiz, "Turkey unnerved by Iran, Algeria deal on Syria", *Today's Zaman*, 9 September 2012, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-291763-turkey-unnerved-by-iran-algeria-deal-on-syria.html>.

13 "UN seeks Mali dialogue as AU endorses military action", *Daily Nation*, 14 November 2012, available at <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/africa/UN-seeks-Mali-dialogue-as-AU-endorses-military-action/-/1066/1619632/-/exwku9z/-/index.html>.

14 Hassan Moali, "Négociations à Alger sur le Nord-Mali: Ançar Eddine lâcherait AQMI", *El Watan*, 4 November 2012, available at http://www.elwatan.com/international/negociations-a-alger-sur-le-nord-mali-ancar-eddine-lacherait-aqmi-04-11-2012-191058_112.php.

15 Khedidja Baba-Ahmed, "Au Mali, l'intervention armée reste un recours ultime", *Le Soir d'Algerie*, 22 November 2012, available at <http://www.lesoiralgerie.com/articles/2012/11/22/>.

16 Laurent Fabius (Foreign Affairs), Yamina Benguigui (Francophonie), Nicole Bricq (Trade), Manuel Valls (Home Affairs), and Arnaud Montebourg (Growth and enterprise) have all visited since Hollande's election in May 2012.

17 "51 years on, France recognises 'bloody repression' of Algerian protesters", *Middle East Online*, 18 October 2012, available at <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=54964>.

US efforts to gain Bouteflika's support on Mali have been more direct and to the point. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a visit to Algiers at the end of October with this issue as the headline item. One of the key US concerns about the viability of an intervention in Mali is the availability of Algerian intelligence on the terrorist groups operating in the region. It is likely that the US also asked Bouteflika for permission to fly drones – which would provide additional intelligence – out of southern Algeria.

These US and French efforts to court Algeria appear to have been effective in achieving their specific objective: while Algeria still does not overtly support the idea of an intervention in Mali, it now protests less than it initially did about the prospect. Despite having put themselves in the position of *demandeur* towards Algeria, the US and France also do not – so far – seem to have had to sacrifice much capital in order to secure Algerian support. But Hollande's visit to Algiers in December will be a test of the extent to which Bouteflika is willing to play a strategic ally in the region without asking for anything significant in return.

However, intervention in Mali risks damaging the EU's relationship with Algeria. As an entity, the EU has only belatedly made its voice heard on the situation in northern Mali. Discussions about a CSDP mission only really got underway in October, and the mission is unlikely to become a reality before 2013. In the first half of 2012, Algeria seemed to be taking the EU more seriously as a partner as both sides made a greater investment in the relationship. But over the summer, France has re-emerged as the main point of European contact with Algeria. This must have invoked a strong sense of *déjà vu* for the Algerians and made them question their earlier decision to focus more on the EU. When Clinton travelled to Algiers in late October, political discussions on the regional situation were top of the agenda; a week later, when High Representative Catherine Ashton visited Algiers, the focus was on €58 million worth of grants for the protection of cultural heritage, support for reforms in the transport sector, and support for youth employment. It seemed to be technical business as usual, while strategic questions were mentioned in passing but largely approached through other channels.

Europeanising member-state ties with Algeria

There is now a clear risk that Europe's hope of making progress with Algeria will be dashed. If the EU is not perceived as a worthwhile partner for the Algerian government and continues to simply follow where France leads, it cannot hope to support the sort of incremental reform in Algeria that the revised ENP aspires to over the longer term. With presidential elections expected in Algeria in 2014 and an ailing Bouteflika unlikely to be able to stand again, combined with the willingness that Algiers has indicated to work with the EU on economic modernisation, this would be a real missed opportunity. The EU must

demonstrate to Algeria that it is not only a technical partner for co-operation that is sidelined by the real global players when there is a serious strategic discussion to be had.

A functioning EU–Algeria relationship also matters for the EU's broader strategy towards North Africa and the Sahel. The EU–Maghreb strategy that is currently being developed in the corridors of Brussels, which is focused on increased intra-regional trade, is viewed as a vital component of the economic regeneration of the region. But it will simply not function without Algeria on board. Algeria is the biggest Maghreb country, one of its most significant economies, and certainly one of its crucial security actors.¹⁸ For a Maghreb Union to be an economic success, it should draw on the complementarity of the countries in the region: energy from Algeria and Libya; labour from Egypt and Morocco; and skills from Tunisia.¹⁹ The dividends of increased economic integration are likely to include a growth in competition and consequent reduction in protection that has bolstered the deep state in many parts of the region. Supporting greater Maghreb integration therefore speaks to two of the EU's objectives in the region: economic and democratic development.

How can the EU make itself matter to Algeria again? The key lies in its capitals – above all Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, and Rome. These member states have strong ties with Algiers but invest in Algeria as energy clients rather than as part of a collective EU approach. Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti's recent trip to Algiers was focused on a joint project between the Algerian and Italian governments to build a second gas pipeline to ensure continuity of supply for Italy.²⁰ Berlin is also developing significant links with Algiers in the field of training and defence equipment sales. In March 2012, the Algerian government signed a deal worth more than €400 million with ThyssenKrupp for two naval frigates. Alongside this deal, the Algerian government has signed a contract worth €12 million for training from the German navy for personnel using this equipment.²¹ Together, these member states have significant weight, but they do not use it to a European advantage. As a result, Algeria does not see the utility of partnership with the EU institutions beyond technical advantage. If the EU is to punch at its real weight with Algeria, member states need to show that they have a common interest as part of a genuine EU strategy towards Algeria.

¹⁸ See, for example, Soumia Yousfi, "Maghreb Union Takes First Step Toward Creating Free-Trade Zone", *Al-Monitor*, 20 September 2012, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/09/maghreb-union-moves-toward-greater-economic-cooperation.html>.

¹⁹ For more on the benefits of the Maghreb Union, see Witney and Dworkin, "A Power Audit of EU–North Africa Relations".

²⁰ "Italy–Algeria: Monti in Algiers, focus on economic exchanges", *ANSamed*, 14 November 2012, available at http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/nations/algeria/2012/11/14/Italy-Algeria-Monti-Algiers-focus-economic-exchanges_7791728.html.

²¹ "Algeria orders 2 Frigates from Germany", World Armed Forces Forum, 15 July 2012, available at <http://www.network54.com/Forum/211833/thread/1342347565/last-1342553874/Algeria+orders+2+Frigates+from+Germany>.

Algeria needs a strong relationship with Europe. It has repeatedly asked for European help to diversify its economy as it recognises that its energy reserves are not infinite. The huge bureaucratic barriers that businesses face are preventing development of home-grown enterprise or foreign investment. As the take-up of the twinning instrument shows, Algeria is aware that France is not the only option. Its agreement to begin negotiations on an ENP Action Plan suggests a recognition that it may be worth discussing a roadmap to political reform in exchange for European support. However, Algeria is pragmatic about whether to work with the EU institutions or with key member states. If the EU can give Algeria the benefits that its member states offer, it will be interested. If, however, it can access as much through bilateral ties, and the member states do not stipulate that their interests are cognate with those that the EU sets out, it will naturally continue to focus on national capitals.

Finally, France – and in particular Hollande’s government – cannot afford to be the only European demandeur towards Algeria if it does not want to sacrifice too much capital at the altar of intervention in Mali. Each concession made in the war of words about the colonial relationship is currently being met by a request from Algiers to go further. This is politically unsustainable for Hollande. Greater European leadership on negotiations with Algeria over the situation in Mali would depoliticise the discussion and focus attention on the current instability in the region rather than on historical grievances. The trust between the EU and Algeria that will come as a dividend of the increased partnership will be important for future co-operation, which might impact on Algeria’s regional role in the longer term.

More broadly, the particular relationship between France and Algeria has long outlived the reality of the benefits to both sides. France is no longer Algeria’s only significant European energy client; Algeria is now far from being France’s only strategic interest in the region. Thus a strong EU relationship with Algeria, in which France continues to play a leading but not directorial role, is in the interests of both sides. France should support the EU’s broader aim to build up a partnership with Algeria over the longer term, making a conscious effort to ensure that their bilateral ties do not always trump the European message. Hollande’s visit to Algiers on 19 December, at which he intends to herald a new era in French-Algerian relations, is an opportune moment to begin to set out this new vision of a special connection between two countries that still play a leading role in their respective regions.

A European approach to Algeria

In order to construct a more coherent European approach to Algeria, the EU, and not just France, must be more present and visible in Algeria. More EU member states need to be involved at a senior level in political relations with Algeria, both on domestic questions and on Algeria’s strategic role in the region. For the EU’s direct relationship with Algeria, key member states – particularly Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK – as well as the EU institutions need to invest more time in relationship building with Algeria and be seen in Algiers. Each meeting that officials from member states hold in Algeria should include a component on the European interest rather than just the national interest.

By 2014, the EU should aim to have sufficiently robust ties to allow an election observation mission to build on the progress made on acceptance of the process of peer review in the 2012 legislative elections and give a frank and credible assessment of the conduct of the presidential elections as a contribution to the gradual establishment of genuine democratic institutions in the country. This would send a clear message that, while Europe recognises and values Algeria’s strategic role on questions like the crisis in Mali, it has not abandoned its commitment to political reform but rather intends to work with Algeria as a partner. The EU’s Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean region, Bernardino Leon, who has been closely associated with EU efforts to support political reform in Tunisia and Egypt, is well placed to underline this message to Algiers.

The EU offer to Algeria needs to be set out more clearly to continue to incentivise engagement. Algeria wants support to modernise its economy, and while the EU’s financial support for developing transport structures and training through the EU’s twinning instrument are helpful steps forward, this strategy could be expanded to encourage business-to-business contact in a wide range of sectors. The immediate interest for Algeria is to encourage European businesses – from a larger number of member states – to go and look at the possibilities in Algeria. In the long term, the greater presence of international businesses should lead to a trickle-down effect in their demand for greater predictability and order in their operating environment. This in turn could have wider ramifications in establishing the rule of law in the country.

A first step to encourage this could be for the EU delegation to host an event for representatives from European businesses, particularly those from member states with fewer bilateral links to key sectors in Algeria. This would enable businesses with a potential interest in Algeria to directly raise concerns about barriers to investment, including corruption and red tape around foreign ownership, and demonstrate the potential advantages of tackling these obstacles. One of the themes of this conference, and of EU engagement more broadly, could be to encourage Algeria to increase trade with its neighbours and focus on breaking down barriers to greater intra-regional trade, including normalising relations

with Morocco and developing strong ties with the new neighbouring governments in Tunisia and Libya.

The EU also needs a new approach to Algeria on its strategic role in the region. The FAC has regularly discussed the situation in Mali – but always from the perspective of Algiers. This collective concern has largely been communicated by French ministers (in which case the concern is complicated by historical and political baggage) and Catherine Ashton (in which case the concern is complicated by her close links to technical co-operation). The appointment of a three-star general as a Special Security Representative to the Southern Mediterranean would give support to Ashton on CSDP matters in the region.²² Given Algeria's significant regional role, this representative could begin with a visit to Algiers early in 2013, as the EU mission supporting Malian forces gets underway, to manage Algerian concerns about a non-African presence in the intervention.

The EU's engagement with Algeria has never been straightforward, but with the political instability in Mali, the picture has become even more complex at a moment when there are signs of improvement after years of impasse. It is not in the interest of either the EU or Algeria to lose the momentum that was created at the beginning of 2012, and the success of intervention in Mali will depend on constructive input from Algeria. Given the history of mutual understanding between the EU and Algeria, a clear strategy and good communication is vital to keep relations moving forward.

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²² See Witney and Dworkin, "A Power Audit of EU–North Africa Relations", p. 68.

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