The Mali-Algeria crisis and the Western Sahara question

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This is a 'quick and dirty' take on the fast-moving Saharan crisis unfolding in Africa's northwest. It appears that in the cut-and-thrust of the French intervention to roll back Islamist insurgents in northern Mali and the hostage crisis in Algeria, that virtually all commentaries on the security vacuum in trans-Saharan Africa have missed the point as they missed it in Libya. It boils down to two words: Western Sahara. This is the long and the short of it as far as post-Qaddafi regional instability is concerned and for all interested parties, not the least the African Union (AU) but also the West. The current crisis should propel the unresolved Western Sahara stalemate to the top of the international security agenda as it relates to Africa, Europe and the Mediterranean.

It is one that underlines the geostrategic spatial interdependencies between Africa and Europe to the detriment of Africa's continental sovereignty which, by the way, is a hell of a lot more important than the sovereignty of either Mali or Algeria – or for that matter, the Western Sahara. Obviously there is a lot more to this multidimensional predicament than the Western Sahara. But, as in how the AU ended up marginalized in the Libyan crisis and is already virtually marginalized on Mali, what this all means for the AU bears repeating over and over again: its northern regional pillar, the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), is non-existent.

It has been rendered dysfunctional by the continuing stalemate between Algeria, Morocco and the Sahrawi Republic over the future of the Western Sahara. Ergo, this means that regional cooperation in the entire Maghreb is virtually non-existent whether in terms of economic integration or in coordinating on security challenges.

This not only affects the North African Maghreb. It also affects the northern borderlands of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which is struggling to mobilize a force to retake Mali's Tuareg north thereby lessening the vulnerability of northern Nigeria under pressure from Boko Harum. Overall, the magnitude of this crisis (as with others in the Central African Republic, eastern DRC, the Somali region, the two Sudans) is one more reminder of the fallacy of the nation-state as a sovereign entity in the interdependent but colonially fragmented landscape called Africa.

The Mali-Algeria crisis package underlines a number of challenges for Africa and the international community that need urgently to inform policies, priorities and strategies:

- The root of the security vacuum in the Maghreb is the absence of a functioning regional economic community in the form of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) operating within the framework of the AU and the fact that this is an outcome of the unresolved Western Sahara issue;

- The need, in light of the Libyan crisis and its aftermath of instability in northwestern Africa and the enhanced terrorist threat, for an international recommitment to resolving the Western Sahara issue so as to reunite Morocco with the AU and kick-start the UMA, which could play a pivotal role in trans-Mediterranean Eurafrican relations on the

one hand, and trans-Saharan relations between North Africa and ECOWAS on the other;

- The security interdependence between the Maghreb and West Africa via the Sahelian Sahara and the need for an AU-backed interregional settlement addressing self-determining autonomy issues for marginalized minorities that transcend the existing colonially demarcated borders of ECOWAS and UMA member states;

- The fact that the threat to Mali's territorial integrity is yet one more example of security 'chickens coming home to roost' from Africa's first generation of nationalist leaders 'kicking the can down the road' in sanctifying colonially determined borders enshrining Africa's fragmentation into the fabric of the OAU and the AU to the detriment of continental sovereignty;

- The need for the AU to insist on an EU revisiting of its bifurcated 'strategic partnerships' with North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa in the wake of the Libyan crisis, the current crisis in Mali and the terrorist episode in Algeria and especially including the need to resolve the Western Sahara issue;

- Not only does the EU need to revisit its divisive strategic partnership policy toward northern and sub-Saharan Africa, the Obama administration needs to find a way of institutionally coordinating Africa policy and policy toward the Middle East and North Africa both within the White House and within State Department and the Pentagon on issues straddling the bureaucratically defined geopolitical divide separating North Africa from sub-Saharan Africa;

- The crises in Mali and the Central African Republic along with the challenges in mobilizing a timely ECOWAS military rapid response intervention exposes the woefully inadequate capacity-building and operationalising of the AU's peace and security architecture revolving around African Standby Forces linked to the AU's major regional economic community pillars, all of which are compounded by the absence of a functioning UMA in North Africa;

- Given the trans-Mediterranean geostrategic spatial interdependencies existing between Africa and Europe (via southern Europe and the Maghreb) coupled with Africa's security dependence on the US and the EU, the AU and major member states like South Africa, Nigeria and Algeria need to consider a more comprehensive AU-EU relationship transcending Europe's policy fault-line between North and sub-Saharan Africa by proposing an AU-EU Permanent Joint Commission, inclusive of a structured role for Africa's major regional economic communities like ECOWAS, SADC, ECCAS, the EAC and COMESA.

The foregoing points are by no means comprehensive. But by laying them out, the intent is to convey the extent to which the Mali-Algeria conundrum in the aftermath of the Libyan crisis is symptomatic of a much deeper trans-regional crisis overlapping the ECOWAS and UMA regions.

While the immediate short-term challenge is to stabilize Mali's return to territorial integrity, the continuing unsettled situation in Libya and its resonance in terms of an enhanced terror threat throughout the Maghreb give a sense of urgency to resolving the Western Sahara question. Indeed, it is ironic that just as the Mali crisis was reaching a new level of urgency triggering French

intervention, France's former finance minister and current Managing Director of the IMF, Christine Lagarde was speaking in Nouakchott at a conference of the Moroccan American Centre for Policy on the need to "unleash the economic potential of the Maghreb."

Whether or not the conference had much to say about the UMA, Lagarde in her speech, did say that the need for greater integration was "the reason for the Arab Maghreb Union and the reason we are here today. Integration must begin with more open direct investment regimes, including in extractive industries. After all, these industries need continuous cutting-edge investment." She went on to make the point that: "The whole region would benefit from becoming more open to itself - by knocking down barriers to trade and opening wide the doors of mutual gain. A Maghreb that allows a free flow of goods and services offers limitless possibilities of a market of over 80 million people."

Tellingly, Lagarde stressed how an integrated Maghreb could become the trade and investment hub that bridges the rest of Africa with Europe.

But how does this happen in the absence of a Western Saharan settlement, which would seem to be the missing piece of the puzzle to achieving regional stability through activating the UMA into an operationally effective regional pillar of the AU?

The security challenges in the Maghreb and the Sahel ought to give impetus to an effort to breathe new life into negotiations over the status of the Western Sahara. But bringing Morocco, Algeria and the Sahrawi Republic together is going to confront great difficulty unless some pragmatic compromises can be made to achieve a break-through on the balancing of the principle of self-determination with the imperative of regional integration.

Africa's priority at this historical juncture is regional and continental integration wherein the defragmenting of Africa is, or should be, uppermost on the overall African agenda? Africa does not need more states. It needs more integration which, in turn, is pre-conditional to enhancing security. For regional economic communities are inherently security communities. This carries with it obvious implications for the self-determinative scope of the Western Sahara as a sovereign Sahrawi 'nation-state' which, in effect, would be nothing more than a mini-statelet of little more than 200,000 people.

Given that the essence of self-determination is self-governing autonomy, there is no reason why this could not find satisfaction under a regional settlement within the framework of the UMA. A tripartite settlement between Algeria, Morocco and the Sahrawi Republic establishing the Western Sahara as an autonomous UMA 'territory' or 'republic' (not sovereign 'nation-state') within a fledgling Maghrebian economic community would seem to be the optimum formula for restoring regional stability. In any case, regional integration ultimately implies the pooling and sharing of sovereignty for all member states of the UMA, not just the Sahrawis. Obviously, given how the solidarity politics of African liberation has led everyone into an intellectual and political cul-de-sac, arriving at a settlement that finesses independence and integration is an up-hill struggle.

But perhaps a tripartite arrangement wherein a UMA Cooperation Council was established to oversee the Western Sahara might be considered. The Sahrawis could, as the 'managing partner,' govern the Western Sahara as an autonomous region or state within the UMA Maghrebian economic community. Such an arrangement would liberate the UMA to become a security as well as an economic community,

making it the centrepiece of the AU's peace and security architecture in North Africa.

Dream on is probably the likely response to such a concept except that Africa and the AU are faced with real credibility problems by the crisis in Mali and how it has drawn in Algeria. But the credibility problem must also be shared by the US, the EU and the United Nations. The only 'winners' thus far are the jihadist proponents of extending the Global Islamic Civil War into Africa's northern tier and those who have no problem in a partitioning of the continent along a Maghreb/sub-Saharan fault-line.

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