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THE SAHARA AND SAHEL AFTER GADDHAFI

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On the security level, the present state of North Africa and the Sahel resembles the dynamics of plate tectonics, some standing firmer while others are more yielding, experiencing either subduction or compression. The detachment of the Libyan plate has caused a collapse of the previous regional eastern security flank and, by ricochet, created an opportunity for a myriad of non-state agents with destabilising objectives.

The volatility of the Libyan situation confronts its neighbors with a series of uncertainties and new threats which revolve around two major axes that are at the core of our analysis: 1) socio-economic and human factors and 2) multiple aggravating vectors that exacerbate the security challenges.

The socioeconomic and human factors

The inversion of migratory dynamics and food insecurity

The Libyan crisis has had immediate consequences on the economic situation of the Sahel, insofar as aid from Tripoli had, over time, become the backbone upon which Sahelian economies rested. Its complete shutdown has put a strain on the development of entire sub-regions depend-

ent on investments and financial flow from Libyan companies. The turnaround has particularly increased the vulnerability of communities suffering chronic rebellions, as those are furthermore the victims of widespread food insecurity.

In northern Chad, many families are cruelly suffering the interruption of transfers from relatives who had migrated to Libya. Driven away by the battles and instability, because they had lost their jobs or were persecuted by Libyans, approximately 43,000 people fled from Libya to Chad between May and July 2011. According to the UN office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (IRIN), money transfers decreased by 57%. And households have been hardly able to provide for those returning to the country.

By redrawing the geostrategic map of the Maghreb and Sahel, Gaddhafi's fall and elimination has disrupted old strategic balances, caused a psychological shock to numerous communities who are faithful to the Libyan leader, and generated socio-economic repercussions that are being harshly felt.

The power vacuum at the core of the old geopolitical structure has direct consequences on the Sahel as a whole, and both domestically and transnationally as well. The region, already afflicted by a number of security challenges such as drug, arms or human trafficking, and the intensification of uprisings and terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), now faces unexpected risks emerging from the Libyan crisis, notably in the border regions of the Saharo-Sahelian countries.

Those risks relate to the following three areas of concern
- Social and economic issues that generate tensions among local communities;
- The militarisation and the increasing power of militant islamism;
- The existence of potentially destabilising loyalist and/or irredentist elements

Likewise, the very close ties between Niger and Libya have been brutally severed. This has led to the repatriation of 260,000 Nigerien workers, a drastic decrease in the life quality of many households and the suspension of infrastructure projects such as the 1,100 km road from the border to Agadez.

To all of this we must add the chronic food insecurity of these arid regions. Since 2010, following a prolonged drought and poor harvests, approximately 10 million

people have been under the threat of famine. At the end of 2011, the total cereal deficit compared to the previous year amounted to 25%, the presaging sign of a food crisis in Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso.

The Tuareg question

These disastrous economic conditions combine with the persistence of latent tensions due to the recent reconfiguration of identity allegiances. By manipulating the various national minorities in Libya and neighboring regions, Gaddhafi was as much an instigator of conflict as a peace-broker, particularly for the Tuaregs. Owing to the Libyan insurrection, we have witnessed a reassertion of "ethnic" identities, the reemergence of territorial disputes, and demands for political representation and social justice.

Numbering from 1 to 1.5 million, the Tuaregs inhabit an area of 2 million square kilometers covering a part of Libya, Algeria, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The drought that afflicted Mali and Niger in the 1970s and 80s and the insurrection-

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ist movements of the 1990s and 2000s provoked an influx of thousands to neighboring countries, Libya in particular, where the regime backed their prolonged establishment.

Since 2007, the Tuareg region where AQIM leads its operations has become increasingly unsafe and vulnerable as it faces recurrent uprisings, criminal travel routes and repeated food crises, all in a context of political and economic ostracism. The 2006 Algiers agreements as well as those with Libya in 2009 contemplated the integration of Tuaregs into the police or the armed forces as well as the creation of ex-rebels units. This goal was never reached but was once more taken up in 2011 in the context of a regional security plan aiming to recruit 5,000 Tuaregs in special counter-terrorism units.

Scarcely represented in the political and administrative institutions of their countries, Tuaregs are often accused by their own governments of banditry or trafficking. Despite Tripoli's ambiguous policy towards them, which oscillated from cultural discrimination to support for their revolts, many Tuaregs have settled in Libya as refugees, particularly since the end of the 1970s.

The elimination of the Libyan leader has therefore had a direct impact on these Tuaregs who have lived and worked in Libya for thirty years, as well as on those who recently became involved in the conflict. According to estimates from Niamey and Bamako, 200,000 Tuaregs from Niger and Mali have returned home. Keeping in mind the Tuaregs' excellent knowledge of the terrain and expertise in guerilla tac-

tics, both governments fear that these armed "refugees" may represent a recruitment pool for islamists and traffickers. In recognition of the newcomers, the new president of Niger Mahamadou Issoufou appointed Brigi Raffini, a Tuareg who comes from Iférouane, a region that has experienced several revolts.

Many Tuareg veterans of the Libyan army remain faithful to Gaddhafi, who continues to enjoy tremendous popularity. This is particularly the case in northern Mali, where new waves of rebellion claiming autonomy for the Tuareg regions has affected the cities of Ménaka, Aguelhoc and Tessalit in January 2012.

In Agadez as well as in certain Tuareg encampments, portraits of the leader can be seen everywhere. In July 2011, a demonstration in support of the Libyan colonel was banned in this city and several mosques organised prayers in his favour. Tuaregs feel indebted to the Libyan leader for having provided them jobs and legal status, interceded in their favour during the rebellions of the 1990s and 2000s, and obtained a ceasefire in 2009 between Niamey and the rebels who demanded a part of the dividends from uranium mining.

Internal and regional overlapping of economic and security challenges thus remains a crucial matter for the future of the Sahel border regions. The Tuareg rebellions could reignite, and the food crisis could accentuate the impoverishment of local communities who have already absorbed economically strained immigrants.

The aggravating vectors of insecurity

Heavy weapons

Distrustful of his army, the Libyan leader purposefully disabled a part of his weapons, and scattered another part throughout his immense territory, particularly in the southwestern Sebha region.

Since the start of the Libyan conflict, unguarded arsenals disseminated throughout the country were easily accessible to looters, rebels and anyone who could make a profit from them: shrewd businessmen, tribes, AQIM intermediaries, Sudanese, Chadian or Tuareg mercenaries who participated in the civil war and would not return home empty-handed. A documentary by Human Rights Watch provides insight into the weapons cache: containers of Kalashnikov assault rifles; rockets; mines; shells; surface-to-air missiles, of which Libya owns 20,000 and SA-24 missiles, which are very expensive Russian devices belonging to the latest generation of air missiles and can shoot down fighter aircrafts. The weapons recently surfaced show, furthermore, that despite international sanctions Libya received weapons from various providers, particularly countries of the Eastern block (Romania, Ukraine, Hungary and Russia), as well as ammunition from

the Chinese Norinco corporation. Last February, flights from Belarus to Libya were revealed to be connected to arms trafficking. According to Hugh Griffiths, who specialises in arms trafficking at SIPRI, on February 15, 2011 an Ilyushin IL-76 airlifter directed from Baranovichi to Sebha was identified. At the time, Sebha was one of the few airports still under Gaddhafi's control. [1]

The open proliferation and circulation of heavy weapons originated from these arsenals combined with the region's porous borders introduce a new threat to the whole region.

The Algeria journal al-Chorouq's edition of September 18, 2011 reported that 500 target-tracking missiles had disappeared after an arsenal was looted. On September 22, 2011 the NTC announced that the rebels had discovered chemical weapons in the Jufra desert area (region of Sebha) during an operation. Officially, Libya had supposedly destroyed its entire stock of chemical weapons in 2004, but according to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Libya continues to stock 9.5 million tons of mustard gas.

The dissemination of heavy weapons has become a top priority for countries in the region and western capitals as well. Recent information has confirmed that these weapon stocks were purchased by various groups or individuals hoping to transfer them to third countries: on June 12, 2011 the army of Niger seized 640 kg of Semtex and detonators coming from Libya at its northern border; in September 2011, Bamako revealed that a certain number of surface-to-air missiles had entered Mali; on September 21, 2011, confrontations occurred between units of the Tunisian army and a group of arms traffickers in the tri-border region; on November 6, 2011, the armed forces of Niger destroyed a sizeable convoy of Libyan weapons on their way to Mali; on November 11, 2011 in a press release to the Mauritanian press agency, Mokhtar Belmokhtar claimed to have acquired Libyan weapons; in early January 2012 the Algerian army intercepted a convoy of weapons and African migrants at its Niger border. A number of Libyan weapons transiting through Egypt's Sinai have been found in the hands of Hamas in the Gaza strip.

Sudan's Defense Minister had already alerted countries in the region at a meeting in Ndjamena on March, 2011 that combatants in Darfur had received heavy weapons of Libyan origin, either from Sudanese fleeing the war or criminal networks. On a visit to Libya on January 7, 2012, Omar el-Bechir, who provided military support to Libyan rebels, proposed helping the NTC in its disarmament programme and integrate militias into the country's future army.

On August 26, 2011 Victoria Nuland, spokeswoman of the US State Department, asserted at her press conference that Libya's chemical and nuclear reserves and Yellowcake, a form of concentrated uranium that is used to produce nuclear fuel, had been secured after the United States located their stocking sites. On the other hand, worry persisted with regards to portable missile launchers. According to Andrew J. Shapiro, Assistant Secretary of Political-Military Affairs at the US State Department, out of a total of 20,000 portable surface-to-air missiles (Man-Portable Air Defense System or MANDPADS) only 5,000 had been destroyed.

Finally, a part of the Libyan factions continues to pile up weapons: after the fall of Tripoli, militias that failed to recognise the authority of the new civil government freely took control over weapons stocks that had been left abandoned. The danger is also that these weapons may be used against Libyans themselves, such as has happened in Iraq or Afghanistan.

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announced an arms control and disarmament plan. Meanwhile, the European Union has planned a security operation and Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, who all supported the rebellion, have offered to contribute their services.

Organised groups

Taking advantage of Libya's chaos, AQIM's *katiba* seek to reap material and ideological benefits from the instability in order to extend their ground of influence and intensify their actions. If an alliance with Libya's islamist leaders materialised, the organisation could undertake a further offensive against democratic forces and islamist parties in power in other countries in the region. Despite AQIM's absence from North Africa's uprisings, Gaddhafi nonetheless sought to discredit the rebellion by tying AQIM's name to it. In a message it released in March of 2011, AQIM tried to profit from these allegations by pretending to have been at the forefront of the uprising, when in fact it played no role in it whatsoever.

As a result of the weapons easily available, new cells can arise today by recruiting from the pool of dissatisfied volunteers from the Libyan rebellion or from the ranks of unemployed

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1. Peter D. Wiezman, «Libya: Lessons in Controlling the Arms Trade», SIPRI, 22/03/2011

youth. The appearance of the Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa (*Jamaat Tawhid Wal Jihad Fi Gharbi Afriqqiya*), led by a Mauritanian who claimed the kidnapping of three European humanitarian workers (two Spaniards and an Italian) at the Polisario refugee camp in Rabuni (Algeria), is no doubt a sign that the Libyan crisis has provided an unexpected opportunity for new destabilising elements.

The growing militarisation of non-state agents of all sorts, in addition to the chaotic geopolitical environment, represent a windfall for al-Qaeda central to reposition itself and exploit the effects of the "Arab Spring". As it loses force on the Asian front, it will most likely proceed to a strategic revision by switching back its forces towards a front it had, until now, unexploited: Africa.

Indeed, Al-Qaeda greatly needs to increase its visibility. It will take the time to capitalise on the vulnerabilities of the Sahel where arms proliferation is but a single factor.

A number of converging signs seem to indicate that a reconfiguration of Jihadism might take place, according to two modal directions:

Nigeria and a former president of the local government of the state of Niger in Nigeria. *Boko Haram* and *al-Qaeda*'s connection would appear to have resulted from the mediation of members who fought together in Afghanistan.

These connections have recently returned to the forefront, and alleged expansion of the terrorist galaxy towards West Africa and East Africa under the form of an alliance between AQIM in the Sahel, *Boko Haram* in Nigeria and *al-Shabab* in Somalia is likely.

This is what General Ham, the AFRICOM Commander, cited by the *New York Times,* asserted in September 2011 on the basis of common messages from these three groups, even while he considers that they do not yet have the capacity to organise synchronised attacks beyond their traditional grounds of operation[2].

For all we know, *Boko Haram* always pursues a local agenda, and it is uncertain whether it will be tempted by the global Jihad endorsed by the Somalian group. The Jihadist arch is still discontinuous so long as it remains fragmented between Somalia, Yemen, the Sahel and Nigeria.

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- a relocation of Jihadist networks from Asia to Africa

These revolutions have overshadowed and taken al-Qaeda central by surprise. Bin Laden never made a single statement on the subject, while his successor, Al-Zawahiri, praised them only very late. The organisation has been considerably weakened following the elimination of two of its leaders (Bin Laden in May 2011 in Habottabad and Abu Hafz al-Shahri in September 2011 in Waziristan) and the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq last December 31st. The crumbling of the Jihad front, lacking in recruits has objectively offset its *raison d'être* in Asia. Even if it hasn't yet set foot in Libya, it is reasonable to assume a relocation of al-Qaeda's center of gravity.

- an Arab-African junction of militant islamism

In 2006, the Nigerian intelligence services informed that members of the Nigerian group *Boko Haram* had received training by AQIM in Algeria. A first group, recruited by the Algerian Khaled Bernaoui, received training which was coordinated by the nephew of a former governor of northeastern

Furthermore, AQIM keeps on its own autonomy insofar as it has not offered its allegiance to al-Zawahiri. Its alliance of convenience with *Boko Haram* essentially consists of an operational collaboration involving shared training and tactics, without this leading, for the time being to a structural Arab-African alliance.

The threat posed by the potential expansion of the instability zone is taken very seriously by West African nations. In November 2011, Nigeria joined the Fusion and Liaison Unit (FLU), an organisation which seeks to coordinate the intelligence services of Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Nigeria's direct neighbors are worried by the risk of radical islamism spreading to Cameroon's northern borders. This issue was addressed during a visit by Idriss Déby in Yaoundé on December 29, leading to the implementation of a common defense programme run by join border security commissions. At the beginning of January 2012 the borders between Cameroon, Chad and Niger were temporarily closed following the security reports that indicated the presence of *Boko Haram* members in Lagdo, a city in Cameroon's Muslim northeast.

These concerns are shared by Chad and by Niger. Chad's intelligence agency has suggested that members of *Boko Haram* may have entered the country fleeing persecution from their

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2. Thom Shanker, Eric Schmitt, «Three Terrorist Groups in Africa Pose Threat to U.S., American Commander Says», *The New York Times*, 14/09/2011.

national army. *"In November 2010, the Nigerian authorities expelled more than 400 individuals of Chadian origin living in the Maiduguri region, officially because of their illegal immigration status. (...) among these individuals, some are suspected to be members of the Boko Haram sect. (...) in common with AQIM's area of operations in northern Mali and Niger, northwestern Chad is a hostile desert inhabited by nomadic peoples whose main activity consists of cross-border trade. For example, it is in northern Chad that rebel Nigerien Tuaregs acquire their weapons."* [3]

Loyalists, militias and the risk of civil war

During the rebellion's advance towards Tripoli, a number of Gaddhafi loyalists left the country heavily armed and took refuge with communities living in the cross-border regions of neighboring countries.

The flight of several high ranking armed Libyan officials to Niger on September 6, 2011, including Mansur Dao, chief of Gaddhafi's personal guard; the asylum Algeria granted on August 29 to a part of Gaddhafi's family (Hannibal, Aïcha); and the asylum granted to Saâdi, another of the leader's sons by Niger on September 11, are further threats weighing on the region. The presence of these figures from the old regime in the Sahel could well become, some day, a destabilising force. An alliance with the loyalists remaining in Libya and others dispersed across the Sahel could allow them to lead a covert strategy of coordinated pressure, financed with the war fortunes amassed over the course of the preceding decades.

Aware of the potential danger these henchmen represent, in September 2011 the NTC appointed a president of the Supreme Security Council who is charged with tracking down the survivors of Gaddhafi's clan in Africa. But how many remain in Libya who might establish a common front together with loyalists who took refuge in Mali, Niger, Algeria or Chad?

In Libya, in addition to tribal and regional divisions, wedges also exist among armed factions with diverging interests. A testimony to this are the battles between ex-rebels from Misrata and Tripoli that occurred on January 2nd in the capital. On December 11, 2011, soldiers of the regular army had to fight militias in order to regain control of Tripoli's international airport.

Several militias who own significant stocks of light and heavy weapons established their headquarters in either official buildings or the private residences of old regime's authorities; others established checkpoints in strategic points of the capital. These militias demand political compensation for their involvement in the war. The main issue at stake is therefore the disarmament of these militias in order to avoid the looming risk of a civil war in the country. The armed confrontations between "revolutionary brigades" in Bani Walid on January 24 bear witness to how precarious peace remains, and reveals the still looming spectre of civil war.

We know from experience, particularly in Africa, that local conflicts always have consequences in neighboring countries. Furthermore, the overlap of internal and regional security issues is an undeniable fact that needs to be reckoned with in order to establish a both global and targeted stability plan.

Conclusions

Regional reshaping will continue fluctuating as long as Libya's stabilization remains incomplete. In return, Tripoli will require a consolidated and stable geopolitical environment.

Pragmatic diplomacy will be essential in order to turn old enemies into future neighbors. The intra-regional tensions that

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resulted from the hostile attitude towards the NTC should be overcome by the parties involved, namely, Chad, Algeria and Niger. The new Libyan government will thus have to work together with Maghrebi and Sub-Saharan countries in order to create a favorable environment.

Taking into account Libya's oil assets and demographic shortage, relations between Libya and its neighbors will hinge upon the economic choices Libyans make with regards to Africa and the Sahel, in terms of economic development and migratory policy and in the context of Libya's likely reorientation towards the Arab world.

To avoid the risk of civil war looming in the horizon, a national reconciliation process could be initiated according to the DDR model (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration). This continues to be the major challenge on which not only the country's future rests but also that of the entire region; a region which, in one year has been subject to an unprecedented turmoil.

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3. «Le nord-ouest du Tchad: la prochaine zone à haut risque?», International Crisis Group, *Africa Briefing* no. 78, 17/02/2011.