



# Algeria's army: on jihadist alert

by Florence Gaub

Algeria remained largely untouched by the political turmoil which struck several of its neighbours in 2011 – but it is now gearing up to fight what it sees as the fallout of the Arab Spring. Rising security risks in Tunisia – as highlighted by the recent terrorist attack on a museum in the capital – and the possibility of total implosion in Libya are now combining with threats from the Sahel zone to its south. Algerian decision-making circles have come to the conclusion that the country is facing its most acute security challenge since the end of its dark decade in 2000.

Algeria's military, which was always at the epicentre of the country's politics, is thus preparing for what it expects to be yet another crucial battle against terrorism. It is making use of the three C's which it successfully employed during its fight against terrorism in the 1990s – containment, conflict, and conciliatory measures – and has added a new one: cooperation with partners.

## A fulfilled prophecy

Algeria had long suspected that a regime change in neighbouring Libya would have serious negative ramifications for its own security – and in early 2013 it was proven right. Terrorists loosely

affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) stormed a natural gas facility in In Amenas and took more than 800 employees hostage, 39 of whom were later killed. Libya's security vacuum certainly facilitated the crisis: although the group itself was not Libyan, the attackers had crossed the border which is only 30 km away from the site. And they most likely used weapons purchased on a Libyan black market awash with lethal material.

The incident occurred only months after Islamist forces seized control of whole cities in Mali, and triggered important changes in Algeria's posture, most notably in the security establishment.

Events such as the assassination of French tourist Hervé Gourdel by a group affiliated to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in late 2014, and attacks on the Algerian embassies in Mali and Libya are clear indications that Algeria is again at war with Islamist terrorism. ISIL's recent declaration that Algeria and Libya form its 'strategic gateway' to Europe only sought to reinforce this notion.

These attacks have also accelerated changes in Algeria's security sector which have been underway since 2012. The country's main intelligence



service, the *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (DRS) has been most affected. Ever since the 1990s, the DRS had been the main body dealing with the threat of terrorism. The attack on the gas complex in early 2013, and the failure to detect it, was therefore considered its responsibility: indeed, the separation of the DRS's analytical intelligence capacity from the armed forces as a whole was considered the main reason that it failed to prevent the tragedy.

As a consequence, the power of the DRS was scaled back, and the armed forces strengthened. Three of the service's core units were removed and attached directly to the armed forces' chief of staff: military security, the directorate of the judicial police, and the centre for communication and documentation, which is in charge of relations with the media. Its special forces devoted to anti-terrorist operations became an independent body in its own right. Several high-ranking officers of the DRS were made to retire (though not its head, General Toufik), and acting defence minister, Major General Abdelmalek Guenaïzia, was replaced by General Ahmed Gaïd Salah, who is also chief of staff. In addition to the DRS units, the counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics files were transferred to the defence ministry: previously, some units dealing with these two issues had been under the control of the interior ministry and the gendarmerie.

Military regions were also redrawn and increased from six to seven so as to better target military efforts. Three are now focused on the sites of past terrorist attacks, including In Amenas. At the same time, the government raised the salaries of all security sector employees by 40% (applicable retroactively since 2009), improved their access to affordable housing, and announced its intention to review the military pension scheme.

A clear indication that the government expects to be confronted with large-scale disruption, this transformation of Algeria's security sector is also flanked by a four-tier strategy to combat terrorism.

### Containment: keeping terrorists out

Algiers believes that threats largely stemming from abroad, especially from Libya, Mali and Tunisia,

are exacerbating its pre-existing domestic security challenges. The government's first reaction to any sign of trouble is to try to keep problems out by closing off borders. For a country almost four times the size of France, with more than 6,400 km of largely desert land borders, that is a considerable undertaking. While its 1,500 km border with Morocco has been shut since 1994 for political reasons, and the 1,400 km one with Mali sealed since 2013, President Bouteflika decided last May to close off *all* of Algeria's borders with the exception of those with Tunisia. He militarised border management by moving the file from the interior to the defence ministry: all borders were declared restricted military zones, and several thousand troops deployed along them.

Depending on the adjacent country, the border regions present different challenges. The 1,000 km border with Tunisia is a site of direct military confrontation, with some 8,000 troops stationed along it. Close to the Mount Chambi area, terrorist networks have been operating cross-border since 2011, laying landmines and ambushing the Tunisian military. Four Tunisian soldiers were killed there in mid-February, bringing the total number of military casualties in the region to over 35.

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The remote desert borders with Mali and Libya, however, provide ideal conditions for the smuggling of weapons and drugs. In this sense, they can be likened to military supply routes which Algeria is seeking to cut off. Walls and electric fences,

which are already being built on the border with Morocco, are now being considered on the border with Libya, where 20 monitoring sites have been established to prevent the infiltration of weapons and armed groups. Besides support for ongoing political negotiations, this 'siege' is considered to be the only suitable response given Libya's current instability. Algiers has rejected military intervention there, with one Algerian colonel labelling it a "waste of time".

### Conflict: this means war

At the regional level, Algeria's defence posture is rather restrained: article 26 of its constitution essentially prohibits the use of force against other countries and thereby limits the deployment of the



military to Algerian territory. It is more muscular, however, inside the country: following a suicide attack that killed 11 troops last year, the defence ministry issued a statement declaring that the army is committed and determined to 'hunt the hordes of these groups until they are definitely liquidated.'

The Algerian armed forces number 130,000 troops (army 110,000, navy 6,000, air force 14,000) and are the strongest on the African continent. They are experienced in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations, and have been fighting a low-intensity conflict against jihadist networks for the past decade. Until 2011, the military employed a two-pronged approach: while hitting hideouts in the country's northeast with aerial bombardments and terrestrial operations, it sought to cut the terrorists off from their southern counterparts, on whom they depended for funds and material. This approach worked: 250 AQIM members were killed between 2007 and 2010, and the organisation's capabilities severely curtailed.

Much of this progress was undone following the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya. AQIM's weapons' stocks were replenished and Algeria witnessed an immediate spike in suicide attacks against its security forces. The resulting chaos also allowed the terrorist group to forge alliances with other networks in Mali, Tunisia and Libya, turning it from a domestic into a regional problem. For the time being, AQIM has not sworn allegiance to ISIL, but similarities between the different Islamist networks operating in North Africa do exist.

The Algerian military has stepped up its efforts to counter the threat: having increased its budget by 176% since 2004, it now spends \$10 billion per year on defence, the highest sum ever recorded in Africa. New equipment accounts for much of this spending. Although the procurement of weapons will be affected by the unexpected drop in oil prices – some deals have already been put on ice – Algeria is particularly interested in drones, helicopters, self-propelled artillery, amphibious vessels and armoured vehicles.

These purchases fold into a military modernisation programme which has been underway since 1999. In 2006, Algeria signed a \$7.5 billion arms deal with Russia (which provides over 90% of its weapons), including several types of aircraft, attack helicopters, submarines, tanks and anti-tank missile systems. It has also invested in various Russian, Chinese, German and Italian vessels

for its navy, fighter jets from Sweden, helicopters from the UK, and armoured vehicles from Germany and the United Arab Emirates. The US is said to be considering providing a military observation satellite to monitor AQIM movements in the Sahel, and Spain is set to renovate and arm two ageing frigates.

At the tactical level, the armed forces have mounted several successful operations against Islamist networks recently, killing, among others, the leader of the *Soldiers of the Caliphate*, an ISIL-affiliated group which claimed responsibility for the murder of Hervé Gourdel.

At a civilian level, the criminal court in Algiers sentenced 25 terrorists to death in absentia, including AQIM's leader.

### Conciliation: thou shalt be forgiven

Drawing on lessons from the 1990s, Algeria is under no illusion that the armed forces alone can defeat jihadist terrorism. Amnesty and reconciliation, too, are part of its anti-terrorism toolbox. Algeria's violent decade was exceptionally traumatic, with 150,000 people killed, up to 10,000 missing, and some \$20 billion worth of damage caused to infrastructure. After it came to an end, the government granted amnesty to all those who renounced violence within four months of the 'law of civil harmony' being declared.

The fighters who surrendered were only eligible for amnesty if they had not committed murder or rape, or used explosives in public places; otherwise, they would just receive reduced sentences. In practice, investigations into these crimes were not conducted thoroughly, and amnesty was granted rather broadly. A secret list of armed Islamists was also pardoned a few days before the deadline, causing a public outcry. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the Algerian national responsible for attack on In Amenas, is rumoured to have been among them.

As the debate over the role of the security forces during the 1990s continued, President Bouteflika drafted the 'Charter on peace and national reconciliation' (2005) and submitted it to a referendum. The Charter extended amnesty to all those who had committed crimes during the violent decade and closed all investigations. It also excluded from political life anyone who had committed acts of terrorism or used Islam for political purposes. Although not without their critics, the two acts are believed to have prompted a quarter

of Algeria's 27,000 fighters to defect from Islamist networks, including numerous high-ranking leaders.

In this spirit, Algeria is now reaching out to those who have joined ISIL in Syria and Iraq or similar groups in Libya and Yemen – although compared to Tunisia's 3,000 volunteers, Algeria's 200-400 fighters seem a rather manageable threat. Algiers is not only monitoring ISIL recruitment efforts through family contacts and social media, it has informed its citizens that they will not be punished if they repent and return home. It is also seeking to tighten state control over religious education. But as the previous amnesty programme showed, pardons alone are not enough to tackle terrorism. If not applied properly, they simply de-criminalise individuals rather than de-radicalise them.

### Cooperation: the more the merrier?

Algeria's reactions to the current turmoil in its vicinity are clearly informed by its previous experience of fighting jihadism: the combination of hard military strikes and pardons bears the hallmark of officers who lived through the dark decade. In one respect, however, the situation this time around is different: while it was largely alone in fighting Islamist networks in the 1990s, Algeria now shares the threat with countries near and far. For example, the Malian dimension of its own problems became apparent once again in March 2014, when an attack in Bamako was allegedly carried out by Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

The regional nature of the threat is challenging Algeria's isolationist security policy. Although Algiers has been a member of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue since 2000, it has never operated with the alliance, in contrast to other Arab countries. It is no more active in United Nations missions, where it has contributed only a handful of experts. It is also unlikely to join the all-Arab force to combat terrorism proposed by Egypt's President Sisi.

Nevertheless, a first step towards greater regional cooperation was the 2010 creation of a Joint Operational Army Staffs Committee (CEMOC) with Mali, Niger and Mauritania. It is based in southern Algeria and tasked with coordinating efforts against AQIM. Although CEMOC has yet to deliver in operational terms, Algeria's involvement is significant given the country's traditional resistance to military cooperation. Moreover, in 2012, Algeria and Tunisia formally agreed

to improve security links, and in 2013 formed a military cooperation committee to share intelligence on criminal and terrorist networks, and coordinate border operations. Training and education on border security is also said to be included in the agreement. Initially, Libya was supposed to be part of trilateral meetings, but was forced to drop out due to its domestic political paralysis. Cooperation with Tunisia goes far beyond what Algeria has ever done in terms of structured military-to-military cooperation – a development which is viewed with some concern by Morocco.

Algeria is also particularly active now in lobbying for a joint international drive against the paying of ransoms to terrorist groups. AQIM, like other such networks, is believed to have made \$60-\$90 million over the past decade from kidnappings alone. In 2012, the Algiers Memorandum on Preventing and Denying the Benefits of Kidnapping for Ransom laid the groundwork for good practices designed to break the link between terrorism and kidnapping, and led to the first ever UN Security Council resolution on the issue in 2014.

The emergence of terrorism as a regional challenge vindicates Algeria's decade-long narrative that it was violent Islamism's first victim. But beyond immediate security challenges, it now faces an entirely new dynamic: with the rest of the Arab world now intent on greater regional security cooperation to fight terrorism, Algeria may no longer be able to go it alone. Indeed, as one of the states with the most extensive experience in this field, the country has much to contribute. If Algiers is serious about combating terrorism at home and abroad, it will have to reconsider its approach and strengthen ties with regional partners.

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