

The hostage crisis in Algeria lays bare the importance of European foreign policy to the UK.

Blog Admin

*Last week's hostage crisis in Algeria, and the French military intervention in neighbouring Mali, have focused attention on growing unrest in the Sahel region of North Africa. **Susi Dennison** argues that although the threat posed by militant groups in Mali and Algeria was well known prior to the crisis, EU member states had been unable to implement strong joint-policies in the area. The incident has highlighted the need to strengthen the capabilities of the European External Action Service, alongside the wider importance of European foreign policy to the UK.*



As the full results of the hostage crisis at the In Amenas gas field unfolded over the weekend, and the death toll climbed above 80, two key questions were left hanging. How do these dramatic events, which suddenly brought Algeria back into mainstream news and appeared to take a number of European capitals by surprise, fit into the wider regional picture? Do they represent a shift in the dynamics in the region, and how will European countries respond to them?

Signers in Blood – the AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) linked terrorist group who took responsibility for the hostage taking – have stated that they did so in reprisal for the French intervention in neighbouring Mali. Although this sounds like a straightforward reaction to recent events, implicitly, this motive confirms two things. Firstly it indicates that (although their closeness with Al Qaeda may be disputed) the terrorist networks involved in the siege at In Amenas, and indeed in the rebel groups controlling swathes of northern Mali, operate across borders.

Secondly, it confirms the very basis for François Hollande's decision 10 days ago to send French troops into Mali: the implications of the Islamist insurgency in northern Mali are not national, nor even regional, but global. The French government showed by their intervention they were very much aware of this threat, as did the UK, Belgium and Denmark in their decision to send equipment to support the French troops at the outset. The US government had been concerned about the situation in northern Mali for the last year too, and through autumn 2012 had ratcheted up efforts to improve the prospects for an African led, UN mandated intervention, with Hillary Clinton visiting Algiers on this matter in October last year. The Algerian government were also alive to the risks, although their reaction was by contrast to the European one, one of caution around intervention, even though they did allow the French to use their airspace to facilitate operations.



Eurocopter Tigre (Credit: jfhweb, CC BY 2.0)

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Clearly then, although the key actors were taken aback by the speed and ferocity of the hostage taking in southern Algeria, they were well aware of the threat from the groups involved and of the international nature of that threat. The question then becomes why the Sahel region, which posed a collective

strategic threat to European countries, had not until now been approached in a more coherent way. In reference to Algerian leadership and decision-making on breaking into In Amenas, François Hollande argued that the Algerian military was capable of 'the most adapted response to the crisis'. France's foreign minister Laurent Fabius said that "The Algerians know at what point terrorism is an absolute evil" because of their experience in combatting violent Islamist groups (from which the groups currently operating in northern Mali developed) during their decade long internal armed conflict in the 1990s.

Why then, have European states themselves not invested in developing a cohesive approach to a region of such strategic, geographical and energy importance, based on a greater understanding of the Islamist networks operating there? A lack of developed structures to spearhead such an approach appears to be one of the critical issues. The EU Sahel strategy, which was launched in the second half of 2011 aimed to fill the policy gap, but it has failed to have much of an impact as the level of implementation has been low. At the end of 2012, a joint communication on an EU Strategy towards the Maghreb was released after much delay. But again, this seems unlikely to deliver a more joined-up approach to security, development and political relationships in the region, because these different aspects of EU policy are led by different parts of the EU architecture and are not well co-ordinated.

The European External Action Service (EEAS), which will undergo an official review in 2013, was intended to bridge some of these divides between different areas of European foreign policy making. But the EEAS has so far been unable to do much more than the structures which preceded it in bringing together these different silos of the EU's external policy – and in particular bringing together defence and crisis management with more classical diplomacy in the Sahel region.

One concrete piece of EU action is the planned training mission for Malian troops, EUTM Mali. This has been under discussion for a number of months, but since the Islamist rebel groups' movement towards the south ten days ago, preparations have gathered momentum. At last Thursday's meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, more details emerged, including the appointment of French General Francois Lecointre as mission commander, and an aspiration for the mission to be on the ground in Bamako by mid-February. However with the situation developing so quickly on the ground now – reports emerged of French and Malian troops retaking Diabaly and Douentza in central Mali on Monday evening – it is now unclear exactly what role this training mission will play in a month's time.

Ultimately, EU member states have not invested the requisite power in the EEAS and EU institutions to allow them to lead an approach to the region. European power in the region still lies in the national capitals, and since efforts have not been well co-ordinated, their impact has under-reached. In this sense, the way in which the In Amenas incident impacts upon the affected countries' involvement in the conflict and post-conflict rebuilding in Mali will be critical. David Cameron, in his response on Sunday to the lives lost as part of the hostage rescue, said that responding to a terrorist activity emanating from this region required iron resolve, over "years, even decades, rather than months". The question of what exactly this iron resolve will entail is left open for now, but it seems likely that for Britain (and indeed the US) this will be greater engagement at the level of intelligence and strategy rather than military involvement. Britain is likely to want to ally itself closely with a broader European effort, drawing on key alliances with security powers in the region such as Algeria. At just the moment that the UK government appears to be reconsidering its relationship with the EU, the situation has evolved in the Sahel to lay bare the importance of European foreign policy to the UK.

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