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Over the past few years American and European counterterrorism officials have grown increasingly wary of the threat posed by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). EUROPOL's 2008 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report said that France, Italy, Spain and Portugal all considered AQIM as a threat to their national security. Because of its proximity to the Maghreb Italy believes it is a particularly attractive transit route for AQIM into Europe. Despite initially limiting its activities to North Africa AQIM has declared that all Western states are targets. The increasing confidence of AQIM will require a robust counter-terror response on both a global and regional level. Yet recent regional initiatives appear to be compromised by an imbalance of appropriate tools and geopolitical rivalry.

On the 21st April 2010 four Saharan desert states agreed to open joint military command headquarters in Algeria. The previous week chiefs of staff of seven Sahel-Sahara region countries met in Algiers to discuss a common strategy to fight terrorism. Both meetings followed a gathering of heads of intelligence and a ministerial conference in Algiers. All have focussed upon the development of joint strategies to combat AQIM. As AQIM has morphed from an armed Islamic challenge to the secular Algerian government into a local franchise of al Qaida the need for regional cooperation has become imperative. The success of Algerian counter-terrorist activities has pushed AQIM to the ungovernable regions of the Maghreb and the southern Sahara desert. AQIM has in turn used the relocation as an opportunity to recruit new members and continue activities that generate income.

Alongside the smuggling of illicit goods AQIM use the borderlands to hold kidnapped westerners in return for ransoms and the release of militants. In 2003 AQIM kidnapped thirty-two western tourists and demanded a ransom estimated to be between \$5 and \$10 million. Reports suggest that the ransom money was used to purchase weapons and satellite-positioning equipment. In 2008 AQIM held two Austrian tourists captive for eight months in Mali's Sahara region. This was followed by the kidnapping of two Canadian diplomats travelling within Niger as part of a UN mission. AQIM released the diplomats unharmed in January 2009 along with four other European hostages. These latter hostages were part of a group that included the British tourist Edwin Dyer who was executed by AQIM in June 2009.

Coordinated efforts to counter the growing regional threat posed by AQIM will be based in Tamanrasset. Situated in southern Algeria, Tamanrasset is a town with a population of approximately 77,000 and a geographical position which looks attractive on a map, but which may be a logistical nightmare. It will host the Joint Military Staff Committee of Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The Committee is seen as an attempt to overcome Western concerns that a lack of coordination could make the region a base for launching larger terrorist attacks. In partnership with Libya, Burkina Faso and Chad, Tamanrasset may also host a security information coordination centre. It is expected that these facilities will benefit all seven states' combined efforts to coordinate anti-terrorist activities and counter cross-border smuggling.

At the 15th April meeting Algeria's Chief of Staff, General Ahmed Gaid Salah, indicated that he was convinced the countries of the Sahel-Sahara are capable of taking full responsibility for the region's security. Yet this is unlikely to result in an equal partnership. As the largest member of the Joint Military Staff Committee Algeria's armed forces outnumber its combined partners by almost ten-to-one. Algeria's dominance is further reflected by its defence expenditure. In 2009 Algeria spent \$5.30 billion on defence, whereas the combined budget of Mali, Mauritania and Niger is a mere \$267 million. Theoretically, the combined military strength of the three additional Sahel-Sahara states does little to counter Algerian dominance. Despite Libya contributing 108,000 personnel to a regional grouping, the smaller armed forces and defence budgets of Burkina Faso and Chad ensure that Algeria militarily maintains the upper hand.

Algeria is also the only partner country to have recently made military purchases that could conceivably be used for counterterrorist operations. In 2009 Algeria and Augusta-Westland agreed an estimated £5 billion deal for 100 AW101 Merlin transport helicopters. With the ability to operate in extreme climates, and an engine inlet particle separator system designed for sandy environments, the AW101 is likely to be integral to regional counterterrorist initiatives. By comparison, in 2007 Chad ordered six second-hand Sukhoi Su-25 Frogfoot fighter aircraft from Ukraine. It still remains unclear whether Chad has actually received any of these aircraft.

The Joint Committee's attempts to better coordinate counter-terrorist activities are likely to be subject to strained diplomatic relations. Both Algeria and Mauritania have been particularly critical of Mali's attempts to crackdown on Islamists in the northern part of the country. In February 2010 Algeria accused Mali of ignoring bilateral agreements following their release of four al Qaeda terrorists in exchange for Western hostages. As two of the terrorists were Algerian and another Mauritanian both states argued that judicial arrangements required their extradition. Their release also prompted the return of both ambassadors from Bamako to further discuss the situation. On the 23rd April Mali put its security forces on high alert after a French tourist and his Algerian driver were kidnapped in Niger. As the kidnappers are likely to make their way to the north of Mali, Bamako's response to their demands needs to be carefully considered.

Algeria's role as de facto leader of regional cooperation efforts is not without merits. As AQIM has its historical antecedents within the country, Algeria has practical experience of counterterrorism from which its partners could benefit. Post 9/11 Algeria has also benefitted from the United States' recognition as a 'front-line state' in the 'war on terror.' Algeria has been able to expand its counterterrorist activities through training and funding offered by Regional Defense Counterterrorism Fellowship Program and Foreign Operations' budgets. Since 2005 the United States and Algeria have also enacted a Joint Military Dialogue programme. Yet increased levels of cooperation are unlikely to prevent the United States from viewing Algeria's effective regional leadership with a degree of concern.

A notable absentee from all of the recent meetings in Algeria has been the region's other major power. Whilst Morocco has not provided extensive grassroots support for AQIM it is by no means immune to its activities. In 2008, for example, AQIM vowed revenge for attacks perpetrated against Moroccan women by government officials. Yet a lack of indigenous support has enabled Morocco to keep AQIM in check. On the 26th April 2010 Moroccan security forces

broke up an AQIM-related cell that was planning attacks throughout the country. The Interior Ministry indicated that the group intended to target security forces and foreign interests.

Morocco also has the potential to make a significant contribution to regionally-led initiatives against AQIM. With a standing army of 175,000 and an air force totalling 13,000 personnel, Morocco could theoretically match Algerian commitments to counter-terrorist operations. An annual defence budget of approximately \$3 billion has also allowed Morocco to make equipment purchases that could be used for activities throughout the Maghreb. In 2008 Morocco ordered four C-27J Spartan cargo aircraft from Alenia Aeronautica. As Morocco already has 44 transport aircraft at its disposal, the additional C-27Js will expand its airlift superiority over Algeria.

Like Algeria, the United States also regards Morocco as a key player in the 'war on terror.' Since 2004 Moroccan and American armed forces have undertaken extensive joint military exercises. Within Exercise African Lion both countries conduct bilateral training at a unit level. As part of this year's exercise instructors from the U.S. Army's 11th Tactical Air Command will conduct low level flight-training and helicopter operations with counterparts in the Royal Moroccan Air Force. Alongside military activities the 23rd Marine Regiment will also undertake humanitarian and medical missions throughout Morocco.

Washington's close relations with Rabat prompted speculation that Morocco was under consideration as a location for the continental headquarters of the United States African Command (AFRICOM). Whilst the United States was quick to deny rumours it is likely that the prospect of an AFRICOM base in Morocco has been used by Algeria for geopolitical gain. Many Algerian officials regard U.S.-Moroccan military cooperation as a rebuke to regionally-led counter-terrorist policies. Underpinning such thinking is over thirty years of strained relations between Morocco and Algeria. Since 1975 Algeria has supported the Polisario Front's armed struggle against the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. Support has extended to the housing of Saharawi refugee camps in western Algeria. Since 1994 the Algerian-Moroccan border has also remained closed due to Rabat's accusation that Algeria was complicit in terrorist activity within Marrakech.

Algeria can therefore utilise contentious diplomatic relations and Rabat's 'special relationship' with Washington to justify overlooking Morocco's contribution to regional counterterrorism. Whilst this consolidates Algeria's dominance within regional initiatives it contradicts the international system's outlook for the Maghreb. Since 1991 both the United States and United Nations have promoted solutions to the Western Sahara conflict. This culminated in 2007 with Rabat's approval of regional autonomy for Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty. Resolution of the conflict would benefit the United States' strategic commitment of promoting regional stability to support foreign policy and security objectives. As Morocco will then be expected to join regional cooperative efforts, Algeria's *primus inter pares* status amongst partners will be seriously compromised.

A closer Algerian-Moroccan partnership would undoubtedly benefit regional efforts to counter AQIM. Both have good working relationships with the United States. Their exchanges could be utilised to benefit the region's smaller states that lack their experience of counterterrorism. As

this is in part due to a lack of resources, both Morocco and Algeria are ideally placed to be the lead supplier of hardware and manpower for counterterrorist activities. Adding Morocco to the partnership also increases the strategic depth of the Maghreb states against AQIM. With Morocco as a partner AQIM would then have to contend with an increased security presence along Mauritania's northern and western borders. Yet cooperation remains contingent on the resolution of an older regional conflict and Algeria's acceptance of a wider regional partnership.