The Sahara and Europe: so, what comes next?

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As gun barrels are cooling down around a blood–stained BP compound in Algeria, and as fighter jets still roam the skies of Northern Mali in search for Islamist militant targets, it is only legitimate to ask what Europe should contemplate doing next in the vast expanses (twice the size of Western Europe) of the Saharo–Sahelian region? Understandable colonial guilt (and the corresponding fear of neo–colonialism) may induce Europeans simply not to intervene. Full stop. Yet there are several reasons to take a different direction.

In the first place, calls for help from embattled allies should be taken seriously. This is particularly true for France, which is bound to Mali by a defence agreement. The current Malian government certainly suffers from a lack of legitimacy as it has not been elected (though the current interim president has an electoral mandate, since he had been chosen by his peers as president of the Malian national assembly), but the socio–political project of the Islamist groups, which have clearly stated their intention to finish off the Republic of Mali, as well as harrowing reports coming from the regions already under their control, have made a strong moral and humanitarian case. Exceptional circumstances call for exceptional decisions. After all, General De Gaulle had never been elected when he sought refuge in London, and yet the Free French were welcomed as the liberators of Paris in 1944.

Europeans also have more self-interested reasons to justify why they should do their bit to help those who fight so that the Sahara does not become a no–go zone: this is the place where substantial proportions of the oil, gas, phosphates, iron ore and uranium used in Western Europe are extracted. Because its northern margins reach the shores of the Mediterranean, Europe is, to a certain extent, its rear garden (or the other way around if you want to stick to a more Eurocentric perspective). Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has clearly stated that it intended to use it as a base to strike Europe, and the menace should be taken seriously. Even more importantly, the Sahara also has the potential to become a land of resources, if its development is left unhampered in the next few decades. For instance, fitted with the right solar panels, it could easily produce all the electricity Europe needs. And conversely, Europe could provide some much–needed human and technological capital to the region.

Being involved in the harmonious development of the Sahara, so that its resources are genuinely beneficial to its inhabitants, will not be made any easier if groups fundamentally and ideologically hostile to anything vaguely Western are left to dictate their intransigent law. Instead, increased cooperation across the Mediterranean could prove a clear case of a win–win relationship in decades to come. All the governments of the region are actively fighting terrorist threats on their territories, and would appreciate a clear sign that the northern shore of the *mare nostrum* is on their side too. Some of them, like Algeria, have been on the job for decades. When they do not request help, they should certainly be able to manage their affairs on their own terms, lest we would like to impinge on their sovereignty.

The situation is a bit different for those who do request external help. We need to ensure that our support is used, not as a stopgap measure, but in the perspective of durable conflict resolution. In Mali's case, this means pushing the agenda for a return to democracy as soon as the security situation allows. It also implies to leave no stone unturned to solve the Tuareg question, which has been undermining the unity of the country since independence. It should start almost immediately, with sustained efforts to limit as much as possible indiscriminate retaliation against light–skinned populations when Northern Mali is reconquered. The temptation will be strong, among the (dark–skinned) soldiers of the Malian army, to equate being Tuareg or Arab with pertaining to a jihadist group. Leaving regulars to indulge in such hasty and lethal generalisations would be a fatal error that would undermine any effort of reconciliation. The longer–term goal should be to ensure a genuine development of the Northern half of Mali which provides meaningful opportunities to local young people. Unemployment and idleness are the most effective fast–track to armed militancy, drug trafficking and sheer violence, which have been undermining the region for decades. Foreign impetus could be used this time to jump–start the engine of development for good.

These are challenging projects and they will not be easy to implement. Yet, neither local nor European governments are condemned to remain alone in their effort. Starting from the realisation that they are objective allies in a battle against under-development and obscurantism, they could engage in a mutually beneficial partnership. Sceptics on both sides may raise eyebrows, but the potential benefits for all parties would be substantial. Rather than just thinking about battling terrorism, we would better consider the grander scheme of how we can make ourselves useful to local governments for the purpose of developing the vast expanses of the Sahara. Europe and the Sahara, partners in development. More than a mere slogan, it should simply become our programme whenever we are invited to act in the region.

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