

# How Washington helped Foster the Islamist Uprising in Mali

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**by Jeremy Keenan**

*As the French-led military operation begins, **Jeremy Keenan** reveals how the US and Algeria have been sponsoring terror in the Sahara.*

*On 12 October 2012, the UN Security Council voted unanimously in favour of a French-drafted resolution asking Mali's government to draw up plans for a military mission to re-establish control over the northern part of Mali, an area of the Sahara bigger than France. Known as Azawad by local Tuareg people, northern Mali has been under the control of Islamist extremists following a Tuareg rebellion at the beginning of the year. For several months, the international media have been referring to northern Mali as 'Africa's Afghanistan', with calls for international military intervention becoming inexorable.*



Calling the shots: a US Special Forces soldier training Malian troops in Kita, May 2010. Alfred de Montesquiou (right)

While the media have provided abundant descriptive coverage of the course of events and atrocities committed in Azawad since the outbreak in January of what was ostensibly just another Tuareg rebellion, some pretty basic questions have not been addressed. No journalist has asked, or at least answered satisfactorily, how this latest Tuareg rebellion was hijacked, almost as soon as it started, by a few hundred Islamist extremists.

In short, the world's media have failed to explain the situation in Azawad. That is because the real story of what has been going on there borders on the incredible, taking us deep into the murky reaches of Western intelligence and its hook-up with Algeria's secret service.

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Azawad's current nightmare is generally explained as the unintended outcome of the overthrow of Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi. That is true in so far as his downfall precipitated the return to the Sahel (Niger and Mali) of thousands of angry, disillusioned and well-armed Tuareg fighters who had gone to seek their metaphorical fortunes by serving the Qaddafi regime. But this was merely the last straw in a decade of increasing exploitation, repression and marginalization that has underpinned an ongoing cycle of Tuareg protest, unrest and rebellion. In that respect, Libya was the catalyst for the Azawad rebellion, not its underlying cause. Rather, the catastrophe now being played out in Mali is the inevitable outcome of the

way in which the Global War On Terror has been inserted into the Sahara-Sahel by the US, in concert with Algerian intelligence operatives, since 2002.

### **Why Algeria and the US needed terrorism**

When Abdelaziz Bouteflika took over as Algeria's President in 1999, the country was faced with two major problems. One was its standing in the world. The role of the army and the DRS (the Algerian intelligence service, see box *Algeria's 'state terrorism'*) in the 'Dirty War' had made Algeria a pariah state. The other was that the army, the core institution of the state, was lacking modern high-tech weaponry as a result of international sanctions and arms embargoes.

The solution to both these problems lay in Washington. During the Clinton era, relations between the US and Algeria had fallen to a particularly low level. However, with a Republican victory in the November 2000 election, Algeria's President Bouteflika, an experienced former Foreign Minister, quickly made his sentiments known to the new US administration and was invited in July 2001 to a summit meeting in Washington with President Bush. Bush listened sympathetically to Bouteflika's account of how his country had dealt with the fight against terrorists and to his request for specific military equipment that would enable his army to maintain peace, security and stability in Algeria.

At that moment, Algeria had a greater need for US support than vice-versa. But that was soon to change. The 9/11 terrorist attacks precipitated a whole new era in US-Algerian relations. Over the next four years, Bush and Bouteflika met six more times to develop a largely covert and highly duplicitous alliance.

### **Algeria's 'state terrorism'**

In January 1992, legislative elections in Algeria were on the point of being won by the *Front Islamique du Salut*, which would have resulted in the world's first democratically elected Islamist government. With a 'green light' from the US and France, Algeria's generals annulled the elections in what was effectively a military *coup d'état*. It led almost immediately to a 'civil war' (known as the 'Dirty War') that continued through the 1990s, allegedly between the Islamists and the army, in which an estimated 200,000 people were killed.

By 1994, the Algerian regime's secret intelligence service, the *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (DRS), had succeeded in infiltrating the main armed Islamist groups, the *Groupes Islamiques Armés* (GIA), to the extent that even the GIA leader, Djamel Zitouni, was a DRS agent. Indeed, many of the killings and civilian massacres were either undertaken by the DRS masquerading as Islamists or by GIA elements tipped off and protected by the DRS.

John Schindler, a former high-ranking US intelligence officer and member of the National Security Council and now the Professor of National Security Affairs at the US Naval War College, recently 'blew the whistle' on Algeria's creation of terrorists and use of 'state terrorism'. Writing about the 1990s, he said:

*'The GIA was the creation of the DRS. Using proven Soviet methods of penetration and provocation, the agency assembled it to discredit the extremists. Much of [the] GIA's leadership consisted of DRS agents, who drove the group into the dead end of mass murder,*

*a ruthless tactic that thoroughly discredited GIA Islamists among nearly all Algerians. Most of its major operations were the handiwork of the DRS, including the 1995 wave of bombings in France. Some of the most notorious massacres of civilians were perpetrated by military special units masquerading as Mujahedin, or by GIA squads under DRS control.'*<sup>1</sup>

By 1998, the killing had become so bad that many Islamists abandoned the GIA to form the *Groupe Salafiste pour le Prédication et le combat* (GSPC) but it soon became evident that it too had been infiltrated by the DRS.

Although the 'Dirty War' began winding down after 1998, it has never really ended. The GSPC, which changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2006, is still operative both in northern Algeria and the Sahara-Sahel.

In many respects, little has changed since the 1990s in that the DRS is still creating terrorists and using 'false flag' incidents and 'state terrorism' as fundamental means of control. The DRS has certainly not changed: its head, General Mohamed Mediène, who was trained by the KGB and once referred to himself as 'The God of Algeria',<sup>2</sup> was appointed in 1990 and is still in post. He is regarded as the most powerful man in Algeria.

As for Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, its leaders in the Sahara and Sahel regions, namely Abdelhamid Abou Zaid, Mokhtar ben Mokhtar and Yahia Djouadi (all have many aliases) are either agents of the DRS or closely connected to it.

1. John Schindler, 'The ugly truth about Algeria, *The National Interest*, 10 Jul 2012.
2. Jeremy Keenan, 'General Toufik: "God of Algeria"', *Al Jazeera*, 29 Sep 2010.

My first book on the Global War On Terror in the Sahara, *The Dark Sahara* (Pluto 2009), described and explained the development of this extraordinary relationship. It revealed why it was that the Bush administration and the regime in Algiers both needed a 'little more terrorism' in the region. The Algerians wanted more terrorism to legitimize their need for more high-tech and up-to-date weaponry. The Bush administration, meanwhile, saw the development of such terrorism as providing the justification for launching a new Saharan front in the Global War On Terror. Such a 'second front' would legitimize America's increased militarization of Africa so as better to secure the continent's natural resources, notably oil. This, in turn, was soon to lead to the creation in 2008 of a new US combat command for Africa – AFRICOM.

The first US-Algerian 'false flag' terrorist operation in the Sahara-Sahel was undertaken in 2003 when a group led by an 'infiltrated' DRS agent, Amari Saifi (aka Abderrazak Lamari and 'El Para'), took 32 European tourists hostage in the Algerian Sahara. The Bush administration immediately branded El Para as 'Osama bin Laden's man in the Sahara'.

### **Rumsfeld's Cuban blueprint**

The US government has a long history of using false flag incidents to justify military intervention. The thinking behind the El Para operation in 2003 can actually be traced directly to a similar plan conceived by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff 40 years earlier.

In the wake of the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster – when a CIA-trained force of Cuban exiles, supported by US armed forces, attempted unsuccessfully to invade Cuba and overthrow the

government of Fidel Castro – the US Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff drew up plans, codenamed Operation Northwoods, to justify a US military invasion of Cuba. The plan was presented to President John F Kennedy’s Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, on 13 March 1962. Entitled ‘Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba (Top Secret),’<sup>1</sup> the Northwoods Operation proposed launching a secret and bloody war of terrorism against their own country in order to trick the American public into supporting an ill-conceived war that the Joint Chiefs of Staff intended to launch against Cuba. It called on the CIA and other operatives to undertake a range of atrocities. As US investigative journalist James Bamford described it: ‘Innocent civilians were to be shot on American streets; boats carrying refugees fleeing Cuba were to be sunk on the high seas; a wave of violent terrorism was to be launched in Washington DC, Miami and elsewhere. People would be framed for bombings they did not commit; planes would be hijacked. Using phony evidence, all of it would be blamed on Castro, thus giving Lemnitzer [Chair of US Joint Chiefs of Staff] and his cabal the excuse, as well as the public and international backing, they needed to launch their war against Fidel Castro’s Cuba.’<sup>2</sup>

The first US-Algerian ‘false flag’ terrorist operation in the Sahara-Sahel was undertaken in 2003

The plan was ultimately rejected by President Kennedy. Operation Northwoods remained ‘classified’ and unknown to the American public until declassified by the National Security Archive and revealed by Bamford in April 2001. In 2002, a not dissimilar plan was presented to US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld by his Defense Science Board. Excerpts from its ‘Summer Study on Special Operations and Joint Forces in Support of Countering Terrorism’ were revealed on 16 August 2002,<sup>3</sup> with Pamela Hess,<sup>4</sup> William Arkin<sup>5</sup> and David Isenberg,<sup>6</sup> amongst others, publishing further details and analysis of the plan. The plan recommended the creation of a ‘Proactive, Preemptive Operations Group’ (P20G as it became known), a covert organization that would carry out secret missions to ‘stimulate reactions’ among terrorist groups by provoking them into undertaking violent acts that would expose them to ‘counter-attack’ by US forces.<sup>7</sup>

## **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb**

My new book on the Global War On Terror in the Sahara (*The Dying Sahara*, Pluto 2013) will present strong evidence that the El Para operation was the first ‘test run’ of Rumsfeld’s decision, made in 2002, to operationalize the P20G plan. In his recent investigation of false flag operations, Nafeez Ahmed states that the US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh<sup>8</sup> was told by a Pentagon advisor that the Algerian [El Para] operation was a pilot for the new Pentagon covert P20G programme.<sup>9</sup>



So happy together: Algeria’s then president Abdelaziz Bouteflika with George W Bush in 2001. Win McNamee / Reuters

The Sahara-Sahel front is not the only case of such fabricated incidents in the Global War On Terror. In May 2008, President George W Bush requested some \$400 million in covert funding for terrorist groups across much of the Middle East-Afghanistan region in a covert offensive directed ultimately against the Iranian regime. An initial outlay of \$300 million was approved by Congress.

Since the El Para operation, Algeria's DRS, with the complicity of the US and the knowledge of other Western intelligence agencies, has used Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, through the almost complete infiltration of its leadership, to create a terrorist scenario. Much of the terrorist landscape that Algeria and its Western allies have painted in the Sahara-Sahel region is completely false.

*The Dying Sahara* analyzes every supposed 'terrorism' incident in the region over this last, terrible decade. It shows that a few are genuine, but that the vast majority were fabricated or orchestrated by the DRS. Some incidents, such as the widely reported Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb attack on Algeria's Djanet airport in 2007, simply didn't happen. What actually transpired was that a demonstration against the Algerian administration over unemployment by local Tuareg youths ended with the youths firing shots at the airport. It was nothing to do with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

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In order to justify or increase what I have called their 'terrorism rents' from Washington, the governments of Mali, Niger and Algeria have been responsible on at least five occasions since 2004 for provoking Tuareg into taking up arms, as in 2004 (Niger), 2005 (Tamanrasset, Algeria), 2006 (Mali), 2007-09 (Niger and Mali). In July 2005, for example, Tuareg youths rioted in the southern Algerian city of Tamanrasset, setting ablaze some 40 government and commercial buildings. It was finally proven in court that the riots and arson attacks had been led by Algeria's police as *agents provocateurs*. The matter was hushed up and some 80 youths freed and compensated. But the object of the exercise had been achieved: the DRS's allies in Washington were able to talk of 'putative terrorism' among the Tuareg of Tamanrasset, thus lending more justification to George Bush's Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative and the Pentagon's almost concurrent 'Operation Flintlock' military exercise across the Sahara.

Around the time of the El Para operation, the Pentagon produced a series of maps of Africa, depicting most of the Sahara-Sahel region as a 'Terror Zone' or 'Terror Corridor'. That has now become a self-fulfilled prophecy. In addition, the region has also become one of the world's main drug conduits. In the last few years, cocaine trafficking from South America through Azawad to Europe, under the protection of the region's political and military élites, notably Mali's former president and security forces and Algeria's DRS, has burgeoned. The UN Office of Drugs Control recently estimated that 60 per cent of Europe's cocaine passed through the region. It put its value, at Paris street prices, at some \$11 billion, with an estimated \$2 billion remaining in the region.



Halos of power: Malian coup leader Captain Amadou Sanogo (right) with interim president Dioncounda Traoré in April 2012. Reuters / Stringer

The impact of Washington's machinations on the peoples of the Sahara-Sahel has been devastating, not least for the regional economy. More than 60 kidnappings of Westerners have led to the collapse of the tourism industry through which Tuareg communities in Mali, Niger and Algeria previously acquired much of their cash income. For example, the killing of four French tourists in Mauritania, in addition to subsequent kidnappings, resulted in only 173 tourists visiting Mauritania in 2011, compared with 72,500 in 2007.<sup>10</sup> The loss of tourism has deprived the region of tens of millions of dollars and forced more and more Tuareg (and



others), especially young men, into the 'criminality' of banditry and drug trafficking.

### **Mali's current mess**

While it will be clear from all this that Mali's latest Tuareg rebellion had a complex background, the rebellion that began in January 2012 was different from all previous Tuareg rebellions in that there was a very real likelihood that it would succeed, at least in taking control of the whole of northern Mali. The creation of the rebel MNLA in October 2011 (see box below) was therefore not only a potentially serious threat to Algeria, but one which appears to have taken the Algerian regime by surprise. Algeria has always been a little fearful of the Tuareg, both domestically and in the neighbouring Sahel countries. The distinct possibility of a militarily successful Tuareg nationalist movement in northern Mali, which Algeria has always regarded as its own backyard, could not be countenanced.

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The Algerian intelligence agency's strategy to remove this threat was to use its control of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to weaken and then destroy the credibility and political effectiveness of the MNLA. This is precisely what we have seen happening in northern Mali over the last nine months.

Although the Algerian government has denied doing so, it sent some 200 Special Forces into Azawad on 20 December 2011. Their purpose appears to have been to:

- protect Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which had moved from its training base(s) in southern Algeria into northern Mali around 2008
- assess the strengths and intentions of the MNLA, and
- help establish two 'new' salafist-jihadist terrorist groups in the region – Ansar al-Din and MUJAO.

The leaders of these new groups – Ansar al-Din's Iyad ag Ghaly, and MUJAO's Sultan Ould Badi – are both closely associated with the Algerian intelligence agency, the DRS. Although Ansar al-Din and MUJAO both started out as few in number, they were immediately supported with personpower in the form of seasoned, well-trained killers from the DRS's Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb brigades. This explains why the Islamists were able to expand so quickly and dominate the MNLA both politically and militarily.

Although Algeria's strategy has been effective, at least so far, in achieving its object of weakening and discrediting the MNLA, it has already turned the region into a human catastrophe. Foreign military intervention now looks increasingly likely. That is something to which Algeria has always been strongly opposed in that it regards itself, not France, as the hegemonic power in the Sahel. The UN Security Council's 12 October Resolution effectively gave Algeria a last window of opportunity to 'rein in its dogs' and engineer a peaceful political solution. But, as anger against the Islamists mounts and the desire for revenge from Mali's civil society grows ever stronger, a peaceful solution is looking increasingly unlikely.

### **Mali's Tuareg rebellions**

The Tuareg people number approximately 2-3 million and are the indigenous population of much of the Central Sahara and Sahel. Their largest number, estimated at 800,000, live in

Mali, followed by Niger, with smaller populations in Algeria, Burkina Faso and Libya.

There have been five Tuareg rebellions in Mali since Independence, in addition to three in Niger and sporadic unrest in Algeria. The latest Tuareg rebellion in Mali, by the *Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA), began in January 2012. The MNLA comprised Tuareg who had returned from Libya around October 2011, rebels who had not laid down arms after the 2007-09 uprising and others who had defected from the Malian army. Their number was estimated at around 3,000. By mid-March, they had driven Mali's ill-equipped and ill-led forces out of most of northern Mali (Azawad), meeting little resistance.

Following this humiliation of Mali's army, soldiers in the Kati barracks near Bamako mutinied on 22 March, an incident that led to a junta of junior officers taking power in the country. Within a week, the three northern provincial capitals of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu were in rebel hands, and on 5 April the MNLA declared Azawad an independent state.

The declaration of Azawad's independence received no international support. One reason for this was because of the alliance between the MNLA and Ansar al-Din, a newly created jihadist movement led by a Tuareg notable, Iyad ag Ghaly, and another jihadist group, *Jamat Tawhid Wal Jihad Fi Garbi Afriqqiya* (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa - MUJAO). Both Ansar al-Din and MUJAO were connected to and supported by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). By May, it was these Islamist groups, not the MNLA, who were calling the political and military shots in Azawad.

By the end of June, tension between the MNLA and the Islamists broke into open fighting, resulting in the MNLA being driven out of Gao and becoming increasingly marginalized politically. Since then, the Islamists have imposed strict sharia law in Azawad, especially in Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. Summary executions, amputations, stonings and other such atrocities, as well as the destruction of holy shrines in Timbuktu - UNESCO world heritage sites - are currently being investigated by the International Criminal Court. By August, nearly half a million people had fled or been displaced.

I have warned on numerous occasions in the past decade that the way in which terrorism was being fabricated and orchestrated in the Sahara-Sahel by the Algerian DRS, with the knowledge of the US and other Western powers, would inevitably result in a catastrophic outcome, quite possibly in the form of region-wide conflagration. Unless something fairly miraculous can be achieved by around the turn of the year, northern Mali looks like becoming the site for the start of just such a conflagration.

Having said that, there is the prospect of one appalling scenario that is being raised by some of the local, mostly Tuareg, militia commanders. They are postulating as to whether Algeria's DRS and its Western allies have been using the Azawad situation to encourage the concentration of 'salafist-jihadists' into the region - in the form of the long-talked about 'Saharan emirate' - before 'eradicating' them. In that instance, Algeria's DRS would pluck out its 'agents' and leave the foot-soldiers - the Islamist fanatics - to face the bombardment.

But whatever dire scenario develops in Mali, when you hear the news stories related to it, do not by any means think: 'oh, just another war in Africa'. Remember this murky, squalid background and how Washington's Global War On Terror has come home to roost for the peoples of the Sahara.

## Notes

1. US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba (Top Secret)', *US Department of Defense*, 13 Mar 1962. It was published online in a more complete form by the National Security Archive on 30 April 2001.
2. James Bamford, *Body of Secrets*, Doubleday 2001.
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