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Northern Africa's Political Shake-Up

Russia and the U.S. are competing for influence in African countries undergoing radical reorganization.

By Roger Kaplan

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The Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie holds a rally at the United Nations, April 20. PHOTO: AREZKI L.

While anti-Israel protesters rallied and rioted at Columbia University on Saturday, a less-publicized, more orderly group of about 500 demonstrators met in Manhattan's United Nations Plaza. They gathered in support of the creation of a new African state in a region they say is oppressed by Algerian colonialism.

The Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie, known by the French acronym MAK, is a political campaign for the independence of Kabylie, a mountainous coastal region in northern Algeria inhabited primarily by the Kabyle, a Berber people. At the rally in front of the U.N., Ferhat Mehenni, who heads the movement, said that a people without a state is defenseless and doomed to perish. The crowd cheered.

Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune's government has branded MAK a terrorist movement and jailed many of its activists. Meantime Mr. Tebboune has

refused to label Hamas as a terrorist organization and has accused Israel, whose legitimacy he denies, of violating international law. By contrast, MAK has taken the position that Israel has the right to defend itself against Islamist barbarism.

The Kabyle reject the Algiers government's charge of separatism and insist that they represent a distinct nation. From their mountain strongholds, the Kabyle for centuries resisted the Romans, Arabs and Turks—until French colonizers finally defeated them in the 1870s. Notwithstanding their active participation in the anticolonial war, the MAK argues that their region was later forcibly recolonized by Algeria, first in a short war immediately following Algeria's independence from France in 1962, and later in regular campaigns of repression.

After half a century of working with human-rights and democratic groups in Algeria to liberalize the one-party police state, Kabyle spokesmen, including Mr. Mehenni, brought the case for decolonization to the U.N. A few days before the New York demonstration, Mr. Mehenni spoke before a U.N. committee, drawing words of support from Emirati, Moroccan and Spanish diplomats.

The “Free Kabylie” event took place against a broader backdrop of political jolts and diplomatic reversals in northern Africa. U.S. policymakers have lately been assessing the consequences of ending U.S. military assistance to Niger—Algeria's southern neighbor—at the request of a military junta that overthrew Niger's elected government in July. Top officials from the State Department and the U.S. military's African command in recent weeks have tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a deal to maintain an air base in Niger for supplying counterterrorism operations over vast and difficult terrain and identifying bad actors hiding among the dunes.

Since the late 1990s, America has helped countries in North Africa resist threats to their security. Algeria has been a partner in U.S. antiterror efforts in the region for decades. Islamist insurgents were driven into the Sahara by the Algerian army in the 1990s, and mercenaries in service to Muammar Gaddafi followed during the Western intervention in Libya in 2011. These groups brought terrorism and war to the Sahel, the region dividing the arid Sahara to the north and the humid savannas to the south. The extremely poor countries on the “shore” of the vast desert welcomed help from the U.S., France, and regional neighbors including Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Chad.

The assistance helped “blacks” resist terror and conquest by “Arabs,” to borrow the terms Sahelians use to distinguish the sedentary farmers on the southern

bank of the Niger River from the nomadic tribes on its north bank. Troops from Mali were able to retake northern towns from Islamist militant control with the help of French and Chadian forces in 2013. Niger, by its own efforts and with U.S. support, secured its borders from raiding parties and drove Islamist and bandit bands into the desert.

Along with military assistance, the Sahel needs meaningful economic opportunities for its growing populations. Not unjustly, its inhabitants view Westerners as more interested in getting a share of Africa's mineral and agricultural wealth than in providing what the continent most needs: job-creating investments. Many Africans consider the economic and currency arrangements they made with former colonial powers after independence more as plunder than as fair trade. France under President Emmanuel Macron has proposed reforms, but Africans see the proposals as too little, too late. It's unsurprising, then, that Senegal's newly elected president, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, is pushing to retool his country's economy away from its reliance on foreign governments, especially France.

It is possible that in Niger, if the U.S. air base isn't already lost, it will be used as a bargaining chip by the Nigerien junta to make Washington understand that the old ways must change—that Africans won't let Western nations suggest deals that they'd better not refuse. This is a bitter pill for the U.S. Army's pan-African training and assistance program known as United States Africa Command, or Africom. It threatens to reverse the successes achieved through exemplary cooperation between American and Nigerien troops in recent years, according to Daniel Eizenga of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

Diplomatically and politically, there's little we can do if we want to maintain the containment policy in which we and the Algerians to the north of the desert, and the Sahelians to its south, have common purposes.

Whatever America may think of juntas replacing elected government in Mali, Burkina Faso, and most recently Niger, for the moment the U.S. is stuck with military men in the Sahel. They are listening with interest to offers of help from Russia, whose Africa Corps—a spinoff of the former Wagner Group—are as interested in uranium mines and other extraction opportunities as in security assistance.

The Algerian military gets most of its materiel from Russia, as it did from the Soviet Union. The U.S. shouldn't rule out forcing Africans to choose between

Russian and U.S. assistance, unless we want to write off a large swath of Africa. We can offer better deals, both in security and job-creating investments.

In a conversation with me, Kamissa Camara, Mali's foreign minister under former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (overthrown in 2020), once offered the wry observation that Americans thrive on competition and ought not decline the Russian challenge. This is a tall order: It means the U.S. must show very poor and very young Africans that they can build a better future at home rather than risk the perils of illegal immigration to Europe or America.

It may be wise for the U.S. to cease its facile concern for democracy and gender ideology, evidently State Department priorities these days, and go to bat for an African future based on security and prosperity.

Even if U.S. foreign-policy makers viewed with favor the emergence of a philosemitic, pro-Western and liberal country such as Kabylie in a strategically important part of Africa, there are no foreign policy precedents to ditch a security partner—Algeria, with whom we need to cooperate—for an unknown quantity.

We never officially supported Zionism, either. Until we did.

Mr. Kaplan is a Washington writer.