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NOVEMBER
2017

FRANCE AND AMERICA'S MURKY WAR IN AFRICA

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One month ago, on October 4, four members of US Special Operations Forces were killed and two wounded in an attack in western Niger, an emerging hot spot of Islamist terrorist activity. If an Islamist armed group was responsible, as some reports suggest, this would be the first known incident in which such a group has killed US soldiers on active duty in the Sahel. Western civilians, including US civilians, have died however in a recent series of mass-casualty attacks by Islamist extremists in regional African capitals. A number of French military have lost their life too.

Such groups conduct regular attacks against local targets: their focus includes government officials, prisons, schools and individuals accused of collaborating with the state or French-led counter terrorism operations – and against UN peacekeepers in Mali.

Some analysts have claimed that the often heavy-handed approach of local security forces has contributed to worsening instability. The best documented incidences of such behaviour are in northern Nigeria. Neighbouring Niger is also a key transit point for African migrants seeking to reach Europe via Libya and the Mediterranean.

An often overlooked factor in discussions on the Sahel belt of Africa are the important French economic interests across a region which boasts gold, uranium, gas, coltan, manganese, lithium and rare earths. Mehdi Taje of the *Institut de recherche strat3gique de l'Ecole Militaire* in Paris argues that “the geographical reality in this region allows certain states to position themselves militarily to better control the (mineral) wealth of the Maghreb and West Africa”. General Vincent Desportes who lectures at SciencePo Paris argues that without the French engagement in Mali in 2013, the interests of the French company Areva, a world leader on nuclear power and its access to Niger's uranium, would have been at risk. A report to the French Senate in 2013 *La presence de la France dans une Afrique convoit3e* asked the government to ensure the security of French access, in particular to the uranium mine of Arlit in Niger.

One should never forget the medium term consequences of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the western led destruction of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. In dif-

ferent ways, both ill thought through operations resulted in the creation of armed resistance groups which found it convenient to join existing Islamist groups. In Iraq many former officers of Saddam Hussein helped to create ISIS. The fall out of Gaddafi's murder was the destabilisation of Mali by well armed groups of northern Malians who had served in the Libyan army and fled Libya in 2012. The French Serval military operation of January 2013 was prompted by the need to prevent such groups from attacking the capital, Bamako. Four thousand French troops were deployed, with no debate in parliament in Paris. This morphed into the Barkhane operation on 1 August 2014. This operation, like its forebear was never discussed by French deputies. Democratic accountability is absent in both cases.

Beyond Mali and Niger, terrorist attacks have spread across the region – the case of Boko Haram in Nigeria is well known. Troops from Niger participate in the Nigeria-led Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to counter Boko Haram while five Sahel countries known as the G5, including Niger, have proposed a similar joint force to pursue Mali-based terrorist groups and enhance boarder security. Niger boasts one of the largest numbers of US troops in Africa, 800 men today – eight times as many as when Barack Obama started the ball rolling in 2013. The State Department for its part has sought to build the capacity of Niger's security forces for security and counter terrorism for 15 years and large sums have been devoted to providing the country with counter terrorism equipment, training and strengthening the agriculture sector. Most Americans do not even know their country has a growing military presence in the area.

Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world – military coups, rebellions and food security crisis are recurrent. The US organisation Freedom House has asserted that Niger's security challenges have "served as an alibi" for the administration of President Mahamadou Issoufou "to restrict freedoms and civil liberties". In neighbouring Mali, the Tuareg north has rebelled many times since independence while Boko Haram has thrived on the misery and corruption so characteristic of government in northern Nigeria.

The US created Africom in 2007-8 to fight against terrorism in Africa and as US Defence Secretary James Mattis made clear last April, fully supports French led military operations. The French commitment is open ended as President Macron stated when he spoke at the French military base in Gao (Mali) on May 17. Whether the US is lending full support to France or is increasing its presence because it feels France has not done a good job is far from clear.

Meanwhile local African troops, who do much of the fighting, are often accused of violations of human rights. The region is rife with tribal, economic and political grievances which are not addressed. Smuggling – of cocaine from South America and increasingly of illegal Africans migrants trying to get to Europe means that Islamist terrorists morph into smugglers or gangsters without anyone being able to say who is who. The same situation has developed along the southern and south western borders of Tunisia.

Meanwhile, there has been an increasing presence of younger imams across the region, trained in the rigorous Saudi wahabi doctrine of Islam since the 1970s in Saudi Arabia. Moroccan and Israeli actors are also part of this increasingly murky show. If you describe the region as a bed of nails, the only answer is a hammer. None of the key actors appears to have a strategy however, which can only lead to a worsening security and economic situation.

A recent report to the US Congress *Attack on US Soldiers in Niger: Context and Issues for Congress* (October 5, 2017 – INI 0797) expresses concern about "US military rules of engagement and force protection" in what is a shadowy war with an un-

clear strategy, of which American public opinion knows next to nothing. As for France, its much vaunted policy of renovating its presence in West Africa looks to some observers like a facelift of traditional neo-colonial behaviour, summed up by the expression *La FranceAfrique*. Selling sophisticated weapons to very poor countries whose elites are notoriously corrupt may be fine for the armament industry, as General Desportes concedes but it will hardly bring peace and development to the region. As for those who choose to see it as part of a global war on terror, the best advice is to read the report published in May by the *Association malienne des droits de l'homme* (AMDH). It may give them second thoughts about the wisdom of the policy France and America are pursuing in the Sahel.