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US militarization of the Sahara-Sahel
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US militarization of the Sahara-Sahel: Security, Space & Imperialism
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Introduction

Securitizing the Sahara

Jacob Mundy

The Threat

Since 2002, the US government has been pursuing a series of counter-terrorism initiatives in Northwest Africa’s Sahara-Sahel region. These measures began with the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), to ‘assist Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Chad in protecting their borders, thus supporting the U.S. national security interests of waging war on terrorism and enhancing regional peace and security’. In 2005, the United States reformulated the PSI into the half-billion dollar Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), ‘designed to provide a regional response to terrorism by offering a balanced program of military assistance, intelligence sharing, democratization and good governance support, and humanitarian aid’. The TSCTI also expanded the scope of participation, bringing Algeria, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia into the project. The 2010 budget request for the re-branded Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorist Partnership (TSCTP) was $80.3 million. In the brave new world after 11 September 2001, this is small beans for a US development-security outlay; it represents just two percent of the 2010 development budget for Afghanistan (the State Department’s side of the civil-military counter-insurgency effort) or what the Pentagon plans to spend on Iraq and Afghanistan every six hours in 2010. The TSCTP is described in US government documents as ‘a multi-faceted, multi-year strategy aimed at defeating terrorist organizations by strengthening regional counter-terrorism capabilities, enhancing and institutionalizing cooperation among the region’s security forces, promoting democratic governance, discrediting terrorist ideology, and reinforcing bilateral military ties with the United States’. Apparently the TSCTP has been so successful that its ‘best practices’ have also been adapted to the East Africa Regional Strategic Initiative, a similar counter-terrorism program focusing on the Horn.

Despite this commitment from the US government to the Sahara-Sahel, there is no consensus among policy makers, observers, regional governments and locals on-the-ground as to the ultimate rationale for these security initiatives. The primary justification for the US militarization of the Sahel is the existence of a small number of self-proclaimed ‘Islamist’ groups operating in the deserts connecting Mauritania, Mali, Burkina, Niger, Algeria, Tunisia, Chad and Libya, not to mention groups already active in northern Morocco Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. Debate has focused on whether or not these armed groups, individually or taken as a dis-articulated whole, present a potential and significant threat to local and international interests. There are those arguing in the positive (Lyman & Morrison 2004; Cline 2007; Hunt 2007; Scheuer 2007; Mohsen-Finan 2008); those expressing skepticism or agnosticism about the existence or extent of the threat (International Crisis Group 2005; Obi 2005; Archer,

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Securitizing the Sahara

According to the most routine narrative, the presence of terrorists in the Sahara owes to a confluence of (1) spill over from the armed conflict in Algeria in the 1990s, (2) from ‘Jihadists’ fleeing Afghanistan following the 2001 US invasion (see Map 1) and, more recently, (3) experienced fighters trained in new terrains of US occupied Iraq and Afghanistan. These groups initially coalesced under the already existing Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat), a surprisingly durable remnant of the armed conflict in 1990s Algeria. The long insinuated flirtation between the GSPC and al-Qa’idah was finally consummated in 2007 with the alleged blessing of none other than Osama bin Laden; the GSPC rechristened as an official branch of al-Qa’idah in Northwest Africa. Foreign observers do not seem quite sure about their official name, but most have settled upon al-Qa’idah in the Islamic Maghrib, perhaps because it makes a nice acronym in French (AQMI, Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique) or in English (AQIM), one that seems to echo the name of other al-Qa’idah branches — e.g., AQAP, Al-Qa’idah in the Arabia Peninsula, and AQI, Al-Qa’idah in Iraq.

The putative threat posed by the GSPC metamorphosis into AQMI goes well beyond the region. Henry A. Crumpton, former US ambassador for counterterrorism, told a US Senate subcommittee in 2006 (i.e., before the formal GSPC merger with Al-Qa’idah): ‘Pressed by Algerian counterterrorism successes, the once Algeria-centric GSPC has become a regional terrorist organization, recruiting and operating all throughout the Maghreb — and beyond to Europe itself’ (quoted in Hansen & Vriens 2009). The European Police Office (Europol) has likewise come to the conclusion that the GSPC-AQMI poses a potential threat to Europe, especially the northern Mediterranean rim (see European Police 2008).

Recalling the contest-ed narratives of the GSPC-AQMI genealogy in Algeria, Stephen Harmon’s contribution to this collection, which serves as an excellent historical primer, goes well beyond the simplistic accounts found in daily news reports and the analyses of Washington think tanks. Yet Harmon is no agnostic regarding the potential threat posed by AQMI; he describes with vivid detail the local and international dynamics that contributed to the trans-regionalization of the armed Islamist movement in Algeria. Harmon nonetheless asks whether or not there is sufficient warrant for the current array of US counter-terrorism initiatives in Northwest Africa:

None of these American securitization initiatives — not the PSI, nor the TSCTP, nor Africom — would have been justifiable on the basis of energy concerns or rivalry with China alone. Defense Department lobbyists needed a credible terrorist threat to pry hundreds of millions of dollars from Congress for these programs. The GSPC/AQIM provided just the right incentive to make these African security organs seem necessary. A question remains as to whether the terror threat posed by GSPC/AQIM to the region was sufficient to warrant the funding and deployment of these initiatives, or whether the US exaggerated the seriousness of the threat to justify its securitization initiatives.

For example, apparent capacity of Saharan armed Is-
lamist groups to actually inflict any serious damage on the local security forces or mount any logistically sophisticated operations appears quite limited. This is not to minimize the loss of life in northern Algeria, where, for example, there were massive bombings in April and December 2007 (the latter claiming the lives of several of my friends’ colleagues); nor in the Sahel, where local security forces have been targeted (e.g., the GSPC reportedly killed fifteen Mauritanian soldiers near Lembghet in June 2005); and some foreigners, likewise, have been killed. But apart from high-profile, low damage attacks against ‘Western’ targets and even less frequent attacks on local security forces, the actual threat posed by GSPC-AQMI to local and foreign interests appears quite limited (International Crisis Group 2005). Moreover, of all the established and emergent threats to security in the Sahara-Sahel — poverty, weak states, ethnic tensions, corrupt governance and, especially, climate change (Hershkowitz 2005; Jebb et al. 2008) — confronting a handful of terrorists seem like a misplaced priority to some (Obi 2005).

Securitization and/as Militarization?

One strand of securitization theory proposes that there are no given security threats but only successful and unsuccessful efforts to ‘securitize’ issues as concerns to be addressed primarily through a lense of national defense. For example, as some news reports noted in April 2010, childhood obesity rates were designated a ‘security threat’ to the United States because it limited the pool of applicants for military service. More seriously, the securitization (qua militarization) of development discourse and practice entails, in the US context, the Pentagon’s appropriation of humanitarian and development outlays. And, as frequently noted in the ‘war on terror’, militarization and privatization now go hand in hand, given the extent to which private contractors now constitute a second skeleton in the US military infrastructure, performing tasks ranging from logistics to covert war fighting. But securitization theory also addresses the nature of security, questioning the utility of militarizing all that is deemed important to a society’s prosperity. Indeed, one of the most profound insights of securitization theory was the simple observation that militarizing priorities might be counter productive to actually achieving those goals.

In the Sahara-Sahel, two questions of securitization present themselves: What is the real threat and how should that threat be securitized? Recently, it seems, there has been an effort to articulate Saharan terrorism with drug smuggling through West Africa. Executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Antonio Maria Costa recently charged, ‘There is plenty of evidence of a double flow. [...] drugs moving, arriving into West Africa from across the Atlantic [...] and the trading — exchange — of cocaine for arms’ (Agence France Presse 15 February 2010). In the world after 11 September 2001, it is not surprising to see various officials play the terrorism card for institutional gain; indeed, the total hegemony of terrorism as the ultimate securitizing utterance is impossible to deny. The fact that terrorism can now be asserted as a threat, rather than proven, is demonstration enough.

Meanwhile, the very real challenge of changing environments, partially induced by global warming, have manifested all along the entire Sahel for years. A 2007 report of the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) came to the conclusion that a significant contributing
factor to the conflicts in Sudan, especially the Darfur region on the eastern edge of the Sahel, is a multi-dimensional environmental crisis. As the UNEP’s Sudan Post-Conflict Assessment reported, ‘forecast climate change is expected to further reduce food production due to declining rainfall and increased variability, particularly in the Sahel belt. A drop in crop yields of up to 70 per cent is forecast for the most vulnerable areas’. Other interlocking factors include desertification (spreading 100 kilometers south in the last forty years), significant declines in rainfall (30% in northern Darfur), deforestation (approaching 100% in some areas in the next ten years) and stress from human and animal populations.

Niger, which seems to be at the epicenter of recent ‘terrorist’ activity linked to AQMI, also happens to be at another epicenter: the massive environmental change sweeping the Sahel. In a region of the world where rainfall means the difference between life and death, Niger saw a 70% drop in average precipitation in 2009. Having just faced a famine in 2005 that affected 3.5 million people, Niger is now asking the international community to help it confront a new famine that, according to Oxfam, will affect two to three times as many children, women and men, especially in the Zinder and Maradi regions. Populations in Chad, Burkina and Mali are also expected to suffer (Agence France Presse, 21 April 2010). As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted on World Water Day, more people die from lack of water than all forms of violence, armed conflict included.

On the one hand, we should be careful not to countenance too strongly a neo-Malthusian worldview in which conflict and local environments are so intimately linked that we absolve important intervening variables, such as the rapacious development ‘needs’ of Europe, North America and Australia, whose responsibility for the global environmental crisis is overwhelming (see debate on ‘violent environments’ in ECSP 2003: 89-96). On the other hand, we nonetheless need to consider whether or not alternative identities (i.e., Islam), ‘radicalization’ and black market activity pose the greatest threat to human security there. Even researchers associated with the US military have come to recognize the importance of considering the natural environment as warranting more attention within a holistic security framework (Jebb et al. 2008).

**Cartographies of Insecurity**

A slide from a US Marine Corps briefing describes the ‘Future Security Environment’ — predicted to last for at least the next two decades — as one of “‘Hybrid’ threats and challenges”; hybrid in that they combine traditional, irregular, catastrophic (e.g., mass terrorism) and disruptive (e.g., cyber attacks) modes of war. The new space of security spans an ‘arc of instability’ encompassing most of Central, Southwest and Southeast Asia; south-east Europe; almost all of Africa (except South Africa); as well as Central and most of South America. Essentially, the Global South — a majority of the world’s population minus China. As the slide notes, this area not only includes nuclear-armed states, major illicit drug production centers and ‘anti-West attitudes’, but also the ‘top ten oil reserves’. Ironically (or not) this briefing predicts threats emanating ‘largely in the littorals’.

The term Sahel means littoral or shore in Arabic (al-sahil). The Sahel is the southern ‘shore’ of the Sahara desert, often described as a savanna spanning the Atlantic (Mauritania-Senegal) to the Red Sea (Sudan). The position of the Sahara-Sahel region in the US ‘arc of instability’ is as much determined by the perceived threat of AQMI’s activities and the confluence of the security discourses of weak/failed states, ungoverned spaces and terrorist safe havens. A recent Aljazeera English broadcast (21 April 2010) reiterated the standard problematization of the Sahara: a ‘wide open
desert space that is nearly ungovernable’. A naïve New York Times subhead, not realizing the geographical and environmental reasons behind Mauritania’s ‘emptiness’, foreboded, ‘Much of Mauritania is empty — a laboratory for terrorists and their hunters’ (Schmidle 2009). Likewise, Senator Russ Feingold (2009), chair of the Senate’s sub-committee on Africa, has warned, The [Obama] administration is right to focus attention on the Pakistan-Afghanistan region, but we cannot lose sight of other places where al-Qaeda is seeking to gain ground. As we have seen in Somalia and Yemen, weak states, chronic instability, ungoverned spaces and unresolved local tensions can create almost ideal safe havens in which terrorists can recruit and operate. Several parts of the Sahel region include that same mix of ingredients. And the danger they pose, not just to regional security, but to our own national security, is real.

Even if AQMI poses little threat to African or Western interests in the Sahara region, initiatives such as the TSCTP are still justified, some argue, because they seek to prevent terrorist groups from coalescing into an actual threat (see Ellis 2004; Mohsen-Finan 2008).

The current locus of US imperial engagement worldwide is certainly Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Obama administration is engaged in an inherited Sisyphean effort to prevent, ostensibly, the re-establishment of an al-Qa’idah safe haven. It is this rationale — the safe haven threat (see Innes 2007) — that allegedly distinguishes the war effort there as one of necessity. And yet this rationale — the self-mandated warrant to prevent the establishment of terrorist safe havens — is foundational to the United States’ post-11 September 2001 security activities in the Sahara-Sahel.

Attacking the safe haven myth vis-à-vis Afghanistan, Harvard’s Stephen Walt (2009; see also Pillar 2009) provides several reasons to reject the case for that war’s necessity. Using a simultaneously banal yet powerful fact, Walt notes, ‘The 9/11 plot was organized out of Hamburg, not Kabul or Kandahar’. Terrorists are stateless and so counter-terrorism should follow suit. But what Walt fails to realize, and what is most disturbing about current US counter-terrorism policy, is that the drive to prevent safe havens is not based on what we know but rather what cannot be known: the future where we don’t intervene to prevent the terrorism we think might happen. The performance of counter-terrorism is now paramount because no democratically elected politician wants to be seen as having done nothing about terrorism the next time there is an attack. If terrorism poses a threat to anything, it is political incumbency in Liberal-Western democratic polities. And so the killing and wasted resources — important conditions of possibility for terrorism — continue unabated. Besides, what use is the world’s most expensive military if it cannot win ‘new’ wars? The shadow of Vietnam, indeed, looms larger than opponents of the Afghanistan war suspect.

Applying the safe haven model to any region of the world where government’s are poor, the territory is vast and the population has the potential to become ‘radicalized’ fails to grasp the specificity of Afghanistan and the Sahara (see McDougall 2007a). Indeed, what seems to be lost in the feverish desire to secure the United States against the unknown is the ironic fact that the two trouble spots in Asia and Africa also happen to be the victims of repeated foreign
intervention during the Cold War and afterwards — Afghanistan and Somalia.

In terms of the most basic geographic and demographic dimensions, any analogy between ‘Af-Pak’ and the Sahara-Sahel must contend with some stark realities. Together, Afghanistan and Pakistan cover roughly 593,000 square miles; the Pashtoon population, the dominant social milieu of the Taliban, number forty million. The Sahara desert, on the other hand, which includes six of Africa’s eleven largest countries (Algeria, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger), covers 3.5 million square miles. Algeria, Africa’s second largest country, is nearly one million square miles, or one and a half times the size of Afghanistan and Pakistan combined. Afghanistan and Pakistan could likewise fit inside Libya with room to spare.

The population of the Sahara — i.e., excluding Northwest Africa’s Sahel and Mediterranean rim — is, as many might expect, miniscule. The entire population of Mauritania, the most Saharan country in the region, is roughly 3.5 million, the majority inhabiting the cities of Nouakchott (the political capital) and Nouadhibou, (the economic capital). The contested territory of Western Sahara boasts one of the lowest population densities in the world. And like the much-vexed ‘tribal areas’ of northern Pakistan, the Sahara has its own special place of interest. Tuaregs call it the Azawagh/Azawak, an area of 31,000 square miles roughly bounded by the triangle of Algeria’s Hoggar mountains, Mali’s Adrar des Ifoghas and Niger’s Air massif. Even this confined theatre of interest in the US militarization of the Sahara boasts a population of less than five persons per square mile.

Early maps of the GSPC threat in the Sahara, like those created to support the Pan-Sahel Initiative, show ‘Terrorist Organizations Operating Throughout the Sahel’ (Map 2) and ‘Area of GSPC operations’ (Map 3). What is interesting about this map is not only the apparently extensive reach of the ‘Terrorist Area’, but the very peculiar way in which it touches all the right countries. It neatly includes Morocco by distending into southeast Morocco’s Draa valley (where no terrorist activity has taken place and the border with Algeria is well patrolled). Even more astutely, this zone avoids either the Moroccan occupied Western Sahara (perhaps the most militarized region in the Sahara) or the section of Western Sahara under the nominal control of that territory’s Frente Polisario independence movement. Western Sahara, of course, cannot be included in US counter terrorism practice because, as Yahia Zoubir’s contribution makes clear, it is illegally occupied by Morocco and no country in the world recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. This raises the question: Is the policy mapping the threat or the threat is mapping the policy? A practice whereby ‘the imagination of place creates political and spatial realities’ (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007). Or, as Konstantina Isidoros suggests in her contribution here, the US impetus to ‘script-write a mythology of terror onto a Saharan landscape’.

The View from Below

Following the recent botched attempt to detonate a car bomb in Times Square by a putative Islamist terrorist, a recent New York Times article dared to ask the obvious:

a new, and disturbing, question is being raised in Washington: Have the stepped-up attacks in Pakistan — notably the Predator drone strikes — actually made Americans less safe? Have they had the perverse consequence of driving lesser insurgencies to think of targeting Times Square and American airliners, not just Kabul and Islamabad? In short, are they inspiring more attacks on America than they prevent? (Sanger 2010)

Only a year ago, a New York Times assessment of US counter-terrorism initiatives in Northwest Africa had asked the same question, noting that the trend in terrorist activity seemed to be going up rather than down since the PSI in 2003 (Schmidle 2009).

While mainstream US journalists feign shock at the
possibility that US policy could be counter-productive, scholars of terrorist studies have long noted the peculiar, co-constitutive relationship between the practice of terrorism and counter-terror discourse. Following 11 September 2001, anthropologist Joseba Zulaika wondered how it is that counter-terrorism (re)produces the very phenomena it claims to fight. Following questionable predictions in the 1980s that terrorism would become the most substantial security problem, Zulaika noted

The more remarkable fact was, however, that during those four years with no single terrorism case [1988-1992], American libraries catalogued [...] 1322 new book titles under the rubric “terrorism” and 121 under “terrorist.” The obvious question at the time was: How could a discursive machine provide the ammunition necessary to sustain an entire industry based on a phenomenon that was both the ultimate threat to civilization and statistically almost absent? What amount of self-fulfilling prophecy was required for the real thing to make its appearance in the United States? (Zulaika 2003: 191)

With respect to US counter-terror policies in the Sahara-Sahel, Greg Mills (2004:166), national director of the South African Institute of International Affairs, suggested, ‘There are, moreover, dangers that such security measures [as the PSI] may, at least in the short term, exacerbate the conditions that give rise to external and internal terrorism in the first place’.

Related to this problem is one of the hot new key words in the study of terrorism: radicalization. As terrorist acts become increasingly orchestrated by smaller and smaller cells, down to lone individuals, the processes through which people and groups become ‘radicalized’ has now become central to the discourse on terrorism, particularly the issue of Islamic radicalization. For some observers, recent violent incidents in northern Nigeria with the Boko Haram sect provided further evidence of widespread radicalization in the Sahel zone, and so provided justification for measures to prevent the transformation of radicalism into terrorism. Taking a fine-grained ethnographic approach, Caroline Ifeka’s contribution to this collection deconstructs the basic notions of the radicalization discourse by untangling the global, regional, national and local networks that produce subaltern resistance. Ifeka challenges us to ask, Who are the real radicals? The frustrated youth who resis injustice or the nested systems that produce them? As Ifeka notes,

Donor governments and AFRICOM should consider, in the light of the Niger Delta’s militant struggle and its proven capacity to reduce oil output, whether militarization in partnership with kleptocratic ruling oligarchies will secure US-EU [Multi-National Corporations’] priority access to strategic natural resources to which communities have strong traditional claims. Or whether, as in the Niger Delta, the more force used by the State the more subaltern violence grows.

Indeed, whatever one’s position on the ontological status of authentic Islamist terrorist organizations in the Sahara-Sahel, the local impact of US securitization initiatives is difficult to ignore. One of the more significant accomplishments of AQMI in the Sahara-Sahel has been the devastation of tourism, a vital economic lifeblood in a region where alternative modes of employment are severely limited and black market activity presents itself as an incentive-laden alternative (e.g., smuggling humans, counterfeit goods and illicit drugs). Following a spate of attacks in Mauritania, historian Ann McDougall, in her contribution to this collection, reflects upon the possible effect of isolation produced by Saharan terrorism:

The impact on tourism was immediate. Air routes were cancelled or itineraries altered to piggyback on other countries’ priorities. Cash-cow charters to ‘ancient desert cities’ are as dry as the wadis they overlook; flights now leave and arrive at 2 and 3 a.m., underscoring Mauritania’s new marginalized position for all potential visitors, including businessmen. What kind of investment, especially much-needed development investment, is attracted to a high-risk, terrorist-active, ‘Islamic’ republic accessible to the world only in the wee hours of the morning?

As a recent piece in the Christian Science Monitor likewise noted the impact on Niger: ‘A once-thriving tourism industry that sustained local businesses and artisans is now decimated in the Saharan caravan capital Agadez, reduced to little more than a stopover for African migrants and internal refugees heading north toward Libya and, for a lucky few, Europe’ (Armstrong 2010).
The fact that the main effect of the alleged activities of the GSPC-AQMI has been the near annihilation of Saharan tourism has helped engender counter-narratives of the recent securitization of the Sahara, vocalized by both domestic actors and foreign observers. Often dismissed as advancing conspiracy theories, skeptics nonetheless believe that there are interests — either large and/or small, global and/or local — who would rather not have Europeans cavorting around in their Landrovers, running into the underbelly of the Saharan economy. According to such critics, the threat posed by armed Islamist groups in the Sahara is either a product of manipulation by regional state actors (for local or national gain) or a synthetic phenomena with no basis in reality, manufactured to provide a basis for foreign intervention. Yet the purchase of the counter-narrative of Saharan terror, like so many conspiracy theories, comes not from bulletproof evidence to the contrary, but rather from the inconsistencies and lacunas of the dominant narrative advanced by governments in the region, in Europe and in North America.

No one in the US government, it seems, has stopped to ask whether or not their intervention is welcomed by the people it pretends to benefit. But such is the nature of empire. Now that these civil-military project have become wrapped in the vocabulary of ‘partnership’, it is implied that the host governments warmly welcome the new US footprint. These being the same governments that regularly receive a good thrashing in State Department democracy and human rights reports, not to mention the ire of independent human rights groups. They conveniently represent the people when it suits us, when we need to find imperial ‘partners’. And when they don’t, we leverage their Freedom House score against them to win neoliberal economic reforms that rarely, if ever, precipitate anything approximating actual political democratic reform. As Alex Thurston argues in this collection,

Concern about terrorist threats in the Sahel and other parts of the continent is warranted. But as US policymakers craft policies to meet this challenge, they should acknowledge that the capacity of the White House and the Pentagon to coerce political transformations in African countries has real limits. The choice between promoting democracy and fighting terrorism through establishing stability, therefore, may be a false and harmful one.

Another glaring absence in the debate is the lack of any attempt to gauge the impact of US security policies in the Sahara-Sahel. Apart from some notable exceptions (e.g. Gutelius 2007), and scattered press accounts, no one has yet looked at the effects of these initiatives outside of their direct bearing upon the efficacy of armed groups and state counter-terror practices in the Sahara. That is to say, no one has asked, What are local popular attitudes towards US security policy in the Sahara? What does the local press say? What does civil society think? What are the contributions of opposition parties and figures to the debate? For example, Thurston’s blog highlighted the words of Fatoumata Maiga, an activist for women’s rights in Mali, who told the Christian Science Monitor, ‘We are not against the training of the Malian Army by the Americans […] But we don’t want the American Army to be present here. We see that around the world, wherever the Americans are, there is a temptation for Al Qaeda to be there’ (Baldauf 2009).

### On the Margins of Empire

The visible shortcomings of the primary (actual threat) and secondary justification (potential threat) for increased US security presence in the Sahara-Sahel have provoked speculation that an alternative rationale must be operating. Given the geographical coincidence between US security measures in the Sahara and some of the world’s most important energy reserves, critics have alleged that the deep logic behind the TSCTP is geo-strategic or ‘imperial’. With Algeria and Libya to the north, and Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea to the south, the Sahara-Sahel rests between two spaces of supreme strategic interest to the United States, Europe and, increasingly, China. Indeed, Chinese encroachment into Africa has been cited as another important factor in the increased US security attention. A similar critique has been launched at related US efforts to establish a military command for Africa (Africom).

Perhaps the most well known skeptic of the Saharan terrorism threat is British anthropologist Jeremy Keenan, a social scientist whose four decades of on-the-ground experience in the heart of the Sahara, coupled with an impressive publication record, is unrivaled in the Anglophone academy. For Keenan, the GSPC and, now, AQMI, represent nothing short of a sophisticated false-flag intelligence operation perpetrated by the Algerian secret services to help advance the cause of US imperialism in West Africa. For Keenan (2009 and his
contribution here), the series of seemingly implausible events triggered by the 2003 kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists in Algeria, coupled with his claims of having monitored the situation on the ground at the time, is the original source of his incredulity. Keenan has since concluded that their kidnapping ‘was conducted and orchestrated by the DRS [Algeria’s military intelligence], but with the knowledge and collusion of the US. In essence, they took 32 Europeans hostage and claimed it to be the work of Islamic extremists’. The US government, specifically the Pentagon under Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, colluded with the Algeria’s military intelligence to ‘fabricate[…] terrorism to legitimise a new front on the War on Terror in Africa and hence the US’s militarisation of the continent’. Keenan believes that the myth of Saharan terrorism is not only central to the warrant for the PSI and TSCTI/P, but now constitutes a significant rationale behind the creation of Africom.

Whether or not one agrees with Keenan’s conclusion, a central premise in his argument — Africa’s indubitable strategic centrality to global energy markets — is impossible to ignore. More than the actions of putative armed Islamist groups in the deserts of Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, the imperial gaze of the United States, some argue, is keenly focused on North and West Africa’s vital hydrocarbon and mineral reserves. For analyst Daniel Volman, the logic of increasing US military intervention in Africa, especially through its most recent avatar, Africom, is easy enough to extrapolate, as he makes clear in his contribution to this collection:

As recent US government figures show, petroleum imports to the United States are dominated by Canada and Mexico. The rest of the top ten, however, reads like a cartography of US strategic engagement: Number ten is Colombia (a major recipient of US aid in the ‘war on drugs’), bordering Venezuela, number five, and Brazil, number nine. Number four and six are Saudi Arabia and Iraq, respectively, whose centrality to US interests and military action needs no background. However, it is number three (Nigeria) and seven (Algeria) that Volman is gesturing towards in his critique of Africom. Nigeria and Algeria are the only African countries among the top fifteen world oil producers. While OPEC partners Algeria, Angola, Libya and Nigeria dominate the African production, non-OPEC West African oil production also includes contributions from Cameroon, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and newcomer Mauritania. A July 2009 Algerian-Nigerian agreement to devote US $10 billion towards a 4,128 kilometer (2,565 mile) trans-Saharan gas pipeline — roughly the distance between San Francisco and Washington, DC — has only enhanced suspicions that the geographical coincidence of mass energy reserves and terrorism is more than mere coincidence.

The likely route of any such pipeline will likely track through Niger, which is itself a giant in the world of energy production. Niger, as one news story recently noted, is ‘confronting a political crisis caused by allegations of corruption and environmental conflicts — all linked to the uranium mines’ (Godoy 2010). Though you could not tell it from the annual UN Development Program’s reports, which regularly locate Niger as the world’s poorest nation, the deposits around Arlit in northwest Niger make that nation the largest exporter of high-grade uranium in Africa and among the top five in the world. A phenomena otherwise known as the resource curse or the paradox of plenty. But what citizens of the United States know about Niger, thanks to former Ambassador to Niger Joseph C. Wilson, is that Sadam Hussein actually did not try to buy yellowcake there. What Areva — a French government owned multi-national conglomerate responsible for mining uranium in Niger — likely knows is that ‘Niger is to the nuclear industry what Saudi Arabia is to the oil industry’ (Meyer 2010). And it just so happens that those mines lie in the heart of Tuareg lands in northern Niger, the site of the most recent Tuareg insurgency in 2007 and 2009 of the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice (MNJ, Movement of Niger-
iens for Justice). With the ‘greening’ of nuclear power in full swing, as the world desperately searches for post-carbon sources of energy to fuel the West’s over-development, northern Niger will continue to sit in the eye of a global storm.

From the Romans to European colonialism to the TSCTP, the Sahara has always been ostensibly peripheral yet clearly central to the grand designs of those seeking to influence the fate of Africa. If anything, it is hoped that this collection of essays sheds new light and, eventually, brings fresh eyes to a series of securitizing practices occurring on the ‘margins’ of empire, generally (Hardt & Negri 2001), and US hegemony, specifically (Agnew 2005; Charbonneau 2008; David & Grondin 2006; Harvey 2005; Khalidi 2004).

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References


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I. Introduction

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Algeria's largest and most active Islamist terrorist organization, was formerly known as the Groupe salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, and usually referred to by its French acronym (GSPC, Salafist Group for Call/Preaching and Combat). It began in the late 1990s as a splinter faction of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), then fighting a bloody insurgency against the Algerian military government with the goal of establishing an Islamic state. GSPC/AQIM eclipsed its predecessor and remains active not only in Algeria but also in the neighboring Sahelian states. Best known for its raids and bombings against Algerian military bases and convoys, the group has also perpetrated kidnappings of European tourists and terrorist attacks in Mauritania and Mali. It has likewise been linked to planned strikes in Europe, as well as to smuggling and human trafficking across the vast Sahara. This article will examine the transformation of the GSPC, whose stated goal was the overthrow of Algeria's long-ruling secular nationalist government, into AQIM, a participant in the global jihad allegedly committed to the destruction of the “Far Enemy.”

Little known outside Algeria, the GSPC burst onto the international scene in early 2003 with the spectacular kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists in Algeria's southern desert massifs. The kidnapping was resolved after the German government reportedly ransomed the hostages. But the perpetrators, led by a mysterious GSPC amir (leader) named Amari Saïfi (a.k.a. Abdelrezak El-Para), were tracked down in a dramatic four-country chase across the desert, culminating in the capture of Saïfi in northern Chad. This joint action, reportedly given logistical support by US forces of the European Command (Eucom), was generally credited to the new Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), the first organ of the US program of securitization of the Sahel, which involved Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. Though groundwork for the PSI had begun before the kidnapping, Saïfi’s daring action and the GSPC itself quickly became the principal justifications for the American initiative. Congress subsequently expanded the PSI into the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), involving nine North and West African countries, including Algeria, Ameri-
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The US and Algeria forged ahead with their securitization programs in the Sahel despite concerns that a US military presence in the region would make the security situation there worse, not better, and allegations that Saïfi might have been abetted by elements of the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS, Department of Intelligence and Security), Algeria’s military intelligence agency (Johnson 2009: 7). Meanwhile, the GSPC, under another mysterious desert amir, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, appeared to be moving in the direction of “hybrid” terrorist organizations, as concerned with contraband trafficking as with anti-government resistance. By early 2007 the GSPC had morphed once again into AQIM, an Al-Qa‘ida affiliate pledging loyalty to Osama bin Laden’s global jihad. It will be argued that changes in the posture of the GSPC/AQIM suggest that the organization is more concerned with its own survival than with either of its previously stated goals: overthrowing the Algerian government or advancing global jihad (Filiu 2009: 223). It will also be argued that the US and Algeria have made use of and perhaps exaggerated the threat posed by GSPC/AQIM to justify their own goals: for the Americans, a military and economic foothold in Africa; for Algeria, the continued rule of its authoritarian government.

A. Background

The GSPC emerged from the civil disorder that convulsed Algeria in the 1990s when Islamist militants attempted to overthrow a secular, authoritarian government. Sometimes called “La sale guerre” (the dirty war), this brutal war started in 1992 and continued into the new century. Since gaining independence from France in 1962, Algeria has been dominated by the Front de libération nationale (FLN, National Liberation Front), a political party derived from the heroic liberation movement that expelled the French after a protracted armed and popular struggle. While the FLN always had Islamic overtones, it was from the start a secular-nationalist liberation movement on the Nasser model. During the struggle to build the new independent state, Algerian Islamists fought alongside the FLN but they were marginalized by Mohammad Ahmad Ben Bella’s quasi-socialist government after 1962 (Kepel 2002: 55). President Houari Boumediene (1970–76) introduced the one-party system and also focused power within the military elite, bypassing the FLN political structure (Bothe 2008: 2). By the late 1970s, Islamists began to simmer with resentment over the FLN’s secular policies and military rule. Algeria’s first militant Islamist group, the Mouvement islamique armée (MIA, Armed Islamic Movement), appeared in 1982. Also known as the Bouyali Group after its founder Mustafa Bouyali, the MIA fragmented after Bouyali was killed by security forces in 1987. President Chadli Bendjedid introduced limited political reforms in October 1988 in the wake of the so called couscous riots, including allowing multi-party elections (Kepel, 2002: 159-162; Bothe 2008: 2, 4).

The Front islamique du salut (FIS, Islamic Salvation Front), Algeria’s first official Islamic political party, was founded in 1989 after the FLN allowed, for the first time, political openings. The FIS won the municipal elections in 1990 and a majority in the first round of legislative elections in 1991. Faced with the prospect of an outright electoral victory by an already gloating FIS, a military junta seized power in early 1992. Mili tant factions of the FIS vowed to turn to violent means to claim what had been denied them through the electoral process (Kepel 2002: 169, 175; Darling 2004). By the early 1990s, hundreds of Algerian militants who

3. In addition to Algeria and the four Sahelian states, the TSCTP (originally called the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative, TSCTI) embraced Senegal, Morocco, Tunisia, and Nigeria (Motlagh 2005: 1).

4. Algeria’s Research & Security Directorate (DRS) is the Ministry of National Defense’s main intelligence agency, responsible for internal security, counter-intelligence, and military security (Special Operations.com/Algeria).

5. University of Paris terrorism expert Xavier Raufer has discussed what he calls hybrid groups that blend crime, trafficking, and Islamism, saying that such groups flourish in areas of weak authority. He considers men like Saïfi and Belmokhtar as typical of the hybrid pattern (Katchadourian 2006).


7. The so-called couscous riots erupted in Algiers in 1988 due to endemic poverty and frustration with the regime’s corruption, exacerbated by recent influxes of rural migrants (Kepel 2002: 159-165).

8. As is typical in Francophone Africa, the first round in an election cycle is municipal elections, which choose local governments in the communes. The FIS won control of a majority of Algeria’s communes. Then follow the first round of legislative elections, in which the FIS won a majority in the National People’s Assembly, carrying 188 seats to the FLN’s fifteen seats.
had trained and, in some cases, fought alongside the Afghan mujahidin in their jihad against the Soviets began returning to Algeria. These Algerian “Afghans,” as they were called, usually had little actual combat experience, but they nurtured hardened Islamist ideologies.9 Flushed with a sense of victory, they wanted to establish an Islamic Algerian state. Some of the “Afghans” merged with the remnants of the Bouyali Group, including Qari Said, a son-in-law of Osama bin Laden and former manager of a hostel for Algerian jihadists in Peshawar (Botha 2008: 7). Said rejected the political process outright, dismissing the FLN government as apostates. Other returning “Afghans” supported the FIS, which sought reinstatement of the electoral system (Hafez 2000: 573; Filiu 2009: 214-217).

B. GIA

The armed groups rose to prominence after the military intervened in the political process in early 1992. It declared a state of emergency, deposed President Bendjedid, outlawed the FIS and imprisoned its leaders, and detained thousands of Islamic activists in Saharan concentration camps. In October 1992 leaders of armed Islamist factions convened a meeting at Tamesguida, attempting to form a united front. But after a surprise raid by security forces aborted the meeting, suspicions of infiltration by DRS double agents prevented any such unity (Hafez 2000: 574). The GIA formed in late 1992 as a loose umbrella group of certain disparate Islamist movements fighting the Algerian military for control (Darling 2004; Botha 2008: 7). Sidestepping the FIS, it soon took the lead in what became a jihad to establish an Islamic state. The GIA represented a challenge to the FIS’s leadership of the Islamist movement as much as it did opposition to the government. Radical “Afghans,” such as Qari Said, were partly responsible for the polarization between the FIS and the GIA. The GIA commenced its campaign of terror in early 1993, attacking military posts, but also non-military targets, including foreigners, intellectuals, and journalists. By late1993 the FIS regretted conceding leadership to the intransigent, extremist GIA. In July 1994 the more moderate FIS formed the Armée islamique du salut (AIS, Islamic Salvation Army) as an armed alternative to the GIA. The AIS, in its public statements, allowed for the possibility of a return to the electoral process, while the GIA did not (Hafez 2000: 576-577; Filiu 2009: 217).

In October 1994 Djamel Zitouni became national amir of the GIA. Zitouni concentrated more on the power struggle with the AIS than on opposition to the government.10 In January 1996 the GIA publicly declared war on the AIS, labeling them apostates also. At the same time that civil war raged between the military junta and the Islamists, another civil war was being fought between the GIA and the AIS (Hafez 2000: 579; Kepel 2002: 256, 266-267; Filiu 2009: 219). Later that year the radical Antar Zouabri became national amir of the GIA. Zouabri blamed the civilian populace for not supporting the jihad. The death toll in the conflict soared as GIA fighters concentrated their attacks on “collaborating” civilians. Zouabri issued a fatwa titled “The Great Demarcation,” labeling the entire Algerian people kufr (impious) for failing to support its campaign against “le Pouvoir,” the government. This hard-line policy cost the GIA both international credibility and domestic support (Kepel 2002: 255; Botha 2008: 8; Darling 2004). Prominent Arab jihadi groups, including Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), broke publicly with the GIA over their excessive resort to takfir11 citizens (Darling 2004). The bloodiest year of the Algerian civil war, 1997, saw over forty separate massacres of civilians, most attributed to the GIA, and the overall death toll approached an appalling 150,000 (Schanzer 2002; Hafez 2000: 580; Filiu 2009: 220).

C. GSPC

It was in this milieu that the GSPC emerged, growing out of elements of the GIA leadership, including Hassan Hattab, Shaykh Abou al-Baraa, and Saïfi/El-Para. These dissidents rejected the GIA’s policy of attacking civilians, allowing only military targets. Hattab broke with the GIA in late 1996 because of the group’s excesses. The AIS, also disgusted with the GIA’s brutality,

9. Some of the Algerian “Afghans” took to sporting Afghan garb, distaining the traditional Algerian djellaba.

10. Zitouni was also responsible for the GIA’s targeting of “Crusader” France, a campaign of bombings in Paris in 1995 aimed at punishing France for aiding the Algerian junta (Guidère 2006: 2)

11. Takfir refers to the process of condemnation or “excommunication,” and harks back to the extreme policies of the thirteenth-century Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya, whose excessive religious exclusivity had long been championed by radical Islamists. The London-based jihadist publication Al-Ansar repudiated Zouabri’s fatwa. Zawahiri, in particular, cited the GIA’s “dangerous deviations,” meaning its constant widening of the circle of takfir. Even bin Laden had condemned Zouabri’s fatwa (Filiu 2009: 219).
declared a unilateral cease-fire with the government in October 1997, thus setting the stage for later government offers of amnesty (Botha 2008: 5). The GSPC formed in 1998, vowing to concentrate attacks on security forces, not civilians (Hafez 2000: 582-583; Filiu 2009: 220). Hattab became the new group’s leader, al-Baraa its ideologue, and Saïfi, a field commander. Al-Qa’ida and bin Laden, having repudiated the GIA’s anti-civilian attacks, gave their blessing to the GSPC. By 2000, though still adhering to the GIA goal of an Islamic state in Algeria, the GSPC had also verbally embraced Al-Qa’ida’s ideology of global jihad (Schanzer 2002; Darling 2004; Ulph 2006: 1).

Meanwhile, the wider Islamist movement in Algeria became more moderate, accepting the electoral process and even allowing women’s participation in it as well as in the economy at large (ICG 2004: 2). President Abdelaziz Bouteflika offered an amnesty to Islamist rebels in September 1999. Most groups accepted, and by the January 2000 deadline some 5,000 AIS militants had surrendered their weapons (Kepel 2002: 275; Botha 2008: 5). But the GSPC refused amnesty. By 2002 the GSPC claimed to have over 4,000 fighters and was concentrating its attacks on Algerian military convoys and bases. In September 2002 Bouteflika ordered a crackdown on the GSPC, Algeria’s largest anti-Islamist operation in five years (Schanzer 2002). The Group responded with stepped-up raids, including an attack led by Saïfi on a convoy near Batna in January 2003 that killed forty-three soldiers (Katchadourian 2006; Mellah & Rivoire 2005). Despite the GSPC’s new global rhetoric, Hattab remained committed to national jihad, but his leadership was challenged by rival amirs who had a more internationalist outlook, including Nabil Sahraoui, Abdelmalek Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdelwadoud), and Saïfi. Saïfi’s kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists in the Tassili Massif was a challenge to Hattab (Filiu 2009: 220, n. 34). In September 2003 Hattab was deposed as GSPC leader for the more radical Sahraoui. Saïfi, meanwhile, along with Belmokhtar, was extending GSPC operations to Algeria’s Sahelian neighbors.

In a global context, the GSPC’s most threatening aspects were its reported links with Al-Qa’ida and the expansion of its activities beyond Algeria to Europe and to the Sahelian countries. At the time of the GSPC split, Al-Qa’ida was seeking to disassociate itself from the GIA and welcomed the GSPC because of its pledge not to attack civilians. Amar Makhlulif (a.k.a. Haydar Abu Doha), a London-based Algerian trained in Qa’ida camps in Afghanistan, had been one of the first to urge Hattab to split from the GIA. Abu Doha helped reorganize the GIA’s former European networks under Qa’ida aegis with GSPC control (Keats 2003; Katchadourian 2006). US intelligence estimates suggested that there may have been as many as 800 GSPC operatives in Europe in 2006 (Motlagh 2006). By that time the GSPC had claimed responsibility for numerous terrorist actions involving the Sahelian countries, especially Mauritania and Mali, and was deeply implicated in regional smuggling and trafficking activities.

**D. AQIM**

Ever since the deposition of Hattab as chief amir of GSPC, the Group had been torn between the long-standing goal of overthrowing the FLN military government, or national jihad, and the appeal of the global jihad, with its focus on the Far Enemy. The US invasion of Iraq in early 2003 intensified this debate. Hattab’s ouster in favor of Nabil Sahraoui in August 2003 was a victory for the “internationalists” within the Group. While Hattab had denied any link with Al-Qa’ida, Sahraoui declared his support for brother jihadis in other countries, from Chechnya to the Philippines (Filiu 2009: 220). However, before he could accomplish much in this regard, Sahraoui was gunned down by security forces in a shoot-out in June 2004 (Black 2009). Four months later Droukdel became amir, also boasting internationalist credentials. The US invasion of Iraq became a major recruiting tool for the global jihad. Indeed, Iraq brought the GSPC and other national resistance jihads in line with Al-Qa’ida. It allowed the Group to recruit young would-be jihadis who wanted to fight in Iraq. While many were actually funneled there, many others stayed and joined the GSPC, which helped compensate for the depletion of recruits due to Bouteflika’s amnesties (Filiu 2009: 221). The apparent success of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI) was the

12. To signal his internationalist credentials, Droukdel chose as his kunya (symbolic paternity) Abu Mussab, the same kunya as Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi and Abu Mussab al-Suri, two leading supporters of the global jihad and Al-Qa’ida (Filiu 2009: 221) (see notes 17-18).

13. Amnesties offered by the Algerian government to Islamist fighters included the February 1995 Law of Clemency (rahma); the June 1999 Law of Reconciliation, offered months after Bouteflika took office; and the August 2005 Charter for Peace and Reconciliation.
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catalyst for the GSPC merger with bin Laden (Guidère 2006). Gradually Droukdel began to echo political statements of Al-Qa’ida, Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of AQI. GSPC-Qa’ida links grew as the Group funneled activists from other North African countries to Iraq. Droukdel’s expansion of GSPC activities into the Sahara-Sahel region, including access to contraband and human trafficking routes, facilitated the funnelling of militants to Iraq, while at the same time boosting his global posture (Filiu 2009: 222).

In June of 2005, one year after Droukdel assumed leadership, GSPC fighters attacked a Mauritanian military barracks at Lemghiti in the far north of the country, killing fifteen soldiers. Led by Belmokhtar, the raid was part of a larger GSPC offensive that killed more than forty military personnel in Mauritania and Algeria. This offensive was commended by Qa’ida affiliates on jihadi Web sites (Guidère 2006; Botha 2008: 24).

At this time Al-Qa’ida began its vetting of the GSPC, part of a process through which militant organizations are accepted into their global network (McGregor 2006; Motlagh 2005). Droukdel vowed to adopt Qa’ida tactics and hit foreign targets. Between January and October of 2006 the GSPC carried out over 199 attacks, most of them deadly and most against military targets. On September 11, 2006, the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Zawahiri announced the GSPC merger with Al-Qa’ida (Guidère 2006). The Group endeared itself to Al-Qa’ida in three ways: 1) it refused national reconciliation, 2) it targeted personnel of outside powers, including France, and 3) it was operating beyond its borders, especially in Mali and Mauritania (Filiu 2009: 223). In late 2006, GSPC declared its intention to strike Western targets, and Droukdel pledged allegiance to bin Laden. He cemented his pledge with an attack near Algiers, targeting a bus carrying foreign employees of the US firm Brown, Root, and Condor. In January of 2007 the GSPC was formally integrated into Al-Qa’ida, adopting the name “Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM) (Filiu 2009: 223; U.S. National Counterterrorism Center 2009).

GSPC’s merger with Al-Qa’ida had several consequences. First, it weakened the government’s amnesty process, especially the National Charter for Peace and Reconciliation, adopted in 2005 (Guidère 2006). Second, AQIM began to adopt Qa’ida tactics as promised, including suicide bombings, heretofore not known in Algeria (Botha 2008: 20), and propaganda videos. The tactics of the Iraqi insurgency served as models in this regard (Guidère 2006). Third, it began a new offensive that included an attack in March of 2007 on a Russian contracting firm and a double suicide attack on April 11, 2007, against Algiers police stations. This attack, AQIM’s first suicide bombing, involved vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) (Stewart & Burton 2009). In December 2007 a truck bombing of UN headquarters in Algiers left thirty-seven dead. AQIM meant the offensive to please its new patrons, showcase its new Qa’ida-like tactics, and highlight its resolve to hit foreign targets (Filiu 2009: 223-224; Botha 2008: 20).

The evolution from GSPC to AQIM was now complete. But this evolution affected the security situation in the broader Sahara-Sahel region in unexpected ways. First, GSPC’s evolution appears to have had as much to do with ensuring its own survival as it did with advancing either the national jihad or the global jihad. Specifically, the Group became distracted from its goal of overthrowing the Algerian government as a result of its expansion into the Sahara-Sahel region and its resort to contraband trafficking and ransom demands.

Second, AQIM ultimately turned away from global jihad because of its inability to abandon the concept of national jihad and because of its relative lack of success in its global program. Additionally, we shall see that both the US and its new partner Algeria made convenient use of, and perhaps even exaggerated, the danger posed by GSPC/AQIM to advance their own agendas. For the Americans, this agenda comprised launching and prosecuting the TSCTP, as well as creating its new Africa command (Africom), thus insinuating themselves into the military and economic affairs of several West and North African countries. Many of these countries have significant petroleum reserves. For the Algerians, the agenda appears to have been to ensure regime survival through the continued denial of meaningful elections and the systematic infiltration and possible abetting of GSPC/AQIM.

II. GSPC/AQIM in the Sahara-Sahel Region

The transformations of the GSPC/AQIM at first glance

14. Drukdel even called for the liberation of Ceuta and Melilia, Spanish enclaves on the Moroccan coast dating from the seventeenth century, thus echoing Zawahiri’s call for the liberation of Andalusia (Filiu 2009: 224).
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seem to reflect what scholars of jihadist salafism would call a shift from focus on the Near Enemy to the Far Enemy. The Near Enemy refers to waging jihad against local national governments, be they secular-nationalist, such as Algeria, or putatively Islamist but collaborating with the West, such as Saudi Arabia. Until the rise of Al-Qa’ida, most jihad movements had Near Enemy focus. The Far Enemy refers to directing the thrust of Islamist resistance against the United States and Israel. The idea is that the collaborating Middle Eastern regimes cannot be defeated until their Western patrons have been knocked out of the fight (Lacey 2008: 32). The general failure of national jihads in the 1990s in countries like Algeria and Egypt convinced most militants to return to negotiations and the electoral process. Others chose to continue the armed struggle by switching focus to the Far Enemy (Lacey 2008: 21). The evolution of the GSPC into AQIM appears to fit this pattern. A closer examination, however, suggests that this evolution may have been motivated more by group survival than by outside ideological considerations. Besides the differences in name and rhetoric and the introduction of new tactics, including suicide bombings, the major changes in the Group’s posture included its expansion into the Sahara-Sahel region and its drift into contraband and trafficking.

A. Expansion into the Sahara-Sahel Region

By “Sahara-Sahel region” I mean the Saharan portions of Algeria and the four Sahelian states solicited by the

American Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. The GSPC/AQIM is the only organized jihadist group that has operated in all four Sahelian countries (ICG 2005a: 7). The countries most affected by the Group’s activities were Mali and Mauritania. Terrorist-type activities attributed to the GSPC first occurred in Mali in early 2002 (Whitelaw 2005). Thirteen deaths were blamed on clashes involving GSPC razzias (cAMELRY RAIDs) in Mali near the Niger border in the Kidal Region, the scene of the bloody Tuareg Rebellion of 1990-95. In January 2004 reported GSPC activity near Léré, by the right angle border with Mauritania, disrupted the Paris-Dakar rally, forcing it to alter its route (Le Vine 2007: 92). The GSPC expanded from its original base in the hinterlands of Algeria into the Algerian Sahara and northern Mali partly because it was pushed out of northern Algeria by security forces (ICG 2005a: 7). This pressure would likely have intensified by September 2002, when President Bouteflika cracked down on the militants. The two GSPC amirs most readily associated with the Group’s early operations in Mali are Belmokhtar and Saïfi.

The GSPC’s presence in Mali attracted international attention in early 2003 when thirty-two European tourists, mostly Germans, were kidnapped near Il-lizi, an oasis town in eastern Algeria near the Libyan border. This kidnapping convinced the US to support the Algerian government’s war on terrorists and to focus attention on the hitherto largely ignored Sahara. The hostages were seized under the leadership of Saïfi (Katchadourian 2006). The first group of hostages was freed in Algeria in May 2003, but the second group was taken across the Malian border and held until August (Mellah & Rivoire 2005). They were released to Malian authorities amid rumors that the Germans had paid a €5 million ransom (Katchadourian 2006; Le Vine 2007: 91). The incident revealed that the GSPC could operate with relative impunity in the desert regions of northern Mali, and had probably been doing so for some time. Presumably using ransom money, Saïfi subsequently purchased arms in Northern Mali, a region awash in weapons since the end of the Tuareg insurgency. He was taking the arms back to Algeria in early 2004 to rearm GSPC fighters when his convoys were detected by US satellite surveillance and attacked by military forces of both Algeria and Mali. Some of the arms were recovered in Southern Algeria, but the joint

15. See note 1. The Salafist package is described by the Syrian global jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri in his Islamic jihad manifesto. Al-Suri’s elements include 1) America as the successor to Britain in the Arab world, 2) anti-Saudi rhetoric, 3) the idea that anything after the second Islamic century, the age of the salaf-al-salih, is innovation (bida), 4) the caliphal ideal.

16. Elements of the concept of Far Enemy emerged in Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In the revolutionaries’ view, the Near Enemy, the Shah, had already been defeated, so their focus was to now be directed against the US and Israel, in their terminology, “Great Satan” and “Little Satan.” The concept was further developed by bin Laden and Zawahiri, supported by ideologues like Abu Musab al-Suri (see note 12).

17. Abu Musab al-Suri, who lived in Algeria during the 1990s, says that the failure of the Algerian jihad turned him towards the necessity of global jihad. He describes how the Far Enemy (the US) supports the Near Enemy (hypocritical Arab governments like Algeria’s).

18. One German woman hostage died in Algeria, reportedly of heatstroke, and was buried there.
military action touched off running battles through Algeria, Mali, Niger, and finally Chad between Saiifi and his followers and the security forces of the four countries (Harmon 2008: 400-401). Chadian government forces, with US logistical support, stopped the fleeing militants in a two-day battle in March, killing forty-three.\textsuperscript{19} Shortly after the battle in Chad, Saiifi and some fifty of his followers were detained by a secular rebel group called the Chadian Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJT), which had been fighting the regime of Chadian President Idriss Déby since 1998 (Katchadourian 2006).\textsuperscript{20} After holding Saiifi for several months, the MDJT, with diplomatic help from Libya, handed him over to Algeria, where he was sentenced to life in prison at a semi-secret trial.

The GSPC maintained a similarly limited presence in Mauritania. The government of President Maaouya Ould Taya, overthrown in a bloodless coup in August 2005, regularly released reports of arrests of suspected GSPC activists in Mauritania. Some of these arrests of Islamists were carried out in the sweeps that followed three earlier coup attempts against the Ould Taya regime, in 2003-2004 (U.S. Department of State 2006: 1). One such report mentioned some twenty Mauritanian Islamists who trained in a guerilla camp in southern Algeria, location undisclosed.\textsuperscript{21} Seven of these were arrested on their return to Mauritania in May 2005 and charged with plotting acts of terror (Ulph 2005). While some Mauritanian Islamists supported the coup of 2005, links between them and the GSPC, like those of the Islamists arrested earlier, remain unclear. As in the case of Mali, there was only one documented case of GSPC activity in Mauritania, the raid on Lemghiti, a remote military outpost in the extreme northeast of the country, on June 6, 2005. This raid, led by Belmokhtar, resulted in fifteen Mauritanian soldiers killed and seventeen wounded. The GSPC claimed responsibility. Some observers are skeptical about the extent of GSPC activity in Mauritania, suggesting that the unpopular Ould Taya may have exaggerated links between his political opposition and the GSPC in order to attract aid from the US through the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) and the TSCTI, discussed below. There is an odd juxtaposition of events here, as the raid on Lemghiti occurred just five days before the first contingent of US marines landed in Nouakchott, Mauritania’s capital, as part of Operation Flintlock, the opening phase of the TSCTP (U.S. Department of State 2006: 1). These US troops arrived amid popular protests on the streets of the city. Two months later, Ould Taya was overthrown. Yet the timing of these events does not prove a connection between GSPC activity and opposition to the regime. Islamism seems to be a recent development in Mauritania, a country more typically associated with Sufi brotherhoods. Besides, opposition to Ould Taya seems to have had more to do with popular discontent over his pro-US and pro-Israel policies\textsuperscript{22} than with Islamism (Harmon 2008: 407; McGregor 2005).

Mauritanian political instability has continued since 2005. The junta leaders who overthrew Ould Taya appointed a transitional government under Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall.\textsuperscript{23} Mohamed Vall held elections as promised in late 2006 and early 2007, the first proper multi-party elections in the country’s history. Yet another coup occurred in August 2008, led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. After continued instability, Abdel Aziz was elected as a civilian president in July 2009. Throughout this period of instability, GSPC/AQIM terrorist attacks continued, many led by Belmokhtar. In December 2007 four French tourists were murdered in a brutal attack that forced the cancellation of the Paris-Dakar Rally. In February 2008 the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott was raked with gunfire, indicating continued resentment over Mauritania’s diplomatic relations with the Jewish state (Filiu 2009: 224; Johnson 2009: 7). In November 2009 three Spanish humanitarian workers were kidnapped en route from Nouadhibou to Nouakchott (Badiane 2009: 1). Yet, as in 2005, it remains unclear to what extent these incidents were connected with the country’s ongoing political instability.

19. Some of the dead fighters were reportedly from Niger, Nigeria, and Mali, indicating the GSPC’s ability to recruit in the Sahelian countries (Katchadourian 2006). A riveting day-by-day account of these running battles is given by Keenan (2009).

20. This admittedly difficult-to-believe episode occurred after Saiifi and his men attempted to surrender to the MDJT fighter, assuming that they were fellow jihadis.

21. There are few references of GSPC training camps in the Sahara; however, Anneli Botha (2008: 25-26) makes reference to “mobile” training camps run by the Group in desert areas of Mali and Niger.

22. Mauritania opened diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999, one of only a few Arab states to do so. These relations were subsequently severed in 2009.

23. The successful coup was led by Vall with the support of a military junta called the Military Council of Justice and Democracy.
B. Smuggling

An alternate analysis of GSPC/AQIM’s Saharan expansion notes the Group’s involvement in smuggling of arms, cigarettes, and other contraband, as well as human trafficking, all practices that are widespread in the unpolicied desert region (Leao 2005: 33; ICG 2005a: 18). Routes carrying people, weapons, drugs, and especially tobacco cross the Sahara to Europe, typically directed by Tuareg nomads using SUVs and cell phones (Wilson 2009). Major Holly Silkman, public affairs officer of Eucom, has said that trafficking in arms, drugs, and people, along with poverty and unemployment, create “potential for instability” in the Sahara-Sahel region (Motlagh 2005: 2). Indeed, the political instability associated with such practices is one of the things that first attracted US interest in the region. Perhaps the most lucrative single contraband commodity in the region is tobacco. Cigarettes pass in containers through the northern Mauritanian town of Zerouate to Kidal in Mali. From there they go by smaller trucks to Algeria and thence to Europe, entering untaxed through Italy (ICG 2005a: 18). Journalist Kate Wilson claims that cigarette smuggling “has provided the bulk of financing for AQIM” (Wilson 2009). Links between smuggling and Islamist terrorism go back to the early years of the GIA. Mourad Si Ahmed (a.k.a. Djafar al-Afghani), first of the GIA’s chief amirs, had formerly been a contraband trader (Kepel 2002: 263). This smuggling connection grew in 2000 as Hattab expanded the GSPC to include Saharan “outlaw” networks. But Hattab, an “Algerianist,” was reluctant to access fully the Saharan smuggling routes. It was Droukdel, an “internationalist,” who took full advantage of the smuggling networks, thereby enhancing his global stature, though the arch-smuggler among the Islamist militants of the Sahara was Belmokhtar (Filiu 2009: 222).

Belmokhtar, described by Wilson as the “lead smuggler,” was nicknamed “untouchable” by French intelligence in 2002. He was from Ghardaïa in the northern Sahara on the main route from Algiers to the south and the oil fields. He trained in Afghanistan in 1991 and returned to Algeria to join the GIA in 1992 at age twenty. Having followed Hattab to the GSPC in 2000, he was given the lead in the Group’s southern zone and ordered to concentrate on weapons procurement. Belmokhtar used cigarette smuggling to raise money to purchase arms. He smuggled cigarettes himself and taxed other smugglers, earning another nickname, Mister Marlboro (Black 2009). Smuggling and contraband continue to be major activities of AQIM operatives. A Reuters news release of January 2010 implies, without convincing proof, that AQIM smugglers are involved in airborne contraband drug trafficking in cocaine. This cocaine is allegedly procured via the FARC in Colombia and flown on “outlaw” jets to West Africa for transit to Europe along AQIM’s Saharan smuggling networks (Reuters 2010). In what may be some corroboration of these allegations, the BBC reported that in 2009 an EU delegation held talks in Algiers with Algerian officials about Saharan drug trafficking. The report cites EU concern about drugs destined for European consumers transiting through Africa, with heroin coming from Kenya, and cocaine coming from West Africa, allegedly converging in the Sahara (Ilias 2009). Furthermore, in December of 2009, US federal prosecutors announced the arrests in Mali of three Malians by DEA agents. Posing as FARC smugglers, the agents arranged with the Malians to transport cocaine across the Sahara for transshipment to Europe. The indictment stated that the Malians alleged that they had paid AQIM to provide protection for earlier such shipments (Volman & Zoubir 2010: 24). As for Belmokhtar, as late as April 2009 he was still procuring arms for AQIM. He has reportedly taken Tuareg wives in northern Mali and “woven himself into the fabric of the region” (Black 2009).

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24. The leading cigarette brands along the smuggling routes appear to be Marlboro and Gauloises.

25. An Algerianist was an Algerian militant who chose to focus on national jihad, as opposed to an “internationalist,” who would focus on global jihad.

26. Recall that, after the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s, weapons remained easily accessible in northern Mali.

27. By 2006, as the GSPC was preparing to merge with Al-Qaeda, Belmokhtar was focusing on smuggling and arms trafficking more than on Islamic struggle (Black 2009; McGregor 2006: 2). US intelligence believed him to be recruiting Islamists in northern Mali, and the Defense Department considered an air strike against him, though the evidence for his smuggling and trafficking activities was more conclusive. Vicki Hudson, former US ambassador to Mali, said that Belmokhtar was supporting the Kunta Arabs and their smuggling activities, not terrorists, and she convinced the DOD to call off its considered strike (Katchadorian 2006). The Kunta Arabs are an ethnic group of the Sahara that claim descent from Arabs, not Tuaregs, and who were involved in the regional unrest at the time of the Tuareg rebellion of the previous decade (Harmon 2008: 410).
haran operations, would qualify as a “hybrid group,” involved in crime, trafficking, and Islamist insurgency, and flourishing in areas of weak authority. Other examples of hybrid groups, according to Wilson, would be Colombia’s FARC and the Taliban. Numerous observers have noted GSPC involvement in smuggling and trafficking, citing especially Belmokhtar. Yet Belmokhtar is also a bona fide Islamist insurgent, having trained with the mujahedin in Afghanistan in the early 1990s and led raids against Algerian and Mauritania military targets. The question that remains to be answered as AQIM moves into its second decade of organized Islamist struggle is which side of the Group will become more important, the jihad side or the contraband trafficking side.

C. Failure of Global Jihad

By the end of the 1990s, Algerian security forces had largely contained the Islamist threat. Key leaders had been killed or captured, and most jihadis were conceding defeat and laying down their arms (Gerges 2005: 131). The government organized elections and Abdelaziz Bouteflika was elected president. Shortly after taking office, Bouteflika held a referendum on the “Concorde Civile,” an agreement that amounted to a national amnesty bill, which Algerian voters approved in September 1999. The Islamists knew they were defeated and most accepted reconciliation. Thousands of fighters appealed for amnesty, surrendering their arms (Kepel 2002: 274-275; Aaggad 2005: 1; Botha 2008: 5). The majority of Algeria’s Islamists turned away from the GIA’s radical vision for more accommodationist tactics. They abandoned the Islamic state and accepted women’s roles beyond nurturing. Meanwhile, Algerian society as a whole did not seem to rally to the banner of armed struggle, preferring to vote in elections in 1995, 1996, and 1997, and supporting state-armed civilian self-defense militias in large numbers. Only the die-hard jihadist salafis like the GSPC were still pursuing armed rebellion. Eventually, sparse local support would force the Group to move into the Sahara and turn to trafficking for material wherewithal, and to external jihad networks such as Al-Qa’ida for legitimacy (ICG 2004: 2). This legitimacy would come at the cost of the Group’s acceptance of global jihad. However, as we shall see, the Group’s embrace of global jihad could not change the domestic political situation—armed struggle had failed, as it had in Egypt, and salafis would have to return to the political process. Nonetheless, the GSPC still had an estimated 4,000 fighters in 2002, and attacks on military convoys and bases continued (ICG 2004: 2; Schanzer 2002).

There had always been a certain degree of tension between national jihad and global jihad in the Algerian Islamist movement. The “Afghans” were inspired by global jihad because of their experience in Pakistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the GIA’s self-proclaimed goal had always been “jihad in Algeria.” Jean-Pierre Filiu addresses this issue, saying “the national framework of the armed struggle was explicit” (Filiu 2009: 218). This same tension between national vs. global jihad continued under the GSPC/AQIM. Hassan Hattab, for example, was an Algerianist, focused on national jihad. With the death of Antar Zoubabri at the hands of security forces in February 2002, the GIA falling apart, and the AIS long gone, Hattab preferred to retrench and concentrate on the GSPC’s Kabila strongholds in the mountains east of Algiers. However, Hattab’s Algerian strategy was challenged by other amirs with a more global outlook, including Sahraoui, Droukdel, and Saïfi. Saïfi’s kidnapping of the thirty-two hostages in early 2003 can be seen, therefore, as a direct challenge to Hattab’s national jihad approach (Filiu 2009: 217-220). Hattab was deposed in 2003 by the internationalists in favor of the more globally oriented Sahraoui (Darling 2004).

Besides expansion into the Sahara and the Saharan reaches of the Sahelian states, especially Mali and Mauritania, the GSPC’s claim of global jihad manifested itself in two ways: outreach to Islamist organizations in neighboring Maghrebian states, and attacks on foreigners, including tourists, and on foreign installations. The GSPC’s linkage with militant Islamist groups in neighboring North African states appeared to be leading to the creation of a true regional jihadi network. The main organizations with which GSPC built links included the Groupe islamique combattant tunisien (GICT, Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group) the Groupe islamique combattant marocain (GICM, Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group), and the Libyan

28. See note 5.

29. Saïfi also fits this hybrid pattern. He and his followers were smuggling arms from Mali into Southern Algeria when they were detected, leading to their pursuit and capture (Harmon 2008: 401).

30. The GICM has been linked to the Madrid bombings of 2004, and the GICT gained international notoriety because it had recruited the suicide bombers that killed Northern Alliance leader
Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Some of these groups already had links to the global jihad. The LIFG, for example, was founded in 1995 largely by Libyans who had trained and/or fought in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater during the Afghan jihad against the Soviets (Filiu 2009: 223; Roggio 2007). The GSPC’s links with these neighboring national jihad movements enhanced the Group’s global credentials. Militants from Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and even Mauritania began to pass through the GSPC’s organization en route to Iraq, where some became suicide bombers. Eucom officials estimated in 2006 that up to one-fourth of the foreign fighters captured in Iraq were from Africa, most from countries that make up the Sahara-Sahelian region (Gearon 2006: 24). These recruits often entered Algeria through the Saharan smuggling and human trafficking routes, making these routes a key asset of the GSPC (Filiu 2009: 222). By 2006, the LIFG, along with the GICM and the CICT, had loosely merged with the GSPC, creating what appeared to be a genuine regional network linked to the global jihad, supplying fighters for the “front” in Iraq (Roggio 2007).

Attacks on foreign targets, including attacks on foreign installations beyond Algeria’s borders and on foreign interests within Algeria, were also manifestations of the GSPC’s global jihad. One of the first such attacks was the raid on the Lembghi army barracks in Mauritania in June 2005. Second was the December 2006 attack near Algiers on a bus carrying foreign employees of Brown, Root, and Condor, which killed the Algerian driver and wounded six foreigners, including four Britons. The third incident was the March 2007 attack by AQIM on the Russian contractor Stroytransgaz, which killed one Russian and three Algerians. The attack on Brown and Root, a Halliburton subsidiary, had been meant to show solidarity with Iraq, as the attack on the Russian firm was intended to show solidarity with Chechnya (Filiu 2009: 223). Next was the devastating bombing of UN headquarters in Algiers in December 2007. In 2008 came the February gunfire attack on the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott, the June murder of a French engineer and his Algerian driver in Boumerdes just east of Algiers, and the August bombing of a bus, which killed twelve local employees of a Canadian aid organization. While these attacks allowed GSPC/AQIM to claim that it was attacking foreign targets, in reality most of the victims were Algerians (Filiu 2009: 222-224).

Meanwhile, the tide continued to turn against armed struggle in the name of an Islamic state. In September 2005 Algerians voted in a referendum to back a new government amnesty program for Islamist rebels. The yes vote on the government’s Charter of National Reconciliation and Peace officially ended more than a decade of civil war. However, once again, the GSPC rejected the offer, leaving it the only armed salafist group still fighting (Aaggad 2005: 1, 5). The amnesty took effect in March 2006, and despite official rejection by the Group, many GSPC fighters took advantage of it, including three high-ranking leaders who surrendered to Algerian authorities in June. By mid 2006 the GSPC was losing much of its remaining influence in Algeria, and even Hattab, who had accepted an earlier amnesty offer and was in custody, was urging his former comrades to lay down their arms (McGregor 2006; Ulph 2006).

By the time that GSPC officially became AQIM, global jihad in Algeria had failed. Inroads into the Sahara had been significant, and had raised alarm among US policy makers, but they appeared to have more to do with kidnappings for ransom and contraband trafficking than with global jihad. The Maghrebian terror network composed of national jihad groups from several North African countries under AQIM aegis appeared effective, but that connection too would soon unravel (Daragahi 2009). The Group could not, except for its Saharan Brigade, attack effectively beyond Algeria’s borders. Initiatives undertaken by the internationalist wing of GSPC/AQIM did not succeed in integrating the Algerian Islamist movement into the global jihad. Nor did they succeed in slowing the prevailing trend among Algerian Muslims away from armed jihad altogether, a trend that had manifested itself in a series of publicly supported amnesties and the surrender of thousands of fighters. In effect, global jihad in Algeria meant local suicide bombings backed by internationalist rhetoric. Despite such rhetoric the Group remained focused on its strongholds in Kabylia and on its Saharan support groups (Filiu 2009: 225-226). AQIM remains an Algeria-based phenomenon, with little linkage with the other Maghrebian armed Islamist groups, while its attacks in Mali and Mauritania are unsophisticated, though at times deadly.


31. In late 2007 AQIM’s Saharan force was renamed the Tarq bin Ziyad Brigade after the Arab amir who led the Moorish conquest of Spain beginning in 711 A.D.
II. The Evolution of the GSPC into AQIM

The GSPC, originally formed as a result of the Algerian civil war, evolved into AQIM after the September 11 attacks. This transformation is a result of the group's desire to spread global terrorism and its ideological shift. AQIM continues to operate in the Sahara-Sahel region, maintaining its terrorist activities despite international efforts to combat it.

III. US and Algerian Securitization Initiatives

Daniel Volman, an African security analyst, lists the primary US interests in Africa as 1) opening a new front in the GWOT, 2) gaining access to Africa’s energy supplies, and 3) competing with China for access to Africa’s resources (Volman 2008: 37). The Cheney report of May 2001 called for increasing American attention to the development of and access to Africa’s oil supplies in order to reduce dependence on Middle East oil (Klare & Volman 2006: 612). Algeria is Africa’s third largest oil producer, behind Libya and Nigeria, and the US is the largest foreign investor in Algeria’s hydrocarbon sector. Most of Algeria’s oil is produced in its Saharan southern regions (Zoubir 2009: 982-983).

Therefore, it is evident that the US interests in Africa in general and in the Maghreb and its Saharan extension in particular revolve around oil and security, two major concerns of the George W. Bush administration even before the events of 9/11. Both the US and Algeria have undertaken extensive securitization initiatives in the Sahara-Sahel region since 9/11. However, as we shall see, the motives behind these initiatives appear to reflect concerns other than security alone.

A. US Security Goals in the Sahara-Sahel Region

Needless to say, after 9/11 the security element of America’s interests in Africa became even more important. President Bush met with President Bouteflika in November 2001 to discuss their countries’ cooperation in the fight against terrorism. The Bush administration placed the GSPC on a list of terrorist groups in 2002 (Schanzer 2002). In October 2002 an American counter-terrorism team visited the Sahelian countries of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad to invite them to participate in the proposed Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), intended to counter GSPC threats in the region (Katchadourian 2006). The two main goals of the PSI were strengthening the Sahelian states’ capacity to fight terrorist organizations and preventing terrorist groups from establishing bases in the region like those Al-Qaeda had established in Afghanistan in the late 1990s (Zoubir 2009: 989).

III. US and Algerian Securitization Initiatives

Administered by Eucom, the PSI called for military and logistic aid to the four Sahelian governments and deployment of US Special Operations Forces (SOF) personnel to train regional military units in counterinsurgency and contraband interdiction (Klare & Volman 2006: 618). In August 2003, just after Saïfi released the last of his European hostages, General Charles Wald called the defense chiefs of the four targeted nations to a meeting at Eucom headquarters in Stuttgart to discuss implementation of the PSI. The training programs were completed by early 2004 (Zoubir 2009: 990). The subsequent pursuit of Saïfi and his men, beginning in January 2004 in Algeria and continuing across Mali and Niger to his ultimate capture in Chad in March, was hailed as the first success of the PSI. Reportedly, anti-terrorism military units of all four Sahelian countries, trained by US special operations forces, participated in the chase.


33. US and Algerian forces may have also participated in the action against the GSPC band. There were reports that US P-3 Orion naval aircraft, operating out of an Algerian airbase at Tamnasset in southern Algeria, provided intelligence to Chadian troops and that two US C-130 Hercules transports dispatched on very short notice from Ramstein AFB to airlift supplies to the Chadian forces as they closed in on Saïfi (Katchadourian 2006; Zoubir 2009: 982).
scribed the Sahara as the “Wild West all over again.” Major-General Thomas Csrnko saw the possibility of Al-Qa’ida establishing training camps in the Sahara, and other Eucom officials suggested that fighters from Saharan countries training in Iraq might transit back to North Africa to teach their newly learned techniques to recruits there (Motlagh 2005). As a result of such lobbying, Congress promised funding of $500 million for the TSCTP and broadened its scope to involve not only the original four PSI countries but also Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Nigeria, and Senegal (Katchadourian 2006; McGregor 2006). Still justified primarily by the GSPC threat, the TSCTP began operations in June 2005 with Operation Flintlock, providing anti-insurgency training to special units of the armies of seven regional countries (Motlagh 2005). Operation Flintlock’s goals were to 1) coordinate security along Saharan borders, 2) strengthen patrols in ungoverned territories, and 3) prevent the establishment of terrorist bases or sanctuaries. It was reprised twice, in mid 2007 and in late 2008 (Motlagh 2005; Zoubir 2009: 990; Volman & Zoubir 2010: 9).

Before the second round of Operation Flintlock had begun, however, the next phase of the American securitization initiative in Africa was already under way, the development of an independent Africa command (Africom). Africom was created in February 2007, ostensibly to combat the rise of AQIM. The new command was to be composed of military and civilian personnel, including officers of the Department of State and USAID. In July 2007 General William “Kip” Ward, an African-American four star general, was appointed chief of Africom. In October Africom was established as a sub-unified command under Eucom. Despite its stated purpose, Africom will also allow the pursuit of three alternate objectives: 1) deploying troops to African trouble spots as needed, 2) training of counterinsurgency and contraband interdiction units in friendly countries who are willing to act as American surrogates in the GWOT, and 3) implementing State Department development objectives. On October 1, 2008, Africom became a fully operational command; however, the new command has had to operate as a section of Eucom out of Germany because, as of early 2010, no African country has agreed to host its headquarters (Roggio 2007; Volman 2008: 37, 38; Volman & Zoubir 2010: 11).

None of these American securitization initiatives—not the PSI, nor the TSCTP, nor Africom—would have been justifiable on the basis of energy concerns or rivalry with China alone. Defense Department lobbyists needed a credible terrorist threat to pry hundreds of millions of dollars from Congress for these programs. The GSPC/AQIM provided just the right incentive to make these African security organs seem necessary. A question remains as to whether the terror threat posed by GSPC/AQIM to the region was sufficient to warrant the funding and deployment of these initiatives, or whether the US exaggerated the seriousness of the threat to justify its securitization initiatives. One of the first documents to question the seriousness of the terrorist threat posed by the GSPC was the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) report of 2005. This report argued that, while the problems of contraband, human trafficking, and porous borders, exacerbated by endemic poverty and underdevelopment, added up to a potentially threatening mix, the level of terrorist activity was actually relatively low. The report also argued that Islam in the Sahel has traditionally been of a moderate, tolerant variety and that the region does not have a history of Islamist extremism (see Harmon 2008: 397). It concluded that the PSI’s focus solely on military capacity, ignoring the region’s endemic poverty and weak institutional structures, was not the most effective approach. The report expressed hope that the TSCTP, amplified as it was by economic measures, might be more effective (ICG 2005a: 35). Yahia Zoubir, a Sahel expert at the Euromed School of Management, echoes these sentiments, saying that US securitization programs in the Sahel have focused on “visible problems” of terrorism, human trafficking, illegal migration, and criminal networks, not on the underlying roots of these problems: poverty, underdevelopment, and joblessness (Zoubir 2009: 977). Regardless of the programs’ focus, it is clear that the dangers of terrorist attacks and of the establishment of terrorist bases in the Sahel is not as great as Eucom’s alarmist spokesmen had claimed. Therefore, it appears likely that the other two stated US interests in Africa, the availability of energy supplies and competing with China for access to Africa’s resources, are also important motives of the securitization initiatives.

B. Algeria’s Security Goals in the Sahara-Sahel Region

Some observers feel that regional governments, es-
especially in Mauritanian and Algeria, may have also overstated the GSPC/AQIM threat in order to win the support of the Bush administration in its GWOT. Critics of the former Mauritanian government of President Ould Taya repeatedly accused him of invoking the GSPC threat as cover for cracking down on political opponents, some of whom were moderate Islamists with few clear GSPC links. ICG analysts claimed in 2005 that Ould Taya jailed and harassed hundreds of opponents saying they were linked to GSPC, and that he was using the threat of terrorism to deny human rights (ICG 2005b: 4; Motlagh 2006). In spite of Ould Taya’s attempts to associate GSPC terrorism with his political opposition, the best known GSPC attack in Mauritania, the raid on Lemghiti in June 2005, may have had more to do with smuggling and trafficking than with overthrowing the government. It occurred in the remote northeast astride established cigarette and arms smuggling routes between Zerouate and Kidal, and it was led by Belmokhtar, better known as a smuggler than as a GSPC amir (McGregor 2006).

In the case of Algeria, the government, especially the DRS, has been accused of exaggerating the link between the GSPC/AQIM and Al-Qa’ida in order to convince the US to provide logistical and political support to its military-led government (McGregor 2006). The establishment seems to be more concerned with its own survival than with either structural reform or ending Islamist violence. The state of emergency instituted at the time of the internal coup of 1992, which was clearly motivated by regime survival, is still in place, despite the fact that terrorist attacks are way down from their peak in the mid 1990s. Notwithstanding some bright spots, such as a relatively free press, Algeria’s government remains authoritarian, as do all the governments of the Union du Maghreb arabe (UMA, Maghreb Arab Union), yet the regime takes pains to pass itself off as meeting minimum democratic standards, while holding itself up as the protector of Europe from attacks from North Africa-based terrorists. Algeria’s brand of authoritarianism is what observers call “electoral authoritarianism,” which means managed multi-party elections in which the so-called “opposition” parties are allowed to contest elections, but only after they have been co-opted by petro dollars (Zoubir 2009: 979). It also means periodic manipulation of the constitution to suit party needs. For example, in November 2008 Parliament approved a constitutional amendment abolishing presidential term limits to facilitate Bouteflika’s re-election after he had already served his two constitutionally allowed five-year terms. Thus, the institutional façade of democracy preserves what is in effect a single-party, president-for-life system, like the Nasserite model on which the FLN was based. Algeria’s authoritarian regime also receives external support, as both the US and the EU appear to have concluded that it is preferable to maintain relations with an authoritarian government, provided it makes cosmetic democratic reforms, than to allow Islamists to come to power, even if they win elections (Zoubir 2009: 978, 980). It was, we recall, this very attitude that started Algeria down the path of jihad and counterinsurgency back in the early 1990s.

The reality is that poverty and joblessness are fueling jihadism in the Maghreb. Again, little has changed since the early 1990s. One of the reasons for endemic regional poverty is that the Maghrebian states have a poor record of intraregional trade and virtually no intraregional trade agreements. Such artificial hindrances to the free flow of regional trade help create a climate for smuggling and corruption (Zoubir 2009: 978-981). Authoritarian measures, including the state of emergency, remain in place despite the fact that outside observers such as the ICG no longer recognized the GSPC/AQIM as a threat to Algerian state security as early as 2005, the year that Operation Flintlock began (ICG 2005a: 1). The Algerian government also appeared to regard the threat as receding, as it offered another of its amnesty programs that year, the National Reconciliation of 2005. Under its terms the government freed some 2,200 jailed Islamists beginning in February 2006 (Motlagh 2006; Zoubir 2009: 980).

As recently as 2009, journalists and other regional observers continued to question the level of danger posed by AQIM in the Sahel. Some of these critics even question whether US support for regional authoritarian leaders, such as Bouteflika and Ould Taya, may actually do more to provoke an Islamist threat than combat one. Scott Johnson, writing in Newsweek, notes that “the violence in the region bears few similarities to large-scale Qaeda operations elsewhere.” Citing US military officials, he adds, “Western institutions have largely been spared, and there’s no flow of money between the Sahel and other Qaeda cells.” He continues, saying that Qa’ida militants in other theaters are “united by dreams regional or of global domination.”
By contrast he says, quoting Vijay Prashad, a regional expert at Trinity College, Sahel terrorists have “no global ambitions. They don’t even seem to have local ambitions. They’ve devolved into a gang.” Johnson goes on to suggest the US military presence in the region “may actually attract jihadists to a region where few now exist.” Supporting this suggestion, he quotes Yahia Zoubir, saying, “If you treat it from a solely security perspective, you’re producing more jihadists” (Johnson 2009: 7).

Some commentators have gone so far as to imply that Algeria may even be acquiescing to incidents of AQIM terror, or worse, actually be abetting militants so that the government can use the resulting insecurity as an excuse to maintain power. Similar implications surfaced during the civil war. Terrorism expert Mohammed Hafez analyzes accusations raised in the late 1990s that the regime, or rogue elements within it, including the so-called Patriot militias, may have acquiesced to or even participated in massacres of civilians in order to discredit the GIA during the height of the violence. Hafez discounts these claims, saying that the preponderance of evidence points to the militants as responsible for the killings (Hafez 2000: 580-581).

One thing does appear to be certain: The regime—rather, the DRS—systematically infiltrated militant groups throughout the period under discussion. This infiltration goes back as far as the 1980s during the Afghan jihad. One reason that few Algerian “Afghans” actually saw combat against the Soviets was that Osama bin Laden suspected that they were infiltrated by Algerian security forces (Filiu 2009: 214). Suspicions of government infiltration of militant groups emerged again in 1992 after the failed Tamesguida unity conference, mentioned above. Infiltration was likewise believed to be rampant during the massacres of 1996-98, contributing to suspicions of regime complicity. Indeed, Hafez claims that “elements within the regime” were regularly accused of either complicity in or acquiescence of the massacres, and that the accusers included amnestied Islamists, Algerian opposition leaders, and international organizations (Hafez 2000: 574, 580).

As recently as 2005, Al-Qa’ida Central is believed to have delayed acceptance of the GSPC merger due to concerns over DRS infiltration (McGregor 2006). The case for regime complicity is weak, resting on hearsay and innuendo, much of it emanating from enemies. The case for regime acquiescence is likewise thin, though perhaps more plausible than the case for complicity. The evidence for systematic, even excessive infiltration of militant organizations by the regime, however, is strong and pervasive. Such evidence contributes to the notion that the Algerian government is making use of Islamist militancy to justify its own heavy-handedness and continuance in power and to garner US political and monetary support for its role as America’s African partner in the GWOT.

IV. Conclusion

The future of the AQIM threat is unclear. As recently as 2006 it appeared to be receding for at least two reasons. First, Algerians seemed to be withdrawing their support from the GSPC, as they did from the GIA in the mid 1990s. Most Algerian Islamists turned away from the Group’s militancy toward more accommodationist tactics, evidenced by the fact that most Islamist rebels, including former GSPC leader Hattab, accepted government amnesty offers. Second, Algerian security forces had arrested or killed important GSPC leaders, including Saïfi, Sahraoui, ideologue Abu al-Baraa, and Abu Bilal al-Albâni, believed to be Belmokhtar’s liaison with the Kabylia leadership. Algerian government reports suggested that the GSPC was confined to the southern part of the country and that Belmokhtar, amir of the Saharan Brigade, was again concentrating on smuggling (McGregor 2006).

AQIM terrorist attacks have continued, especially in the Sahara in both Mali and Mauritania, but also in Algeria. These incidents have included attacks on Algerian security posts, attacks on foreigners and foreign installations, and kidnappings of Europeans. Attacks on Algerian security posts include a June 2009 ambush by AQIM in which twenty Algerian gendarmes were killed (Thurston 2009) and the deadliest attack of all, on August 19, 2008, when a VBIED attack on job applicants waiting in line at a Les Issers police station

34. Gilles Kepel says that there were allegations that Amir Jamal Zitouni’s bombing campaign in France in 1995 may have been “manipulated” by Algerian special services (Kepel 2002: 266-267).

35. Keenan (2009), levels the most damning accusations against the regime regarding complicity in terrorism, building a case that the DRS was complicit in the mercurial Saïfi’s 2003 kidnapping of the thirty-two Europeans. While he raises significant questions regarding odd behavior and positioning of the security forces during and after the incident and riddles the official explanations with holes, he nonetheless fails to convince. Instead of proving complicity in the kidnapping, he appears to challenge the reader to prove a negative, that the regime was not complicit.
east of Algiers killed forty-eight and wounded forty-five (Stewart & Burton 2009). Attacks on foreigners and foreign installations include the June 23, 2009, shooting of American humanitarian worker Christopher Leggett in Nouakchott and the suicide bombing of the French Embassy on August 8, 2009, also in Nouakchott (Badiane 2009: 2). Kidnappings of Europeans include the February 2008 kidnapping by the Saharan Brigade of two Austrian tourists in southern Tunisia (Guitta 2008). More Europeans were seized between December 2008 and May 2009, including UN workers and tourists. British tourist Edwin Dyer was kidnapped along with three other hostages in southern Algeria on January 22, 2009. The others were released, but Dyer was held, mostly in Mali, until he was beheaded on May 31 after a second ransom deadline had passed. AQIM operations in Mauritania continued into late 2009 when three Spanish humanitarian workers were seized, and a French hostage Pierre Cammatte was seized in Mali in November but released in February 2010 after a prisoner exchange was completed (Badiane 2009: 2; Thurston 2009; BBC News 2010).

Malian security forces went on the offensive in February 2009, capturing an AQIM base near the Algerian border and killing two dozen militants. AQIM responded in July, attacking a desert patrol in the far north and killing nearly a dozen Malian soldiers (Thurston 2009). Alex Thurston says that two factors are generating AQIM violence: lawlessness in the Sahara and the ongoing political crisis in Algeria. He notes that virtually none of the root causes of the violence of the 1990s Algerian civil war have been addressed. Meanwhile, Algeria is moving ahead with a new securitization initiative that included an August 2009 meeting at Tamanrasset, where Algerian military commanders and those of the Sahelian countries discussed coordinated strategy, including the formation of a unified military command to thwart AQIM activities in the Sahel (Nacer 2009: 2; Volman & Zoubir 2010: 19). At the same time, President Bouteflika was said to be considering a new offer of amnesty. Mali, for its part, seemed to be opting for a show of force, including the capture of the AQIM base. Thurston suggests that such a two-pronged strategy may be a good way to address the two countries’ respective problems, political crisis in Algeria and lawlessness in Mali (Thurston 2009).

All the while, many observers insist that the danger of terrorism in the Sahel is overblown. Scott Johnson notes that in the Sahara there are no training camps, no madrassas full of radical devotees from which to recruit, no Deoband-type Islamist ideology, only indigenous Sufi brotherhoods, and that most Sahelian people condemn the violence of the extremists. Johnson adds that there is no money flowing in from or out to Qaeda cells (Johnson 2009: 2). Jean-Pierre Filiu claims that in Algeria, AQIM has failed to turn the people away from accommodation with the regime and back to jihad, and it has failed to internationalize its movement. Despite its global claims, its struggle remains a national one. For example, it has not been able to hold on to the Maghrebian jihad network that it tried to build in 2006-2007 (Filiu 2009: 224-225).

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) announced its own direct alliance with Al-Qaeda in November 2007 in a display of independence from AQIM (Roggio 2007). By 2009 AQIM was down to about 1,000 fighters, and contraband trafficking had become a bigger problem than terrorism in the Sahel (USNCTC 2009; Zoubir 2009: 992). Furthermore, in a stunning reversal of Al-Qaeda’s fortunes in North Africa, LIFG announced in December of 2009 that it was renouncing Qaeda violence altogether and reconciling with the Kadafi government (Daragahi 2009).

The future of US involvement in the Sahara-Sahel region and more broadly in Africa also remains unclear. The Obama administration appears to be following in the footsteps of the Bush administration in its securitization and militarization of the continent. For example, the Obama administration appears to be strengthening the US-Algeria partnership. Current US policy is that Algeria will take the lead in the region in undermining AQIM so that the US can avoid conspicuous responsibility. Algeria has indicated that it is willing to play this role, as it demonstrated in calling the August 2009 meeting in Tamanrasset to discuss coordinated military action among its Sahelian neighbors. In addition, the Obama administration announced in October of 2009 the delivery of a new security assistance pack-

36. Further complicating matters, in 2008 Tuareg rebels again started making trouble for the Malian military in the country’s northern Kidal Region, a center of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s. The Alliance, the main Tuareg militant group, seems to be hostile to AQIM as well as to the Malian government, so it is unclear how their activities will affect the security situation in the Sahara (Guitta 2008).

37. Deobandi Islamist ideology derives from the nineteenth-century madrassa Dar al-Ulum at Deoband in northern India. It is rampant in Pakistan and Afghanistan, underlying the radicalism of the Taliban and many Pakistani Islamist movements.
age to Mali consisting of Land Cruiser pickup trucks, replacement parts, uniforms, and communications equipment. The purpose of this aid package, provided under the Counter-Terrorism Train and Equip (CTTE) Program, is to enhance internal security and border control. It is intended to help Mali deal with AQIM activities. Yet there appears to be no guarantee that Mali will not use such equipment against Tuareg insurgents, as it has done in the past. Meanwhile, the Obama administration still lists AQIM activity as the main reason for continued US involvement in the Sahel, while the TSCTP, backed by Africom, remains the focal point of US efforts against AQIM (Volman & Zoubir 2010: 19). Indeed, Obama appears to be expanding US military activity further in Africa than his predecessor did. In December 2009 the US confirmed that it is considering creating a 1,000-man marine rapid deployment force for Africom for intervention in African hot-spots. This increasing reliance on militarization comes despite the fact that US military aid in Africa ties the US to what are often repressive, unstable, and undemocratic regimes. Obama claims that such military aid is in conjunction with non-military activities meant to address the underlying issues of poverty and corruption. Yet the civil aid thrust in Africa has been weakened over the past several years by chronic underfunding for DOS and USAID, leaving military assistance, such as the CTTE Program, the only viable approach. So Obama relies on military aid, despite the risk that it may ultimately exacerbate regional security problems (Volman n.d.: 2-3).

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, AQIM is again declining in military effectiveness both in Algeria and the Sahel. The Group continues to mount small-scale attacks, especially kidnappings for ransom, and to expand its contraband trafficking. Anneli Botha adds that AQIM no longer poses a threat to the Algerian government, but it can disrupt the security of the country and alienate foreign interests (Botha 2009: 32). Meanwhile, the FLN is still in power in Algeria, and the Obama administration is still going ahead with Africom and other military programs. Therefore, the current situation appears to bear out the arguments advanced in the introduction. First, AQIM is more concerned with its own survival than with either overthrowing the Algerian government or advancing the global jihad, having failed in both of these goals. Second, the US and Algeria have exaggerated the level of terrorist threat posed by GSPC/AQIM in order to pursue their own security agendas. In addition to security, these agendas include, for the Americans, a military and economic foothold in North and West Africa, especially in oil-producing states, and for Algeria, the continued rule of its authoritarian government.

References


Stephen Harmon

From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group into an Al-Qa’ida Affiliate


War on ‘terror’: Africom, the kleptocratic state and under-class militancy in West Africa-Nigeria

Caroline Ifeka

The aim is no longer to transform the world, but (as the heresies did in their day) to radicalise the world by sacrifice. Whereas the system aims to realize it by force.

— Baudrillard (2002: 10)

Abstract

The US, EU and Chinese compete to control strategic resources (oil, bauxite, uranium, subterranean water) in the Sahara, Sahel and proximate semi-arid zones as northern Nigeria, home of the young suicide bomber who failed to bring down Northwest Airlines Flight 252 over Detroit in December 2009. US-NATO commands in Stuttgart and Brussels prosecute the ‘War on Terror’ to securitize ‘dangerous’ West African Muslim states (and quietly manoeuvre leases to exploit resources vital to US and EU capital accumulation).

The principal cause of growing youth militancy mobilising around ethnicity and Islamic reformism is the ruling class’s failure to ‘share’ the ‘dividends of democracy’ — e.g. rental incomes from ‘traditional’ community owned strategic resources as oil, gas, gold, bauxite, uranium, water — according to subaltern clients’ expectations. So the under-class experiences as ‘bad’ the ‘democratic’ West African State’s governance. Failed expectations are reflected in some radical elements’ readiness to sacrifice their lives in fighting the war machine — sheer force — of the repressive State.

‘Bad’ governance is the consequence not of corruption but of clientelism, that is informal political relations greased by money between patrons/‘big men’ and clients/‘small boys’; this largely illegal system of power and patronage generates venality and violence, but not as yet real terrorism (Obi 2006). Ironically, Islamic militants (northern Nigeria) and ethnic sovereignty movements (southern Nigeria, northern Niger, northern Mali) drawing on subaltern discontent share

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with international donors the same objective of securing ‘good’ (i.e. just, efficient, clean) governance, though under-class devout Muslim youth define good governance not in donors’ secular terms but in regard to Quranic precepts. The US military command for Africa (AFRICOM) and international aid practitioners target corruption as the cause of ‘dangerous’ under-development; they strengthen security agencies and hand out anti-corruption funds that the ruling classes mis-appropriate. The militarization of ‘development’ will succeed only, as elsewhere (e.g., Afghanistan), in nourishing the growth of real terrorism among, for example, Nigeria’s estimated 40-60 million largely unemployed youth and ethnic minorities.

A more peaceful strategy than US reliance on resource control by force is ECOWAS community capacity building. Subaltern classes could be empowered to strengthen management of traditional resources and land in strategic locations developed as hubs of sustainable economic growth and justice reform at the magistrate, native court, and Shari’a court levels. Improvements in the local economy, governance and justice delivery as part of planned institution building for socially inclusive growth and equity could diminish subaltern discontent and encourage currently disempowered majorities to challenge peacefully the kleptocratic State’s reliance on force to ‘resolve’ political conflicts with and among citizens.

Introduction

West Africa was of secondary military-economic interest to the US in the mid-1990s, compared to North Africa (Libya) and the Horn of Africa, but continuing difficulties in Middle Eastern oil supplies encouraged the US to seek petroleum providers elsewhere – the Caucasus, the south Atlantic ocean, and West Africa’s oil rich Gulf of Guinea states, especially Nigeria. Twenty years ago China was just beginning to prospect in West Africa for business and construction contracts, and so was not viewed then as a serious contender for access to and control over important African resources as oil and gas (Obi 2008). Today, nearly 750,000 Chinese are resident in Africa; 300 million emigrants to Africa may be planned (Michel and Beuret 2009: 4-5). The terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, opened US eyes to the strategic advantage of relatively ‘safer’ West and West-Central African, especially Nigerian, sources of high quality crude oil rapidly transportable across the Atlantic ocean to refineries in populous cities on the North American eastern industrial seaboard. This major shift in US policy regarding West Africa took place at a time when arms sales by the world’s top arms exporters – the US, Russia and Germany – rose by a further 22% between 2005-2010 (Norton-Taylor 2010).

Since 2001 renewed religious riots, outbursts of alleged ‘terrorism’ in the Sahara-Sahel and northern Nigeria, and militant threats to African oil exports have spurred the US to establish US African Command (AFRICOM) in collaboration with NATO’s Special Forces (Keenan 2009). From 2006 onwards the US has carried out military and naval exercises in selected African states, including the Cape Verde archipelago proximate to oil blocks off Senegal, targeted for leasing to US Multi-national Corporations (MNCs). AFRICOM was fully operational from 2008 (AFRICOM 2009; AFROL 2009a).

The Pentagon appears to be intensifying plans in 2010, partnering with selected West African states (e.g. Senegal, Cape Verde, Ghana, Cameroon, Sao Tome and Principe, Mali, Niger), for further military exercises, training programmes and sales at discounted prices of modern fighter aircraft, automatic machine guns, and possible robotic aerial vehicles (US AFRICOM 2010). AFRICOM has in view certain locations in northern (e.g. Kano, Bornu, Bauchi, Yobe, Jos, Kaduna states), and southern Nigeria, principally the Niger Delta core oil producing states (Bayelsa, Rivers, Delta) as well as Lagos, the country’s sprawling commercial capital – estimated population 15 million, headquarters of MNC oil corporations, banks, and major Nigerian companies as Dangote Ltd and new light industries in partnership with Chinese companies.

Militarisation is taking place in selected West African states whose pre-industrial economies are still geared, as in the colonial era, to export raw materials with little value added to the advantage of Western and Asian industrialised economies. For example, partial modernisation in Nigeria reflects the country’s status as a rentier state relying on oil revenues (Karl 1997). Its late emergence in the 1970s as West Africa’s potential industrial power was aborted by a military regime in

5. In the early 1990s Taiwan was more interested in Nigeria than China.
the mid-1980s, following pressure by international financial and trade institutions (e.g. International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organisation) that West African states remove tariff barriers on consumer and light industrial goods. An emerging Nige-

Aborbive economic modernisation in Nigeria, and Francophone Sahelian states as Niger and Mali, seems to have sustained perceived ‘traditional’, i.e. customary community values and identities. Until recently, when mobilising in political protest subalterns did so, by and large, through religious or ethnic, rather than class, identities (c.f. Laclau 1977: 155 ff). Many dissident youth movements based on ‘customary’ ethnic and/or religious identities have a long tradition in rural communities; they seek to reclaim land, water, resource management, rental incomes, and to purify ‘governance’ in favour of just land reform and resource distribution (Parker & Rathbone 2007: 91ff) Yet militant groups may also be referred to locally by globalising tags that suggest community familiarity with struggles elsewhere; for example, northern Nige-

When resisting repression youth coalesce around kin-based ethno-religious and clan identities that cohere around two dominant poles — ‘us, small people’ (clients) and ‘them, big men’ (patrons/godfathers) (Ifeka 2001b, 2006; Smith 2007). The ‘people’/‘power’ opposition draws on a repertoire of customary representations and practices (e.g. initiation rituals, war gods, charms against bullets, juju ‘medicine’, language, religious texts, shrines) that authorise subaltern militant organisation. More recently, since the return to democracy in 1999, the growth of poverty and shared meanings of suffering, and on-going political violence between rulers and ruled, is contributing to a revival of representations of class identity and consciousness that elderly working men, peasant farmers, traders, teachers and petty clerks knew in the 1970s.7

Adopting a political economy approach, I disaggre-
gate that over-used neo-liberal concept of ‘the people’ into social classes; that is, groups differentiated by their unequal relationship to the means of production (capital) and power as owners/workers, but who yet express their socio-political worlds through customary institutions of patron-clientship. For example, subalterns and rulers construct the social formation in terms of unequal relations of power expressed in terms of relations between client (subordinate) and patron (dominant)— almost everyone is a patron and/or a cli-

tent to someone else. Clientelistic relations cross cut but do not erase economic class divisions: for instance, on one level ministers and senior civil servants in com-

mand of the state and its revenues are the top patrons or men of mega-power, those lacking such access are their clients, but on another level middle ranking civil servants, company administrators, junior army officers are themselves patrons to many lesser others. Thus, power relations between patrons and clients defined in terms of upward and downwards informal and illicit flows of money/services constitute the country’s ‘real’ political economy (Joseph 1987; Ifeka 2001a, 2006, 2009; c.f. Laclau 1977). Fundamentalist religious movements or ethnic nationalists may draw on a mix of ‘traditional’ cultural symbols as well as those of economic inequality (‘big’/‘small’ men) to express under-class frustration and a strong desire, backed by force, for cleaner, more just governance with improved ‘dividends of democracy’ for the masses.

**The ‘Terrorist’ Threat**

‘Terrorism’ is a terrifying condition of existence, one that normalises violence and so destroys the every day trust that lives are safe and justice prevails. It is often linked to al-Qaeda or the Taliban. We need to ask if ‘terrorism’ in West Africa is a threat or reality.

Just before the terrorist bombings of the Pentagon

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7. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the Nigerian working class based in city factory production in Lagos, Aba, Jos, Kano and Kaduna was growing rapidly in numbers, trade union organisation and consciousness. 30% of today’s subalterns live in cities almost devoid of factories, 70% live in rural areas where kin-based support networks render meaningful symbols and practices of ethnicity, religion and clientelism that habituate the marginalised majority to ‘accept’/‘endure’/‘do’ every day violence.
and World Trade Centre, in 1999-2000 twelve northern Nigerian state governors (Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Kano, Yobe, Jigawa, Bauchi, Katsina, Niger, Bauchi, Adamawa and Gorom) declared their commitment to the full-blown establishment of Shari’a law in their states. (There are thirty-six states in Nigeria.) Led by Zamfara state’s governor, they proclaimed the urgent need to sanitise state legal systems that did little or nothing to implement Quranic justice and governance; in two or three years, however, kleptocratic governance ensured that Shari’a, too, became comatose so Islamist religious sect leaders began preaching again for governance reform and justice according to the Quran.

After twelve northern Nigerian states implemented Shari’a law, different views at home and in US-European metropoles began to be expressed regarding the likelihood of Nigerian ‘terrorism’ in addition to on-going militancy in the oil producing Niger Delta threatening Nigeria’s stability as a core US crude oil supplier. Nigeria holds the largest concentration of US capital in Africa, mainly the result of investment in the past thirty years by the world’s largest multi-national oil corporations, ExxonMobil and TexacoChevron. Together with the UK and Holland’s Royal Dutch Shell and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco are aiming to supply 25% of US oil needs, though this goal requires a sustainable resolution of the Niger Delta crisis (Peel 2009; Amanze-Nwachuku 2010) Militancy and perceived terrorism threaten US-EU strategic interests in sustaining MNC capital accumulation.

Opinions about ‘terrorism’ in Nigeria have changed. First, some writers in 2000-04 saw no evidence of al-Qaeda linked terrorist cell penetration of northern Nigeria, nor that terrorist and criminal syndicates trafficking guns, drugs, and people had linked up. Yet in 2003-04 informants in Cross River state, which abuts Rivers (a core Niger Delta state), hinted that some Niger Delta militant youth were in contact with groups elsewhere in Nigeria and beyond; by 2006, I believed that a few ‘restive’ youth in the Delta and the country’s northern regions were exchanging information. Using information technology (IT), militants were moving closer together; some were becoming more frustrated and angry at the ‘selfishness’ of plutocratic politicians, corporate chief executives, military, police and intelligence services in not distributing down the clientelist chain financial profits in stolen state funds and trafficked illegal goods; they were beginning to move beyond ethnic nationalism/religious fundamentalism into a shared sense of under-class alienation from lands, livelihoods and largesse (Ifeka 2006). Equally, information was seeping into northern Nigerian contexts about the plight of the Tuaregs, repressed by the Nigerien state — and probably covertly by the Algerian secret services (Keenan 2006, 2009) — for their aggressive posture in regard to their ethnicity’s claims to customary ownership of land, oasis, subterranean water and uranium resources.

Second, a few authors wrote about the perceived ‘terrorist’ threat posed by forms of Islamisation, including Shar’ia law, to West African security and the US’s need for sustainable energy flows from Nigeria (Volman 2003). Certain commentators began to understand that US policy could be more nuanced, less likely to cause unwanted ‘terrorist’ strikes in North America’s homeland, if the Pentagon took on board that Nigeria’s large Muslim population — in 1998 estimated numerically to be the fifth largest in the world at c. 78 million relative to Indonesia’s c. 196 million (Islamic Web 1998; ABC 2009)— does not exist in a social, cultural or economic and historical vacuum. Rather, Muslims, about 57% of c. 140 million Nigerians in the 2001 Population Census, largely Sunni congregations and brotherhoods leavened by a sprinkling of Sufi adherents, boast historic connections via the ancient trans-Saharan trade routes with the Middle East and North African Maghrib (Parker and Rathbone 2007: 7-8ff). Such historic connections and shared understandings suggest both the possibility of US/Maghribi diplomacy exercised for peace, as well as some radical Ummah states’ support for Islamist fundamentalist cells (dubbed ‘terrorist’ by AFRICOM-NATO) in Nigeria.

Third, other observers inclined to the view that the Federal Republic of Nigeria could split. In 2004 a defence analyst identified Nigeria as a ‘potent mix of communal tensions, radical Islamisation, and anti-Americanism’, in their view fertile grounds for militancy that threatens to tear Nigeria apart (Morrison 2004: 75-8). Late in 2009, another defence analyst advising the US Pentagon, addressed a forum sponsored by the Royal African Society at a University of London institution, and stated that Nigeria could fragment. The Niger Delta ‘crisis’ and the emergent Ijaw ethnic-nation state’s
armed struggles against the Nigerian State for at least a 50% share, progressing over time to 100% resource control of their ethnic-nation’s oil and gas, may have been uppermost in his mind.

In my experience, having lived and worked in Nigeria for several decades, I now doubt that ethnic-nationalist or fundamentalist Islamist politicians of the twenty first century will emulate the Igbo in 1966, or Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra in the 1990s, and struggle for secession though this may have been a possibility in the early 2000s (Ikeka 2000a,b, 2001b, 2004). The Nigerian government’s 2009 amnesty with some Nigerian Delta militant organisations was preceded by much carpet crossing of Niger Delta activists; money, sometimes called ‘gratification’ in Nigeria’s clientelistic system, is all; it trumps party and militant loyalty. I also experienced personally in 2008-9 the depth of Nigeria’s ruling political and business class’ commitment to obtaining by any means the dollars with which to maintain vertical chains of ‘chopping’ and ‘sharing’ funds between patrons and clients. Shares must keep well ahead of inflation, so nowadays percentages deducted for ‘commissions’ can top 60% of a contract’s gross value.

‘Money shouts’: Nigerian history shows that at times of political conflict over resource allocation local, state and federal elites can ‘cry wolf’ and declare secession, but since the end of the Biafran civil war (1967-1970), as long as oil and gas flow, and criminal trafficking flourishes, senior level godfathers of whatever state and ethno-religious provenance will mostly shy away from overtly secessionist or ‘terrorist’ struggles. Currently, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is refreshing its call of the early to mid-2000s for total control of all oil and gas revenues, and airing the possibility of secession (Remy 2010). But such actions could weaken, or destroy, personal and sub-ethnic highly lucrative networks in the all-important ‘shadow’ Nigerian political economy of ‘chopping’ on the State’s oil wealth and capitalising on trafficking in illegal goods. Influential clients and patrons of potent families, clans and sub-ethnic groups convert funds of whatever legal/illegal provenance into the financial means with which offspring, younger relatives and trusted clansmen/women sustain emerging dynasties influential in ruling class party politics of accumulation and patrimonial distribution. Flows are ‘protected’ by secretive godfathers, and at times godmothers, closely connected to the State’s security agencies, politicians and criminal networks who rely on force — gunning down protesters and assassinating turncoats — to remove opposition.

Some financial benefits of reducing any perceived ‘terrorist’ threat, and staying on board the ‘chopping’ ship of the Nigerian State, can be quickly sketched. In 2006 the Bayelsa state government (a core oil producing state with an estimated population of over two million Ijaws and some smaller ethnic groups) received its monthly funds from the Federal oil derivation account reportedly to the annual value of $1.954 billion (Economic Confidential 2009). The-then state governor, Diepreye Alamieyesigha, is known to have racked up about $20 million in stolen assets deposited or invested in properties overseas; though this sum was probably just a tidbit, it was about 10,000 times the daily earnings of governor Alamiaghya’s humble fisher folk constituents (Peel 2009: 109). To put Bayelsa state’s wealth in context: in 2009 the Northern Governors forum calculated that the three core Niger Delta oil producing states’ annual revenues could fund all nineteen northern states at their current rates of expenditure for one year. At the same time, using financial figures available on the Internet, I have calculated that if expended transparently, according to the national budget approved by the National House of Assembly and President, and not siphoned off, Nigeria’s 2008 annual budget could have funded in that year the approved budgets of over thirty sub-Saharan African states, excluding South Africa, Senegal and some others.

Regarded in terms of its huge oil and gas wealth — generating in 2008 the (under) reported sum of circa $30 billion (Peel 2009) — its rapidly expanding banking systems, populous home market and dominance (with Columbia) of global narco-trafficking, Nigeria is a-typical of other ECOWAS states. But in terms of its deep rooted patronimical system, kleptocratic governance and shadow (criminal) political economy in narcotics, guns, minerals, fossil fuel resources and people trafficking is typical. Nigeria is an exemplar of the kleptocratic (not terrorist) State, first described by Stanislaw Andreski (1968), a pioneering sociologist of corruption and venal power’s impoverishing impact on under-classes: kleptocracy is a system of state power based on rule by theft and bribery — but I would add violence is equally necessary, because players operate
in unregulated shadow trading systems relying on discipline through a mix of trust and force. Penetrated as it is by clientelist and criminal networks, committed to accumulation by any means, the Nigerian State is as yet some way from confronting real terrorism. Yet AFRICOM’s imposed securitization of ‘development’ in partnership with the nation-State is generating renewed militancy against the nation-State’s police, who retaliate with killing force (Abrahamsen 2005).

‘Dual’ political and economic institutions — the formal/legitimate and informal/illegitimate — surely pose a complex challenge to the militaristic mentality that dominates AFRICOM-NATO. Militarism, when prodded, may consider sustainable economic development as a strategic pathway to resolve issues of perceived West African ‘terrorism’ linked to ‘bad’ governance, corruption and violence. But, being of the military, these senior officers are trained to think primarily in terms of top down (undemocratic) solutions of force to what are actually dynamic and deep-rooted societal problems. These indubitably require bottom-up democratic solutions that are sensitive to differences in social institutions of power, production and religion in diverse ethnic-nations and yet capable of counteracting widening poverty, the bureaucratic nation-State’s reliance on total force, and under-class violent resistance (Ifeka 2005, 2009; Duffield 2001, 2007).

AFRICOM was the fifth and latest of the Pentagon’s regional commands. The whole world is now more or less integrated, at least on paper, in one consolidated global military network (Rozoff 2010b). AFRICOM’s area of responsibility includes 53 African nations. Indeed, we should situate America and NATO’s military drive into Africa, all of Africa, within the context of US and NATO expansion and strengthening of, on paper, an increasingly integrated global command system with which to eradicate ‘terrorism’ and protect strategic resource flows to US-EU metropoles.

AFRICOM was authorised in 2007; the command was launched as an independent entity on 1 October 2008, 8

By 2009 the US had evolved its global command system into five regions (table 1):

### Table 1: US Regional Command Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Command</th>
<th>Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>CENTCOM — US Central Command</td>
<td>Tampa, Florida, and Doha, Qat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>EUCOM — US European Command</td>
<td>Stuttgart, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>PACOM — US Pacific Command, Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>SOUTHCOM — US Southern Command, Central and Southern America</td>
<td>Miami, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>AFRICOM — US Africa Command</td>
<td>Stuttgart and Camp Lemonier, Djibouti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. AFRICOM’s Equipment: In 2009 US Air Forces Africa (AFA AFRICA, 17th Air Force) flew a new C-1303 Super Hercules tactical airlifter aircraft from Ramstein Air Base, Germany, to pick up seventeen troops assisting with training Malian forces. By 2010, AFA AFRICA will be able to call on 14 such aircraft in support of their mission in Africa (Torres 2010). Is the US command setting up a new West African regional military force (Scavetta 2009)? Will the US use private security companies (e.g., CSS Global Inc) as in Somalia, to establish a small but flexible military presence in selected states (ibid)? Will UAVs be awarded to favoured West African states?

NATO: France has about 7,000 troops in different West African countries from Senegal to Gabon; about 2,900 French troops are also stationed in Djibouti where the US command has leased Fort Lemonier as an AFRICOM naval base. Africa is a testing ground for NATO’s Rapid Response Force and the US’s 1,000 ship Navy and Global Fleet Station projects (Wikipedia 2009a).
with a forward base at Camp Lemonier, Djibouti, in the highly strategic Horn of Africa, facing a volatile, fractured and ‘terrorist’ infiltrated Yemen. Two thousand AFRICOM troops are stationed at Camp Lemonier; the French army and navy also have a base with troops stationed in Djibouti (France 2008).

AFRICOM’s web site suggests that EUCOM/AFRICOM, Stuttgart, has developed a dynamic plan for improving relations all round between the US and selected African states, including those in strategic North and West Africa (Wikipedia 2010c). General William (‘Kip’) Ward, AFRICOM’s genial Commander, engages monthly on a hectic round of public relations and relationship building with friendly states via military-to-military events, training and conferences, strategic site visitations, supplies of modern military equipment, fostering partnering agreements between US-based National Guard units and selected African nations for military-military familiarisation and relationship building; for example, Nigeria is paired with the California state Home Guard, Tunisia with Wyoming’s. In 2009 US command donated to Mali modern military vehicles and communications equipment for improved intelligence and surveillance, especially of northern Mali, home to nomadic Tuareg (Rozoff 2010a).

Surveillance drones to patrol the vast empty spaces of the northern Sahara from ‘lily pad’ military platforms in Tamanrasset (southern Algeria) are also planned for southern Libya. A UK company is working, possibly in partnership with Italy, towards selling Libya up to fifty Evo Falco UAVs for surveillance work in restricted military airspace in the Sahara-Sahel (Copinger 2010). Unarmed drones are launched from the US base in the Seychelles to monitor piracy, smuggling, military and ‘terrorist’ activities in the Gulf of Suez and Indian Ocean. The latter on-going exercises link up with AFRICOM’s intelligence and monitoring operations by its 2,000 personnel based at Camp Lemonier, Djibouti (ibid).

Since 2006 AFRICOM has used its African Partnership Station (APS), the USS Fort McHenry, and carried out military and naval exercises in waters off Cape Verde, Guinea Conakry, Sao Tome and Principe, and Gabon (Wikipedia 2010c); it has simulated war games on Nigeria (Volman 2009; Samuelson 2009; Crossed Crocodiles 2008). AFRICOM’s air force planned thirty such events in 2009 and has 120 billed for 2010 (AFRICOM 2010). Seventeen event countries, some receiving development aid, include West Africa’s Nigeria, Mali, Ghana, Senegal, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Cape Verde (Powell 2009; Afrol 2009b).

Agreements with selected states providing ‘lily pads’ — forward operational locations or platforms for rapid response force detachments — are being expanded and consolidated; agreements are in the pipe line for Tamanrasset in the far south of Algeria, Bamako airport (Mali), Dakar airport (Senegal), also with Cape Verde regarding rapid response force use of its military base at Sao Vicente, off Senegal, and with Sao Tome and Principe (Gulf of Biafra). The latter states are upcoming US partners with oil fields to be exploited.

**Clientelism**

Szeftel (2000 : 407ff) argued that Africa’s culturally rooted patrimonial political systems based on clientelism and patronage with (illegally) appropriated state funds obviously do not depend on development in the accepted sense. Rather, are these kleptocratic West African states threatened by it. Further repression by force may ensue. Therefore, development aid doled out on the current bilateral or multilateral basis, state to state, may be a waste of funds, siphoned as they usually are into the pockets of state officials, and if working together as is sometimes the case, laundered through the bank accounts of complicit NGOs, religious organisations, and business companies.

The principal cause of perceived ‘terrorist’ threats in West Africa to Western (oil, gas, mineral) interests is often said to be armed robbers, kidnappers, militants, religious fanatics and fundamentalists — and other alleged ‘saboteurs’ of the nation-State’s sovereignty and much vaunted stability including illegal traffickers, especially but not exclusively narcotic dealers with Nigerian connections.

However, a political economy analysis pinpoints, rather, the kleptocratic state’s internal *de facto* governance by clientelist relations within and between juridical, political and administrative institutions and security apparatuses. These relations are oiled by corruptly obtained money and evaluated in strictly financial terms — *cui bono?* Hardly surprising, all donors are desired including the Chinese, who in 2006 awarded wealthy Nigeria a $50 billion credit line that is still unused.
(Aderinokun 2008).

In sum, we can say that the informal ‘legal’ economy is indeed important in sustaining a hundred million and more families of waged and salaried workers, peasant-farmers, graziers, off-farm and pasture enterprises as well as cattle transporting, veterinary drugs buying and selling, hawkers of petty items, and small business folk including women street sellers of ‘hot food’ and other informal services. The illegal sector includes lucrative businesses in sex slave trafficking, based in Edo state as well as narcotics and gun trafficking orchestrated by Nigerian networks through West African remoter locations. This sector sustains clientelism linking dominant and dominated — ‘dirty’ money being recycled through multiple accounts until it emerges as ‘clean’ credit — though it also contributes to subaltern economic survival, as long as under-class madams in, for example, sex trafficking ventures survive by remaining ‘obedient’ and ‘trustworthy’ to men in command of their network (Agbroko 2009).9

Clientelism and its vertical relations articulate power processes between patrons and clients through the distribution of ‘dash’/‘chop money’ between those at the heart of the kleptocratic State — the ruling political party, security forces, corporations and oligarchs of Nigeria’s venal ‘real’ political economy — and impoverished kinsfolk, clansmen and ethnic women of the under-classes who constitute ‘big’ men’s power base. Embedded patrimonial socio-political systems are cause and effect of a largely rural population growing at 3% per annum, relying for survival on networks of kin, clansfolk and ethnicity, and starved by patrons of the benefits of Nigeria’s huge oil revenues. Clientelism is therefore a major driver of the kleptocratic State’s corruption, violence and cruel use of killing force.

Access to and use of physical power strengthens patrons and senior clients’ hold on illegal pathways of accumulation and politically embedded State cultures of impunity; the latter protect government politicians, civil servants, police and army officers from serious investigation before the law and ensure brutal treatment by security agents of militants, vigilantes, and others (Bayart et al 1999; Chabal and Daloz 1999: ix-15) Thus, clientelism promotes violence at all levels of the ‘shadow’ or ‘real’ as well as formal (legal) political economies.

Yet the same all-powerful men also use ostensibly more peaceful methods to consolidate their formal command of the apparatuses of state including the all-powerful ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP). Oligarchs of leading dynasties seek to reproduce familial wealth and power in the predominantly Christian south, and largely Muslim north, by encouraging young kinsmen to become vigilantes to ‘police’ or protect their community and its natural resources from unwanted strangers. As well, they aim to marry off daughters to the sons or nephews of other notables of politics as state governors, senior administrators or banking CEOs. By and large daughters obey, but as a recent instance demonstrates there are limits to a client’s obedience, and when the client feels sufficiently secure with his patron he may decline to serve. In early 2009 the sole wife of a powerful northern state governor (a client of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) refused to agree to the First Lady of Nigeria’s demand that her husband marry the President’s daughter; the state governor’s first lady is still his only wife.

**Vigilantism: Militancy**

Vigilantism, taking the law into the group’s own hands with the ostensible objective of protecting one’s neigbourhood/quarter or town, is an enduring aspect of settlement society and history among different ethnic groups in Nigeria (Conerly 2007, Pratten 2007) — and elsewhere.10 Youth organisations span the spectrum from purely recreational to credit associations and town unions to vigilante armed units with ordering functions and militant organisations whose mission is to achieve political goals by attacking the bourgeois State. Some are also active in the ‘shadow’ economy of others (Bayart et al 1999; Chabal and Daloz 1999: ix-15) Thus, clientelism promotes violence at all levels of the ‘shadow’ or ‘real’ as well as formal (legal) political economies.

10. An early reference in published form to town unions and youth associations is by Smythe and Smythe (1962). Vigilantes flourished in Igbo communities during the turbulent build up to the Biafran Civil War (1967-70), and as armed robbers extracting money and goods as well as protecting their own people, on highways at night, and in neighbourhoods. Vigilantes or ‘youth’ organisations with ‘protective’ functions were absorbed into the Biafran army during the civil war, and subsequently reappeared as civilian organisations. Some of these organisations have strong roots in male secret societies with initiation rituals (Pratten and Sen 2005; Ifeka 2006).
trafficking illegal goods for pecuniary gain and prestige acquisition. Vigilantes’ primary role, however, is supposedly defensive — protection and ordering — rather than offensive as are militants.

However, vigilante youth policing or ordering activities lack strong boundaries (Buur 2003): an energetic youth can be a vigilante in the conventional sense (above) but also participate in or initiate traditional style religious fundamentalism, become a trade union (class) strike leader or leave the vigilante zone and enter an ethnic-nationalist organisation in the Niger Delta or join a fundamentalist politico-religious sect. The latter may be modelled on a leader’s hearsay knowledge obtained from travellers or the Internet of al-Qaeda, the Taliban and other radical Muslim organisations in the global Ummah. Equally, men employed as police don their Nigeria Police uniform by day, but at night may join a vigilante or ethnic/religious militant organisation or even a band of armed robbers and engage in ‘operations’ to obtain cash (Ifeka 2006, Walker 2009).

Youth organisations protecting the community may receive remuneration, usually a regular monthly fee and/or payments in kind that can flow into other less licit forms of money-getting activities; as noted, the latter merges into community policing. Increasing impoverishment is encouraging more security agents to participate in rackets in which armed robbers, fraudsters and other local ‘godfathers’, in partnership with client middle-ranking or junior police officers, arrange to obtain entry to the Nigeria Police and start work by day as police constables. Night time operations (e.g. robberies, attacks on rival mobs) then go much more smoothly, less likelihood of road blocks and interrogations at gun point.

Vigilante/militant culture and symbols of power (e.g. spiritual force as traditional jujú, gods and powerful ‘medicines’, status as ulamma or pastor) are not only created by young men, and sometimes in mixed organisations by young women, drawing on known traditional cultural values of righteous authority and violence (e.g. secret societies with violent initiation rituals). Militant values are also influenced by community values and ‘traditional’ political practices of consensual decision making, respect for the elders, care for the young and vulnerable; also group culture is shaped by relations with, and criticism of, the dominant culture of mainstream society and the State, as experienced by youth when dealing with the State’s agencies and also as perceived through urban television.

Socially immature (e.g. unmarried, or married without financial means or capital assets) men often feel that godfathers are not living up to their (clients’) expectations: lack of ‘dash’ means they lack the cash to fuel a ‘high’ or ‘rich’ level of consumption (drinks, women, hotels, clothes, mobile phones); nor have they been given sufficient money that compensates for labour, at times dangerous, on behalf of godfathers’ shadowy accumulation. Unfulfilled expectations, and, since the return to democracy in 1999, politicians’ ready recourse to violence during elections to secure a majority vote certainly precipitates further growth of youth-led vigilante and other more militant organisations. The latter match with counter-force the physical power of a ‘selfish’ dominant class as well as launch ‘war’ on rival gangs or sects.

The Nigerian economy’s class divisions, both in the legitimate and shadow economies, are formative forces, though partly obscured by the pervasive familiarity of kin-based identities of ethnicity and religion that provides spiritual protection (charms) as well as potent prayers at shrines, in churches/mosques against witchcraft, magic, enemy bullets and poisoning. Free trade and market reforms in the context of an uncaring ('selfish') state have benefitted the few and disadvan-
taged the many (Bracking 2009): these trends have sharpened under-class perceptions. Youth with a post-secondary education, but often without regular paid employment, may come from families with a larger survival margin in the form of savings or capital assets (land, water, property rentals), such families are accorded more prestige and higher status positions in village/town governance. Class divisions in the wider society are reflected in the extent to which, everything else being more or less equal, competent and reasonably popular literate and educated youth are considered leaders rather than their illiterate or semi-literate counterparts. Though partly obscured, persons’ positions in relation to the means of production (e.g. land/farming/petty business/trading) in the formal and ‘shadow’ (illegal) economies, as well as patrons ‘generosity’ to clients in patrimonial networks of accumulation, reflect deepening economic inequalities and class awareness shaping growing subaltern
resistance through vigilantism/militancy in the remotest rural areas, villages and cities of Nigeria — and elsewhere in West Africa.\textsuperscript{11}(11)

Thus, contemporary vigilantism and fundamentalist ethnic/religious organisations constitute a generalised youth sub-culture that represents a level of (indigenous) thought and understanding of their position as largely unwanted surplus labour — young urban hawkers, waged labourers, office workers, farmers, graziers, peasants and petit bourgeois small business folk — sandwiched between and mediating elders’ (more traditional) knowledge and that of the modern State’s dominant political class values of pecuniary accumulation by any means, fair or foul (c.f. Stuart Hall 1975: 15; Ifeka 2001a, 2006).

Repression

Patron-client networks protect police, soldiers and junior army officers most times from prosecution by injured citizens and unemployed under-class youth. But if young men and older male children picked up by the police in a raid against armed robbers, for example, lack a patron, they may well be executed without trial. Five young people including a boy of thirteen years were shot dead on sight by the police during one such ‘raid’ in 2009 in an Enugu suburb (Walker 2009). Nigerian police often execute without trial young men accused of armed robbery, theft, attacks on officers when being ‘arrested’. In the 1990s-mid-2000s, I observed how so-called ‘armed robbers’ may be tied to telegraph poles painted white over two metres high and shot dead in the early hours of the morning; others may be killed at night by fellow inmates of small cells packed tight with up to forty men. Few prisoners or their families dare to complain in public or to the police themselves. Distressed, fearful relatives ask themselves: what is the point of such complaints?

Frustrated beyond endurance at the latest problem in their neighbourhood, on the roads, or at public bus stations, beset with economic anxieties, under-class men (and women) lash out against one another and, if in the vicinity, the much hated and despised police. Fighting in public places as the streets, water taps, and markets is very common.

Given such conditions of existence, it would be surprising if, after years of endurance, Nigerian youth did not seek to redress the political and economic balance between subalterns and a mega-rich political elite by grafting militancy onto their vigilante, armed robbery and other illegal trafficking activities. They have to survive — somehow — by acquiring the power with which to challenge security agents, especially the police, identified as tools of the dominant political-military-business class; in so doing, they reject their subordinate under-class status, the legitimacy of the State’s formal policing system and kleptocracy; they demand clean, just governance that would deliver to the masses equitable rental incomes (i.e. from oil/uranium) and implements customary or religious (Islamic/Christian) core precepts.

Revolts

In the past thirty years many Ijaw (Niger Delta) and Tuareg (Niger, Mali) youth and adult men in some communities have moved from defensive style peaceful protest and vigilante policing to the offensive. They now carry out planned, armed attacks against symbols of the repressive nation-state allied to multi-national oil, water and mining corporations to achieve a clearly articulated political goal represented in traditional, popular symbols of resource ownership, purer governance and employment for ‘our people’. A key event that pushed many Ijaw people towards accepting political violence by ‘our boys’ took place in 1999, when residents of a Niger Delta village called Odi killed twelve government officials and customs officers patrolling the pot-holed highways and roads (Smith 2007). They experience daily the economic violence inflicted on their small earnings, salaries and wages by a collapsing economy and anticipated lack of compensating rewards were they to engage in more lucrative illegal activities; they feel almost daily the social violence miseries of young children chronically ill and dying, mothers and wives dying in childbirth.

11. For example, Maradi, southern Niger (Duval-Smith 2001); the Casamance, Senegal (Diallo 2010; HRW 2009b).
policemen who had abused residents; the newly elected Nigerian President (Obasanjo) ordered that the army be sent in to crush ‘rebellion’ and slaughtered over 3,000 residents including children; he showed no remorse, rather he blamed the people of Odi; they deserved their punishment.

Since 1999 the US and UK have tried to ‘civilise’ the Nigeria Police with several training and reorientation programmes (Dfid 2008). But the 260,000 rank and file, the 50,000 senior officers and Mobile Police (known as ‘MoPo’ ‘kill-and-go’) still see themselves as having the ‘right’ to lash out with weapons and even kill in retaliation for youth or community attacks on police buildings and personnel (Wikipedia 2008).

A summary of selected riots, disturbances and incidents is given in Table 2. It records some violent events as examples of different expressions of resistance to the State’s view of ‘law and order’, and of popular demands for a fair distribution between ethnicities according to Nigeria’s ‘federal character’ of locally valued assets (e.g. local government institutions). Tables 3 and 4 analyse similarities and differences in selected militant organisations.

Islamic fundamentalist organisations (Table 2), illustrate how Muslim youth and older members draw on a mix of traditional and class symbols for unity, internal discipline, and authority invested in recognised leaders. Of these we can mention the Islamist Maitatsine rebellion.

The Maitatsine reform movement sought, from the 1960s, to abolish corruption and substitute clean governance according to Quranic principles in the Nigerian State as well as among other (rival) Muslim congregations (e.g. Sufi orders, Yan Izala, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood). Mohammed Marwa Maitatsine was renowned in Kano for his controversial preachings on the Quran and critical statements about the State. Though unpopular with state authorities for perceptively inflammatory, subversive and militaristic teaching, he began to be accepted by Islamic authorities in the 1970s (Wikipedia 2010a). His preaching attracted largely a following of subaltern Hausa youths, unemployed migrant young men, and those who felt that mainstream Muslim teachers were not doing enough for their client communities. Maitatsine claimed to be a prophet; he was killed by security forces in 1980 during the Kano insurrection which saw over 4,000 dead. Some contemporary Islamic reform groups as Boko Haram claim descent from Maitatsine.

Boko Haram (‘Western education is a sin’) seeks to impose Shari’a law throughout Nigeria. The sect claims to be an offshoot of Maitatsine as does the Kalo-Kato group. Boko Haram was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri by Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf, who was shot dead without due process by the police in the 2009 uprising. In 2004 the sect set up a congregation at Kanamma, Yobe state, known locally as ‘Afghanistan’ since members engaged periodically in what communities perceived to be ‘Taliban’ style attacks on police outposts, killing police officers. Their objective is to impose reform on corrupt (Muslim) elites who have adopted ‘bad’ Western values, and to establish Shari’a states throughout Nigeria. To that end, when preaching fails to persuade corrupt elements to reform, violence may be necessary.

Seventy members of the Boko Haram sect erupted, guns blazing, on 26 July 2009 in an attack on a police station at Zongo near Bauchi in retaliation for the arrest by police of branch leaders suspected of plotting extreme violence against the State’s security agencies, particularly the police. According to press reports sect youth were armed with grenades and guns including several AK-47s. Thirty-eight members were killed in the fighting along with a soldier (Gusau 2009). Soldiers launched reprisal attacks in Bauchi as well as Maiduguri where Yusuf had sought refuge close to the mosque used by followers. Several armed youth were reported to have ‘bombed’ police facilities with burning motor bicycles, during attacks on a Maiduguri police station during the July 2009 uprising. Some members of the sect reportedly came from Chad and spoke only Arabic; Chadians launched a fierce attack on Wudil Divisional Police Station, near Kano (Wikipedia 2009b; Muslim News 2009).

In Bornu, Boko Haram armed sect members targeted the Police armoury, the Maiduguri new Prison (whose inmates they released) and the life of the commander of the joint border patrol. As prison inmates fled, militants took hostage the correspondent of the Daily Trust newspaper, alleging that he had betrayed the sect by dressing and growing a beard like them, but had failed to protect their interests by fighting the Borno state government and its security agents. He had also failed...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type of Incident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Iva Valley mines, Enugu state</td>
<td>Coal miners’ strike. Miners rioted over poor pay and working condition. Twenty one miners were massacred by the colonial State’s security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Kano, capital of Kano state</td>
<td>Riots between largely Yoruba and Igbo Christians over properties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Kano</td>
<td>Riots between Muslims and Christians over ‘indigenous’ northern Nigeria, Hausa Muslim rights versus those claimed by southern largely Christian Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups settled in the city, employees then of government, on the railways, in schools as teachers and self-employed in petty business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Kano</td>
<td>Riots triggered by the Maitatsine movement. Over 4,000 people died in a month of fighting between followers and non-adherents, between followers and the police.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Maiduguri, capital of Bornu state</td>
<td>Riots linked to Maitatsine; some expressions of doubt about claimed link.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Yola, capital of Adamawa state</td>
<td>Riots linked to Maitatsine; some expressions of doubt about claimed link.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Jos, capital of Plateau state</td>
<td>Riots between ‘settler’ Muslims and ‘indigenous’ Christians over control of political resources. Many died.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Warri, Delta state</td>
<td>Riots between Itsekiri, Igaw and Urhobo ethnic groups over the location of a local government and its remunerative offices, appropriated for personal and familial pecuniary gain. Some deaths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Odi, Bayelsa state</td>
<td>Residents of the largely Igbo town killed twelve policemen who had abused them. 3,000 Odi citizens were massacred by the Nigerian army which crushed the rebellion, raising the town to the ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Kaduna, capital of Kaduna state</td>
<td>Riots between Muslims and Christians over proposals to make Kaduna a Shari’a law state. Over 2,000 people died.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Abuja, Federal Capital Territory, FCT, capital city</td>
<td>Nyanya bus stop riots — people rioted against the Federal Government’s Department of the FCT to employ and intervene. Rioters killed some policemen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Jos, capital of Plateau state</td>
<td>Riots — between Muslim Hausa-Fulani ‘settler’ status and Christian Birom ‘indigenes’, the founders and owners of north Jos Local Government Area and the Council’s remunerative offices, funds, etc, for personal and familial pecuniary gain. Police casualties?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Benue/Taraba states</td>
<td>Tiv and Jukun killed soldiers, in reprisal for abuse by security agencies. Federal army intervened, killed rioters and civilians caught up in the trouble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Kaduna</td>
<td>Riots — between Muslims and Christians, sparked by the Miss World Beauty Contest proposed to take place in the city. Hundreds died including police men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Niger Delta</td>
<td>Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force engages the enemy — MNCs and the FGN.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Kannama, Yobe state</td>
<td>Boko Haram attacks on police stations. Their base at Kannama known locally as ‘Afghanistan’ and sect members as ‘Taliban’ or ‘Afghans’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Niger Delta</td>
<td>MEND emerges fully, assumes leadership of armed struggle against the State.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-8</td>
<td>Kano</td>
<td>Clashes between a militant sect Boko Haram and police in village outside Kano. Police and soldiers killed as well as sect followers and leaders. Hundreds died.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Niger Delta</td>
<td>NDPVF &amp; MEND join forces, launch major assaults on MNC installations &amp; State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Jos</td>
<td>Riots, as above — ‘settler’ Muslim versus ‘indigenous’ (Birom) Christians over control of Jos north local government council. Hundreds died in the fighting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Maiduguri, capital of Borno state, Kano, Zamfara, Gombe, Bauchi</td>
<td>Boko Haram fundamentalist Islamic movement attacks on police stations in northern Nigerian states. Over 300 died in the fighting, including sect followers killed by police and soldiers, July and December.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data gleaned from Wikipedia, the Daily Trust, and other web sites, also the writer’s participant observation and note books. Abimboye 2009.
to assist Boko Haram in waging jihad against the Izala sect and its mosques in Maiduguri. Of the some 154 people killed, over 115 were said to be sect members who had used swords, bows and arrows, sticks, petrol bombs and several guns in attacking police headquarters. A Nigerian army detachment surrounded Yusuf’s home on 28 July, killing followers — over 25 bodies of young men were photographed by press reporters, trussed up, face down, shot in the back of the head without trial; then police removed Yusuf to a police station where subsequently, without interview or trial, he was shot dead. On 30 July mobile police from Operation Flush II, and soldiers, killed over 100 sect members in fighting in Maiduguri; three police were also killed. Security forces entered the mosque occupied by militants and raked the inside with machine gun fire. Elsewhere soldiers and police engaged militants in house to house fighting. Violent clashes were also reported from Potiskum (southern Plateau state) and Wudil near Kano (Wikipedia 2010b). In all about 300 people were killed, including children, police and soldiers.

Boko Haram items displayed by police to the public as ‘evidence’ of the sect’s dangerous intentions and capabilities included knives, cutlasses, local charms and drugs apparently used by youth before launching their attacks. Modern weapons collected were gun powder using in making explosives, equipment for manufacturing local guns, pump action guns, revolvers, a few AK47s and an air rifle. Many of the sect were said by the police to be teenagers from Kano and Bornu states. Others, killed by the police, were children between the ages of eight and fifteen; the police admitted after serious press and human rights NGO questioning to having shot three, but journalists reported eight to twelve children shot dead by security agents in cold blood (Gusau 2009; Wikipedia 2010b).

In December 2009 an Islamist sect, Kalo-Kato — said by member to be related to Maitatsine and Boko Haram — struck in the Zango area near Bauchi city. Full violence commenced subsequently, when during morning prayers at the mosque, the Kalo-Kato sect leader started preaching that other Islamic sects (e.g. Yan Izala) were infidels; he condemned the state government for ordering the arrests of ‘fanatics’ and strongly denounced police and army reprisals against Boko Haram members as, according to him, ‘they were preaching the truth’; that is, ‘the reality in the country’ of ‘selfish’ governance and disobedience to the Quran and Shari’a law. Kalo-Kato sought the release of remaining Boko Haram leaders and members currently facing trial in the High Court, Bauchi. Six soldiers entered the mosque trying to stop the preaching, not knowing that the militants were well armed; the latter killed one soldier and absconded with his rifle. Allegedly five hundred adherents then attempted to embark on a procession of protest, but were obstructed by neighbours and Mobile Police from Operation Flush. Members went wild, attacking anyone in sight and burning houses; some reportedly wore ‘long white jumpers’ infected with powerful charms that the youth believed protected themselves against bullets, knives and arrows (Obateru 2009).

Thirty seven members, two policemen and two soldiers were killed along with four children, said to have been burnt to death when their house was torched by Kalo-Kato sect child members. Reportedly the latter were mainly children between ten to fifteen years of age, backed up by adults, were torching houses and attacking anyone standing in their way (Obateru 2009). Many of the dead were said by police to have ‘killed themselves’. Security reports blamed the violence on a quarrel between sect leaders and their followers. Human rights organisations are demanding prosecution of the security forces for extra-judicial ‘barbaric killings’ (HRW 2009a).

Comparisons

Tables 3 and 4 comprise, respectively, a preliminary outline of some social features of militant organisations and analysis of organisational variables.

The organisations differ in that Islamists situate their marginalised, militant groups in relation to traditional Ummah institutions and sacred texts as the Quran, while Niger Delta groups articulate a common identity through worship of traditional gods, reliance on juju and community ‘mothers’, and on follower identification with rent-seeking through resource control. Again, Islamist sects reviewed here seek justice and governance in line with Quranic precepts, not resource control and rent-seeking; lacking much modern weaponry Islamist followers seem aware of their position as a subaltern under-class fighting its corner against powerful corrupt interests.
### Table 3: Characteristics of Religious & Ethnic-Nationalist Militant Organisations (Nigeria)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name &amp; Location</th>
<th>Social Type</th>
<th>Organisational Variables</th>
<th>Funds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
     |                  |             | Followers: illiterate/literate subaltern youth with a sprinkling of educated (post-secondary) Hausas; women and adult men; some Chadian. 
     |                  |             | Weapons: largely traditional, few AK47s, rely on traditional weapons e.g. bows and arrows, swords. Donations stolen from the police, may also be from regimental armouries if proximate. 
     |                  |             | Mobilise through traditional Islamic discourses, use magically protective charms. 
     |                  |             | Organisation’s culture: symbols of poverty (e.g. poor clothes, the begging bowl) and pius faith, the Qur’an; the sword symbolises righteous Jihad, sacrifice of lies. Charms and white jumpers treated with medicine protect against police/army bullets. Class awareness among subalterns. | A. Donations by: (i) The faithful (ii) Semi-hidden political patrons in middle/higher level government, police/army, para-statals. B. Money raised by: illegal ‘operations’ e.g. cross-border smuggling (e.g. Chad, Niger). Relationship to trafficking in illegal goods not known yet. |
| 2.  | S. Nige. Niger Delta | Ethno-Nationalist | Leaders: MEND partially hidden, commander Jomo Gbomo, influential Henry Okah, military hardware purchaser, organisation segmentary, units in creek camps, coastal towns and fishing ports for rapid movement by boats, easy evacuation of crude oil bunkered, often close to flow stations. Communicate quickly with dispersed ‘boys’ (troops) by mobile, satellite phones. 
     |                  |             | Troops: live in swamps, some in towns by wharves for rapid escape to creeks, intelligence gathering. Trained in guerrilla attack strategies by ex-Nigerian army soldiers or mercenaries? Shift camp frequently when under surveillance or attack by the Nigerian navy, airforce or army. Latter have strong interest in controlling bunkering, therefore challenge MEND/ND 
     |                  |             | militant units engaged in crude oil bunkering. 
     |                  |             | Weapons: modern, ample AK47s, bullets, rocket grenades, very powerful motor boats able to travel 200 km to remote oil platforms in the deep ocean. Robotic weapons as yet unreported. ‘Donations’ of modern weapons by friends or patrons in regimental armours etc. | Fund raising by: (i) Hostage taking. Use to pay MEND’s overheads; fighters’ bank accounts and those of community supporters including ‘mothers of the community’ who feed ‘our boys’ and as in the Biafra civil war (1967-70) carry out important support work behind the lines. (ii) Armed robbery, sale of oil infrastructure following operations to open up pipelines (on shore) to evacuate the crude, bunker it at ‘safe’ fishing ports, and sell for cash. (iii) Donations of funds by powerful patrons inside government, the security agencies, ex governors with large overseas bank accounts. (iv) Hostage taking. Ransom money is paid, the FGN and MNCs claim they and relatives never pay. A very lucrative business that vigilante/militant groups across Nigeria began to emulate from about 2008. (v) Niger Delta Vigilantes was funded at the outset by ex-Governor Peter Odili, partly during 2003 election campaigns. Amnesty with FGN, mid-2009. First to sign. |
| 3.  | Niger Delta Peoples’ Volunteer Force (NDVF) and other smaller groups, e.g. NDV |                  | Leaders: MEND resumed attacks on oil infrastructure but at a lower level of intensity than hitherto. May/may not have received ‘gratification’ from Presidency. | Funds raised as above. Rewarded by Presidency, nature not disclosed, ‘shares’/’gratification’ would be given to Tom by Presidency for being first to support the Amnesty. |

* As above; Business Day 2010
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Organisational Variable</th>
<th>Style/Action</th>
<th>Religious Organisation</th>
<th>Ethnic-Nationalist Organisation</th>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Middling</th>
<th>Weak</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.a</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Charismatic style leaders, personal interaction, largely faceless, secretive</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>1.b</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Charismatic style leaders, personal interaction, publicly known and recognised</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>1.c</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Contact maintained between movement’s units or branches</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1.d</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Contact maintained between movement’s units or branches</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.a</td>
<td>Followers</td>
<td>Faith, trust in leaders, group’s mission measured by co-activity, e.g. prayer/juju</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>2.b</td>
<td>Followers</td>
<td>Faith, trust in leaders, group’s mission measured by co-activity, e.g. prayer/juju</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.c</td>
<td>Followers</td>
<td>Faith in leaders, group mission, measured by sacrifice of lives</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.d</td>
<td>Followers</td>
<td>Faith in leaders, group mission, measured by sacrifice of lives</td>
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<td>3.a</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Record keeping, documentation via publicity releases Internet, GSM</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>3.b</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Record keeping, documentation via publicity releases Internet, Mobile phone</td>
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<td>3.c</td>
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<td>Financial Transparency</td>
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<td>4.a</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Personal interaction, spread of news by word of mouth across large community of faithful</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.b</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Personal interaction, spread of news by word of mouth</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>5.a</td>
<td>Fighting the State</td>
<td>Reliance on spiritual protection -- charms, medicine</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>5.b</td>
<td>Fighting the State</td>
<td>Reliance on spiritual protection -- charms, medicine</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.c</td>
<td>Fighting the State</td>
<td>Reliance on traditional physical weapons (swords, bows &amp; arrows, machetes, dane &amp; locally made hand guns)</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>5.d</td>
<td>Fighting the State</td>
<td>Reliance on traditional physical weapons (swords, bows &amp; arrows, machetes, dane &amp; locally made hand guns)</td>
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<td>5.e</td>
<td>Fighting the State</td>
<td>Reliance on modern physical weapons (AK47's, rockets, grenades, luger pistols, powerful boats)</td>
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<td>5.f</td>
<td>Fighting the State</td>
<td>Reliance on modern physical weapons (AK47s, rockets, grenades, luger pistols, powerful boats)</td>
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<td>6.a</td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Followers largely illiterate, semi-literate poor, subaltern youth v. leadership traditional Quranic or modern Western style educated</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.b</td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Followers largely illiterate, semi-literate poor subaltern youth, leadership traditional Quranic or modern Western style educated</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>7.a</td>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>Just governance according to religious precepts</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.b</td>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>Revenue / rent-sharing according to community</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.a</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Class awareness influences follower motivation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8.b</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Class awareness influences follower motivation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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*Source: Same as above*
Donor governments and AFRICOM should consider, in the light of the Niger Delta’s militant struggle and its proven capacity to reduce oil output, whether militarization in partnership with kleptocratic ruling oligarchies will secure US-EU MNCs’ priority access to strategic natural resources to which communities have strong traditional claims. Or whether, as in the Niger Delta, the more force used by the State the more subaltern violence grows. An alternative fifteen year strategy for peace would, first, strengthen community land management, especially in settlements close to areas with strategic resources as uranium, oil, diamonds, gold and bauxite so as to build in these regional hubs the basis of a politics of growth and equitable accumulation as against ‘big’ men’s ‘selfish’ control of distribution and patronage. Second, it would improve community, NGO and West African government capacity to promote transparent competition between Asian and Western dominated MNCs. Such a strategy could sustain at the community and local government levels institutional capacity building for resource conflict resolution (UNDP 2009) that erases subaltern resistance currently used by the US-EU to justify the ‘War on Terror’; this would reduce US-EU defence costs.12

Still, a strategy of running an alternative community based capacity building programme alongside formal political structures (and all-important relatively invisible networks of illegal accumulation embedded in old institutions with the potential to penetrate new initiatives) would need considerable support from ECOWAS, the AU, MNCs, and major US-EU-Asian donors. That might be difficult to secure unless, in response to militarization, full-scale militancy in the Niger Delta, Niger/Mali blocks strategic resource flows to the West African State and overseas metropoles.

Conclusion

As Bourdieu has argued, violence inbuilt into everyday life is linked to the emergence and growth of explicit political terror and state repression (Schepers-Hughes and Bourgeois 2004: 20) In challenging the kleptocratic State by seeking just governance, subaltern youth are rejecting their subordinate under-class status and the legitimacy of the State’s formal policing system. Some are prepared, and do, sacrifice their lives for their cause (HRW 2009). Advocacy activists in Nigeria, Guinea, Niger and Mali are calling for urgent reforms to end extra-judicial killings and the culture of impunity in West African police and the military to ensure prosecution of perpetrators of such violence against citizens.

I have argued that the primary cause of unending cycles of violence nourishing ‘terrorism’ is not the State’s security agencies, per se, but as Islamic militants as well as Western donors recognise, ‘bad’ governance. Clientelism, not corruption, is the primary cause of subaltern resistance and dominant class reliance on violent repression. Linked as cause and consequence of clientelism are: first, the West African-Nigerian ruling class’s insertion into profoundly lucrative networks of trade in illegal goods for capital accumulation that rely largely on pecuniary and physical methods of control; second, the patrimonial system’s failure to implement the customary just redistribution of ‘dividends’. Godfathers and other ‘big men’ are more committed to securing a permanent position for themselves, and their extended families (dynasties), in the dominant political-military-commercial class than they are to upholding traditional clientelistic values of ‘sharing’.

12. Hubs for development with peace and transparency across the region, achievements in governance broadcast by the visual, print, party and electronic media, could provide models of cleaner more equitable governance. As in Pro-Natura Nigeria’s successful community development foundation programmes in the Niger Delta, elected leaders representing the working and middle classes — vigilante organisations, farmers and graziers associations, trade unions, religious confederations, professional associations of doctors, teachers and lawyers — might be mobilised to provide the infrastructure and social services that alone convince the majority that the way of peaceful development is best. Such leaderships could largely bypass a despised and unpopular oligarchic West African Bonapartist class, mediating on behalf of its own pecuniary and self-serving financial gain between ‘people’ and Western/Asian institutions and banks.
Is it that the State’s repressive security agencies are implementing ‘war’ — against their own young people for allegedly committing ‘terrorism’ (Kapferer 2009)? In press reports following Islamic sects’ attacks in 2009, police declined to use the words ‘murder’ or ‘homicide’ to describe the killing force they had deployed; rather they preferred to speak euphemistically of ‘mopping up operations’ against ‘terrorists’, ‘rebels’. Clearly, Nigerian (and other repressive West African) regimes are so habituated to violence that the dominant class and subalterns live in a permanent ‘state of exception’ to democratic constitutions and the international law of human rights. Subaltern youth, adults and children lack rights and are treated as if they are beyond the law; they can be sacrificed, not killed (Agamben 2005: 7-11).

In conclusion, politically acceptable, realistic alternatives to Africa’s militarisation are vital to help halt prospects of potentially appalling conflict between, on the one hand, regionally based imperial confederations (Western, Asian and Middle Eastern) — equipped with nuclear arsenals and remotely operated unarmed and armed aerial vehicles (UAVs) or drones (Singer 2009), their political and corporate bourgeoisies in fierce competition for control of Africa’s strategic but finite resources to sustain high rates of capital accumulation elsewhere — and on the other hand, dispersed radical movements, a mix of under-class and radicalised middle class elements surplus to capital accumulation, convinced there is nothing to lose but everything to gain in spiritual blessings, for do they not, in Baudrillard’s (2002) words, labour to radicalise the world by sacrifice?

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Editor for constructive comments, Bruce Kapferer for encouragement and many subaltern friends for their support in the field.

Acronyms

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APS</td>
<td>African Partnership Station</td>
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<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>DfID</td>
<td>Department for International Development</td>
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<td>FGN</td>
<td>Federal Government of Nigeria</td>
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<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>IT</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGA/LGC</td>
<td>Local Government Authority/Local Government Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>MASSOB</td>
<td>Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra</td>
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<td>MEND</td>
<td>Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta</td>
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<td>MNC</td>
<td>Multi-national Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation</td>
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<td>NDPVF</td>
<td>Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force</td>
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<td>NDV</td>
<td>Niger Delta Vigilantes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDP</td>
<td>People’s Democratic Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAV</td>
<td>Unarmed Aerial Vehicle</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USADF</td>
<td>United States African Development Foundation</td>
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<td>US AFRICOM</td>
<td>Africa Command</td>
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<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Treaty Organisation</td>
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References


Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2009a. Nigeria:


Counterterrorism and democracy promotion in the Sahel under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama from September 11, 2001, to the Nigerien Coup of February 2010

Alex Thurston

Introduction

The Sahel region of Africa, considered a ‘frontline in the War on Terror’ as recently as President George W. Bush’s first term, had become the zone of a less dramatically described but more broadly construed counterterrorism approach by the time President Barack Obama took office. US counterterrorism policy in sub-Saharan Africa is evolving, reflecting shifts that started with Bush’s administration and have been adopted by Obama’s team. Just as the rhetoric of the ‘Global War on Terror’ has fallen out of favor in Washington (Wilson & Kamen 2009), so too has the rhetorical emphasis on democracy promotion in the Muslim world that comprised a major portion of Bush’s first-term agenda. In Africa, American policymakers increasingly prioritize stability, as opposed to electoral change. This emphasis is evident in the Sahel, where Washington has dealt in a relatively mild fashion with elites who tried to maintain or obtain power through channels that circumvented democratic processes. Despite official condemnation of coup leaders and questionable electoral outcomes in Mauritania and Niger, the Obama administration has appeared tentatively willing to countenance a lack of full democracy in these countries. Moreover, Washington reacted quietly to a series of terrorist incidents perpetrated in Mauritania, Mali, and Niger by Al Qaeda affiliates in 2009 and early 2010. Perceptions that the Sahel is marginal in geopolitical terms may help explain the lack of major US engagement in democracy promotion and counterterrorism in the region, but the US reaction to events there also owes partly to changing notions of how the ‘War on Terror’ should be fought.

This article sets US responses to recent events in Niger, Mauritania, and Mali in the context of changing conversations among policymakers concerning terrorism in the Sahel. After a discussion of how attitudes and policies toward counterterrorism in Africa shifted from 2001 to 2009, a second section discusses recent political events in Mauritania and Niger before examining kidnappings and other terrorist incidents in Mauritania and the Mali-Niger borderlands. I ask why US policymakers reacted differently to events in 2009 and early 2010 than they might have had the same events occurred in the 2001-2005 period. President Obama and other administration representatives state that Africa is a top US priority and stress the importance of effective governance on the continent. Yet the evolution of counterterrorist rhetoric and policy signals that the United States is retreating from an agenda that seeks to transform political systems, and is instead advancing a program of long-term military involvement in areas, such as the Sahel, where perceived US security interests are at stake.

Alex Thurston is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Religious Studies at Northwestern University, where his research focuses on Islamic intellectuals and politicians in Northern Nigeria. He writes about Islamic and politics in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa at Sahel Blog (sahelblog.wordpress.com). His writing has also appeared in The Guardian’s Comment Is Free and Foreign Policy’s Middle East Channel.
Changing Conversations on Counterterrorism

George W. Bush came to power at the end of a decade characterized by democratic transitions in some African countries and, in others, massive bloodshed and instability that the US could not or would not halt. Democracy promotion, especially in the Muslim world (Bush 2009), comprised a major portion of the Bush administration’s early efforts in the Global War on Terror, and this rhetoric extended to sub-Saharan Africa. In 2002, Bush told the Africa Growth and Opportunity Forum that ‘economic freedom and political freedom must go hand in hand’ on the continent in order to present a clear alternative to ‘the terrorists and their supporters, [who] offer a narrow and backward vision’ (Bush 2001). Soon the administration’s National Security Strategy proclaimed, ‘The path of political and economic freedom presents the surest route to progress in sub-Saharan Africa’ (see Bush 2002).

Bush administration policies partly implemented the strong language on democracy: holding elections represented an important component of US strategy for transforming occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, US policymakers pushed for elections in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Washington publicly pressured regimes like Saudi Arabia to embrace democratic reforms. However, continued support for rulers like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Pakistan’s Pervez Musharraf contradicted Bush’s stated democratic aims. Democracy promotion efforts in sub-Saharan Africa read even less clearly than efforts in the greater Middle East. In his first years in office, Bush encouraged a few democratic transitions in Africa: most notably, the US helped mediate the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 in Sudan, a key plank of which was the proposal to hold presidential elections in July 2009 (since delayed to April 2010). However, the Bush administration maintained strong relationships with allies like Ethiopia, whose 2005 elections were marred by bloodshed. The complacent approach toward democratization dominated in the Sahel where, for example, the Bush White House expressed disappointment with Nigeria after much-criticized elections in 2003 (HRW 2007) and 2007 (BBC 2007), but made no serious policy changes toward the country (Sanders 2008). Despite some rhetoric to the contrary, it seems that, in the War on Terror, Africa was conceived of not primarily as a political space in need of democratic reform, but rather as a military zone in need of surveillance and control by the US and African partners with varying degrees of democratic credibility.

In contrast to Clinton-era attitudes, and in contrast to its own inconsistent approach to democracy promotion, the Bush administration did focus consistently on military goals in Africa. The break with the recent past was stark. As one author observes, ‘The 1990s were in many ways a decade of disengagement by the United States in African affairs’ (Kraxberger 2005: 48) and ‘saw a pattern of selective and limited engagement by US officials and foreign-policy elites in Africa’s crises, with US intervention in Somalia and Liberia but a distinct lack of involvement in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and the Congo (ibid.: 53). Though Africa had constituted an ideological battleground during the Cold War, some US policymakers questioned Africa’s significance in the immediate post-Cold War environment (e.g., n.a. 2007 [1993]), especially after the loss of eighteen US lives in Somalia in 1993. It was possible by 1995 for the Department of Defense to state, ‘We see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa’ (DOD 1995).
East Africa and provoked a missile strike on Sudan, yet the fact that Afghanistan was Osama bin Laden’s headquarters in the late 1990s meant that Africa remained a secondary concern for US counterterrorism experts.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, a shift in thought took place in Washington regarding counterterrorism in Africa. As the administration, the Pentagon, and a bipartisan range of analysts outside government contemplated ‘potential Afghansans ... Africa emerged as one of the greatest areas of concern, and the Sahel ... soon became a laboratory for the United States to test its policies in the “global war on terror”’ (Schmidle 2009). A growing chorus warned of threats emanating from the Sahel, above and beyond Niger’s alleged role in Iraqi nuclear ambitions. In 2004, counterterrorism analyst Douglas Farah (2004a) stated that failed states in West Africa were ‘the ideal operating grounds for terrorists and other groups that pose significant threats U.S. national security and the stability of much of Africa’. Former Ambassador Princeton Lyman (2004) testified before the House Committee on International Relations’ Subcommittee on Africa that ‘nowhere has interest and concern for small, decentralized deployments of US troops on the continent. Concerns about overextending resources, provoking local resistance, and stumbling into a repeat of the 1993 experience in Somalia restrained the deployment of a substantial number of US soldiers to protect the US embassy (Marquis 2003).

At first, policy changes that came out of the post-9/11 rethinking of America’s strategic posture toward Africa represented ‘far more talk than action’. The US pressured African governments to adopt harsh anti-terror legislation, and the Pentagon began planning for small, decentralized deployments of US troops on the continent. Concerns about overextending resources, provoking local resistance, and stumbling into a repeat of the 1993 experience in Somalia restrained other policy ambitions (Kraxberger 2005: 64). Yet over time, the Bush administration moved from cutting military programs in Africa to introducing new programs to, eventually, proposing the establishment of a centralized United States African Command or AFRICOM. In doing so, the administration was responding to pressure from domestic critics and the military to devote greater resources to Africa.

The progressive expansion of US military activities in Africa suggests that at several junctures the views of those advocating a larger US military presence in Africa won out over the objections of skeptics (Gutelius 2003). In 2002, foreign policy analyst Michael O’Hanlon criticized the Bush administration’s proposed cuts to the Clinton-era African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI), a training project for African militaries, and argued for an expansion of the program’s budget and scope. Later that year, a partial fulfillment of O’Hanlon’s wish arrived in the form of the
Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), with a budget comparable to that of the ACRI and a focus on Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad (Smith 2004). Also in 2002, Djibouti’s Camp Lemonier was resuscitated and staffed with hundreds of US soldiers (BBC 2002). These efforts, however, failed to reassure some counterterrorism analysts. In 2003, the Heritage Foundation advised Bush to create a sub-regional command for Africa in order to deal with conflicts and terrorist threats (Carafano & Gardiner 2003). In 2004, Farah argued that US policymakers should devote more military resources to West Africa in order to combat terrorism and counteract Chinese influence (2004b), while Lyman and a co-author (2004) praised Bush’s recognition of the terror threat in the Horn, but urged the administration to consider threats emanating from elsewhere in Africa. Lyman also argued for a unified command structure for the continent. Again, these hopes were partly met when the administration transformed the PSI into the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which launched in June 2005 with a larger budget and broader geographical coverage.¹

The extent of US military involvement in the Sahel, especially during Bush’s first term, is hard to quantify. According to Raffi Khatchadourian (2005) of the International Reporting Project, in 2002 State Department officials warned of an Al Qaeda presence in the Sahara and approached ‘members of European Command with a proposal to deploy U.S. forces to the region’. Teams of US soldiers and counterterrorism experts began coordinating with Sahelian governments by October of that year, when the Pan Sahel Initiative began. The PSI at first ‘seemed like an abstract, preventative exercise’, but the 2003 kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists in Algeria, reportedly orchestrated by a member of the Algerian Group for Salvation, Preaching, and Combat (GSPC, later Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or AQIM) named Ammari Saifi, ‘became the central and most vivid justification for expanding the U.S. military presence in the Sahel’. According to local reports, Khatchadourian writes, US forces and reconnaissance aircraft assisted in the pursuit of Saifi through Mali, Niger, and Chad, where he was eventually captured. Collaboration continued into 2004, as ‘American Special Forces and Marines visited Mauritania, Mali, Chad, and Niger to train local armies how to bring order to the desert’. Testimony from residents, Peace Corps volunteers, and others pointed to at least sporadic appearances of US troops throughout the region. Moreover, congressional restrictions on US aid to African countries may have curtailed military expansion in the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa, suggesting that, had it been given free rein, the Pentagon would have expanded its reach in Africa further during this time (Mazzetti 2006).

During Bush’s second term, US military activities in Africa intensified, while democracy promotion efforts stagnated. This shift appears consonant with other changes in Bush’s style in 2005-2006. Observers have argued that ‘in its second term, the Bush administration ... appears to have backed away in practice from the defining traits of its doctrine, such as preventive action, unilateralism, and aggressive democratization’ (Leffler and Legro 2008: 8-9). In 2006, one writer said the Bush team had effected ‘a return to realism’ (Gordon 2006); Bush’s rhetoric did not change, but ‘the budgetary, political, and diplomatic realities that the first Bush team tried to ignore ... set in’ (Leffler and Legro 2008: 76), leading to a renewed emphasis on diplomacy and a retreat from neoconservative idealism concerning America’s capacity to reshape the world through force.

In the context of this new ‘realism’, voices within the military called for more integrated approaches to counterterrorism and for a continent-wide military structure in Africa. For example, a 2006 essay written by Colonel Thomas Dempsey (2006), entitled ‘Counterterrorism in African Failed States’, argued that previous counterterrorism approaches in African states had been inadequate and suggested an approach wherein military units, law enforcement personnel, and intelligence agents would work together more closely. Calls such as these helped spur the proposal of AFRICOM in 2007, which the Pentagon describes as ‘the culmination of a 10-year thought process within the Department of Defense acknowledging the emerging strategic importance of Africa’.

Thus by 2008, leading voices were sounding much different notes regarding US strategic interests in Africa than was the case in 2002. As the idea of substantial US military involvement in Africa comes to constitute a fixed element of global strategy, rhetoric about Africa now emphasizes ‘stability, security, and cooperation’ (Skinner 2008) or, as Defense Secretary Robert Gates says, the ‘3 Ds: Defense, Diplomacy, and Devel-

development’ (Al Jazeera English 2009b). Notably absent from this list is a fourth D, Democracy. Military as well as civilian officials openly prioritize long-term political alliances with trusted African leaders and no longer speak so enthusiastically of promoting short-term electoral change as they did in the 2001-2005 period. As one officer wrote in his 2008 master’s thesis on terrorism in Africa, ‘AFRICOM must begin by adopting a new security model, one that regards security and development as inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. This linkage is ... the strategic paradigm most likely to produce more durable security in Africa’ (Steward 2008: 16). For him and others, security does not rest on democratic institutions, but on stability.

In an interview upon leaving office, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer used similar language. Frazer noted the Bush administration’s efforts at promoting democracy, but stated that Bush’s greatest accomplishment regarding Africa was ‘partnership’ with the continent and its leaders (Corey 2009). By the summer of 2009, perspectives such as that of Mwangi Kimenyi (2009), Senior Fellow with the Brookings Institution’s Africa Growth Initiative, were common: ‘Policies that strengthen African institutions of governance and also promote economic growth ... represent the most durable strategy to combat terrorism and concurrently advance economic and social development in Africa’. Even though Kimenyi wrote in the context of disputing recommendations by Frazer regarding how America could help Africa, he did not mention democracy promotion, and neither did Frazer (2009).

Given the broad elite consensus around core elements of US policy toward Africa, it is not surprising that President Obama has not drastically changed direction on the issue. Even before he took office, center-left commentators encouraged him to ‘champion AFRICOM as a state-strengthening vehicle’ and ‘root out terrorism and strengthen African states’ (Conley & Porter 2008). Thus they did not sound very different from the Heritage Foundation (Schaefer & Eaglen 2007). The increasing emphasis on African stability and diminishing focus on African democracy that began under Bush has continued under Obama. Even White House officials’ direct statements on democracy in Africa reflect a focus less on engineering transitions than on building institutions. For example, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Johnnie Carson identifies democracy promotion as an administration priority but defines it as an effort to ‘work with African governments and organizations to increase and strengthen Africa’s emerging democracies’ (Center for American Progress 2009). The President, in his speech to the Ghanaian Parliament, stressed the importance of democracy in Africa but also stated that ‘America will not seek to impose any system of government on any other nation’ and emphasized that democracy ‘is about more than just holding elections’ (Obama 2009a). And in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly — an event where he also met separately with African leaders — Obama laid out ‘four pillars’ critical to humanity’s future: stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons, establishing peace, combating climate change, and rebuilding the global economy (Obama 2009b). Given US rhetoric in the early Bush years, it is striking that Obama did not emphasize democracy.

**Mauritania and Niger**

This background helps explain why official Washington largely ignored questionable electoral outcomes, incidents of terrorism, and the repercussions of military coups in Mauritania and Niger in recent years. Events in these countries help illustrate the contours of America’s current approach to the Sahelian theater.
Both Mauritania and Niger have experienced complex political transitions between one-party systems, military rule, and democracy in the last two decades. Mauritania underwent several decades of one-party and military rule, culminating with Colonel Maamouya Ould Taya’s military takeover in 1984, after which he ruled the country until 2005. Over time, Taya gravitated toward the United States and its allies. In 1999, Taya opened relations with Israel, and after September 11 he allowed US soldiers to train Mauritanian troops. However, conflict between Taya and domestic and regional Islamist groups grew, culminating with a June 2005 attack by the GSPC on a Mauritanian army post. In August 2005, citing instability among other factors, Colonel Ely Vall ousted Taya. US leaders condemned the coup, the State Department demanded Taya’s return (Associated Press 2005), and US security cooperation with Nouakchott was halted (Schmidle 2009).

At that juncture, at least one counterterrorism analyst felt the US had reached a crossroads in its dealings with Sahelian governments. For Farah, the coup starkly illustrated the challenges for US counterterrorism policy in the region: ‘The United States desperately needs to develop a working relationship on counterterror efforts in all of those countries, all of which are close to becoming failed states ... without fully embracing the current power structure that has led to rampant oppression and corruption’. The question of ‘how much support to give wretched regimes who support and embrace U.S. counter-terror efforts’ applied not just to Mauritania, Farah (2005) argued, but also Nigeria, Chad, and other countries.

In a move that shocked some observers, Vall arranged for elections in 2007 and barred members of the military junta from participating. The elections received little public attention in America, though at least one commentator praised them as ‘an example of Arab liberalism in action’ (Kirchick 2007). However, the Bush White House befriended Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallah, the victor and new president — security cooperation resumed, Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte attended Abdallah’s inauguration ceremony and ‘Bush invited Abdallah to an intimate discussion among emerging democracies during the United Nations General Assembly meeting’ (Schmidle 2009). Nonetheless, Abdallah faced opposition and instability. Massive protests broke out in Mauritania during Israel’s blockade of Gaza, and in the winter of 2007-2008 Al Qaeda affiliates attacked French tourists, a Mauritanian military outpost and, finally, the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott (Reuters 2008).

In August 2008, the democratic regime came to an abrupt end when General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz seized power. The coup posed several challenges for Washington and seemed to force a choice between democracy promotion (which would mean rejecting Abdel Aziz) and counterterrorism (which might necessitate cooperating with Abdel Aziz and the military leadership, who justified their actions partly in reference to the need to fight terrorism). At first, Washington was unmoved to help Abdel Aziz (Schmidle 2009). In addition to condemning the coup (McCormack 2008), the US stopped delivery of more than $20 million in non-humanitarian aid (BBC 2008), much of it military assistance (Schmidle 2009). The State Department imposed travel restrictions on members of the military junta, and the White House even refused to help the Mauritanian army when several of its soldiers were captured and executed while pursuing AQIM fighters (ibid.). However, Mauritania’s international relations quickly caused concern in Washington; some questioned whether US hostility toward the junta was driving Nouakchott into the arms of radical friends. Starting in the fall of 2008 and continuing through the presidential campaign, Abdel Aziz adopted anti-Israel rhetoric and sought support from Libya and Iran (The Moor Door Next 2009).

Washington at first seemed to choose democracy over counterterrorism, but in the following year America’s reaction to changes in Mauritania illustrated the shift away from a rigid pro-democracy agenda in Washington. As happened in 2005, the coup in 2008 raised questions about the viability of the democracy promotion agenda in general. Following the military takeover, Brookings Institution Visiting Fellow Khalil al-Anani (2008) wrote, ‘What happened in Mauritania makes us rethink the call for democratic transition in the Arab world, before a cultural, social and value revolution [paves] the way for a sound democracy without fear of coups like what happened in Mauritania’. Government policymakers appeared to share these sentiments. US-Mauritanian relations since the fall of 2008, lukewarm but not hostile, seem to reflect ‘realpolitik’ thinking in Washington, as democratic rhetoric gradually gave way to limited cooperation. At a December 2008 meeting of Mauritanian and US
elites in Washington, the US ambassador predicted continuity in US-Mauritanian relations under Obama. The day before the Mauritanian elections in July 2009, a writer for the *Wall Street Journal* said the event would ‘test’ Washington’s stated preference for democratic transitions in Arab countries even at the expense of ‘more pragmatic considerations such as the fight against terrorism, rolling back Iranian influence, and promoting Israeli-Arab peace’ (Trofimov 2009a). When Washington accepted the election of Abdel Aziz, despite serious allegations of fraud coming from the opposition camp, the result of this test seemed to favor stability, not democracy. Whether Abdel Aziz will prove an effective partner in fighting terrorism remains to be seen, though his past record in this arena has produced skepticism among his critics.

Post-Cold War Niger’s democratic transition came earlier than Mauritania’s, but has proved no less turbulent. Nigerien experiments with democracy have alternated with periods wherein leaders consolidate power through extra-constitutional means. Beginning in 1989, a decade of civil society activism and popular pressure led to the collapse of the regime of President Ali Saibou and a prolonged transition involving several civilian and military systems. Ultimately, democratic elections in 1999 placed former army officer Mamadou Tandja into power, but “the new president and his party are the direct heirs to the single party of the pre-democratic period” (Villalon and Idrissa 2005: 44). At any rate, the elections of 1999 and Tandja’s re-election in 2004 were hailed as free and fair, and when Tandja visited the White House in 2005, Bush ‘praised his adherence to democratic values’ (Nossiter 2009).

In late 2008, however, Tandja’s supporters began arguing that he should remain in power beyond his constitutionally mandated two-term limit. Eventually, Tandja announced that a referendum would be held on the question of extending his mandate and allowing him to run for a third term. Conflicts over the referendum, pitting the president against other branches of government, resulted in the dissolution of the parliament and the constitutional court. After a tense period of opposition protests and outcry from international groups and regional bodies like the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS), the referendum on August 4, 2009 delivered a resounding victory for Tandja. In the succeeding weeks, Tandja tightened control over the country, detaining journalists, opposition figures, and human rights activists. Washington’s initial reaction to these events was mild; in July, before the referendum, the White House expressed concern at Tandja’s actions and said it was monitoring the situation (BBC 2009c). On August 14, at the close of her trip to Africa, Hillary Clinton (2009) reiterated US concern regarding Niger but said, ‘We haven’t yet made a determination as to the best way forward’. When ECOWAS suspended Niger after parliamentary elections in late October (which the opposition boycotted), the White House again expressed concern about Tandja’s behavior, but no major policy changes were evident. In November, the European Union suspended development aid to Niger.

It was not until December, as the originally mandated end of Tandja’s time in office approached, that Washington acted. First, the Millennium Challenge Corporation suspended around $20 million in aid to Niger (Reuters 2009a). Then, in advance of Niger’s fifty-first anniversary of the founding of its republic, Obama directed a brief statement at Tandja, saying, ‘America looks forward to the day when Niger can celebrate both the proclamation of the republic and its firm transition to democracy’ (Reuters 2009b). Finally, when Tandja’s original term formally expired, Washington halted all non-humanitarian assistance to the government in Niamey and restricted the travel of some top officials (Reuters 2009c). Soon after, the U.S. government suspended trade benefits with Niger, along with two other African countries in crisis, Guinea and Madagascar (Reuters 2009d).

Multiple readings are possible concerning the Obama administration’s decision-making process on Niger. One is that Washington simply followed Brussels’ lead. Another is that Obama gave Tandja until the final moment to change course, and had been prepared all along to impose stiff penalties on Niamey. A third, more cynical view, would speculate that European and US measures against Tandja were brief, pro forma spectacles that could be dropped after the crisis ended — in this view, Tandja was likely to remain in power despite condemnation from abroad, as happened with Kenya’s Mwai Kibaki and Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe. No matter what interpretation one follows, 2009 ended with Tandja engaging warily in ECOWAS-backed negotiations with the Nigerien opposition but holding firm on core issues. On December 28, his administration defied international and regional critics and held
municipal elections, which the opposition boycotted. These elections, some feared, were another way for Tandja and his party to consolidate their rule and exclude opposition politicians from positions of power. As talks between Tandja and the opposition stalled, protests continued in Niamey, aid groups’ warnings of a looming food crisis grew increasingly urgent, and some outside donors gave emergency aid (Reuters 2010a). In this atmosphere of tension, Nigerien army officers broke the political deadlock, forcing Tandja out of office on February 18, establishing a transitional government, and promising to hold elections quickly. Given that the junta included officers who had participated in the last transition to democracy in 1999, many observers took them at their word.

US pressure appears not to have directly affected political outcomes in Niger in the period leading up to the coup, though arguably the withdrawal of US aid money contributed to the tensions that forced Tandja’s ouster. In fact, the coup may have come as something of a relief to Washington. As reporters for Reuters wrote shortly after the military takeover in Niamey, ‘Foreign governments have criticized the army takeover but diplomats recognize, in private, that it has offered a breakthrough in a stalemate where international mediation failed’ (Reuters 2010b) The Times of London went further, arguing that in contrast to French and African Union condemnation of the junta, ‘the United States appeared to give the move...its approval’ (Clayton 2010).

Perhaps more significant than the bilateral US-Niger relationship is the regional context in which America’s behavior toward Mauritania and Niger played out. Observers could not help but compare the two most high-profile Sahelian votes of 2009 and their outcomes; a writer for Reuters Africa Blog (2009) remarked that even though Niger faced punitive measures after Tandja’s referendum in August, ‘the fact that new benefits were simultaneously extended to Mauritania may also give a lesson in how would-be coup makers should best behave if they want to get away with it’. Quick elections and a pledge of support in the War on Terror, the writer went on, seemed to have won favor in Washington for Mauritania. After the overthrow of Tandja, another writer for Reuters brought the argument full circle, saying that Mauritania’s coup had provided the blueprint for Niger’s. If the perception that American leaders are reconciled to this model becomes widespread, cynicism about Washington’s pro-democracy credentials may grow even more in and outside the region.

If the choice to ignore accusations of fraud in Mauritania’s elections, hesitate for months before taking action on Niger, and convey a degree of toleration for the February coup in Niger seemed to confirm Washington’s emphasis on stability in the Sahel, the lack of reaction to activities by AQIM in 2009 and early 2010 was even more indicative of US policymakers’ changing calculus in the region. As AQIM’s goals have shifted away from attacking the Algerian army and toward targeting European and US civilians, its sphere of operations has expanded, making it, as one observer writes, ‘quite Saharan’ (The Moor Next Door 2008). In June 2009, AQIM affiliates in Mali executed Edwin Dyer, a British citizen who had been abducted along with three other European tourists in Niger in January of 2009; his compatriots were released several weeks after his death. Also in June, a US aid worker, Christopher Leggett, was killed during an attempted kidnapping in Nouakchott. AQIM claimed responsibility (BBC 2009b). Clashes between AQIM fighters and government soldiers occurred sporadically from the summer of 2009 through the time of writing.

These AQIM kidnappings and murders produced little reaction in official Washington. In contrast to the sharp words British Prime Minister Gordon Brown had for AQIM after Dyer’s death (Al Jazeera English
2009c), Leggett’s death did not attract substantial media coverage or commentary by top administration officials in America. Other clashes involving AQIM in the summer of 2009, such as the assassination of a Malian army officer (BBC 2009a) and a suicide bombing at the French embassy in Nouakchott, led the Wall Street Journal to comment that AQIM’s geographic reach, local support, and economic impact were increasing (Trofimov 2009b) — but did not produce a dramatic change in US counterterrorism rhetoric toward the Sahel.

The lack of strong rhetoric does not mean the US is uninvolved in counterterrorism in these countries. In fact, from 2005 to 2008 Mauritania and Niger received $24 million and $44 million in TSCTP funding respectively (GAO 2008). According to Al Jazeera (2009a), TSCTP will disburse at least $20 million to Sahelian governments in 2010. Given the partnerships already in place, and the potential for establishing a new one with whoever comes to rule Niger, the Pentagon and the White House may not have reacted directly to specific terrorist incidents in the Sahel because of a confidence that in the long term the US military will exercise greater control over the region. Whether or not Niger ultimately receives TSCTP funding in 2010 will also hold significance for the future of US counterterrorist efforts in the Sahel.

In the long run, neither an agenda of democratization nor ambitions to stabilize Africa through a US military presence seem likely to succeed broadly.

In pursuing strategies of long-term dominance than in prosecuting short-term retaliatory actions. The broad agreement on a long-term US military role in Africa seems to be accompanied by a general lack of enthusiasm for democracy promotion efforts on the continent (even as Obama’s critics accuse him of not doing enough to promote democracy elsewhere, especially Iran). These trends hold true in the Sahel, where “partnership,” rather than calls for reform — or for direct US military intervention — is what receives major backing in Washington.

Conclusion

If Christopher Leggett’s murder by Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists — carried out in an Arab capital ruled by a military leader who denounced Israel and sought the friendship of Iran and Libya — had occurred in 2002 instead of 2009, Washington’s reaction might have been quite different, or at least louder. But in the years since September 11th, as US policymakers began to reconsider their nation’s posture toward sub-Saharan Africa, a consensus has emerged not only around the conviction that the United States faces significant terrorist threats emanating from the Sahel and other “ungoverned spaces” in Africa, but also around the form that counterterrorism in Africa should take. As matters stand, the Pentagon seems more interested in pursuing strategies of long-term dominance than in prosecuting short-term retaliatory actions. The broad agreement on a long-term US military role in Africa seems to be accompanied by a general lack of enthusiasm for democracy promotion efforts on the continent (even as Obama’s critics accuse him of not doing enough to promote democracy elsewhere, especially Iran). These trends hold true in the Sahel, where “partnership,” rather than calls for reform — or for direct US military intervention — is what receives major backing in Washington.

In the long run, neither an agenda of democratization nor ambitions to stabilize Africa through a US military presence seem likely to succeed broadly.

Concern about terrorist threats in the Sahel and other parts of the continent is warranted. But as US policymakers craft policies to meet this challenge, they should acknowledge that the capacity of the White House and the Pentagon to coerce political transformations in African countries has real limits. The choice between promoting democracy and fighting terrorism through establishing stability, therefore, may be a false and harmful one. More promising would be an approach that asks what social, economic, and political factors drive terrorism in the Sahel, and then crafts a US response that couples a limited military role with more sophisticated political awareness. The US is unlikely to be able to decisively shape African politics either through force or finesse. Yet if policymakers and military planners consider more carefully what the political atmosphere is in countries where America seeks partnerships, then counterterrorism can perhaps be conducted in a manner less likely to spark unintended backlash, and less likely to prop up anti-democratic leaders.
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In the post 9/11 global (dis)order, US security presence has steadily increased in the Sahara under various military operations such as the Pan-Sahel Initiative, Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative and the US military’s Africa Command (AFRICOM). So too have North African-Sahelian governments been branding indigenous Saharan groups as having links to ‘armed Islamic groups’, ‘dissidents’ and ‘terrorists’. When US officials court these governments, who will not jump onboard the development handout wagon?

Recently, US official commentary has heightened in pitch with allegations linking its imagined ‘al-Qaeda’ in the Sahara to Western Sahara’s Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente Polisario), accompanied by the interminable drip-drip of Moroccan official propaganda to bolster its autonomy plan and, under international law, illegal claims to territorial sovereignty of Western Sahara.  

As an anthropologist researching the western region of the Sahara, these problematic discourses raise personal reservations and analytical questions. Most significantly because this US-Moroccan discourse is intertwined in three ways. Firstly, as a sacred symbol and ‘eternal truth’ in relation to the United States’s own dominant, unchallengeable and sacrosanct perception of an Islamicised ‘religious fundamentalism’ (subsuming the fashionable terms of terrorism and extremism). Secondly, that this ‘eternal truth’ sits transparently alongside the very ‘hard fact’ (or ‘fingerprints’) of US geo-political-economic interests in North Africa, the Sahara and the Sahel (see Zoubir 2009), which may be interpreted as ‘economic fundamentalism’. And thirdly, in the creating and maintaining of a ‘fearful void’ (see McDougall 2007), this selective US imagining and rewriting of the Saharan human and physical geographical landscape remains rooted in Orientalist representations of the ‘Other’ (Said 1979). As historian McDougall (2007) has written, ‘...it is ironic how central the “imaging” of the Sahara ... remains even today as we seek terrorism in the depths of the desert’.

This article is my response as a concerned researcher of Western Sahara to allegations the US and Morocco are constructing to link the Polisario to an imagined ‘al-Qaeda entity’ (or ‘Saharan terrorism’). I do not

1. For a succinct analysis by several contributors, see Benjamin and Slisli (2007).


4. Two analyses of the conflict’s origins (Frank 1976 and Mundy 2006), published three decades apart, indicates how little the Western Sahara impasse has changed over 36 years.

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dispute incidents such as kidnapping whereby some ‘entity’ has called itself al-Qaeda, but it appears that the US has picked up its al-Qaeda template and transplanted it over the Sahara. The analytical problematic lies in accurately clarifying when does something become ‘al-Qaeda’ and why. It is important not to accept universalising claims at face value and to ensure that the less audible and visible aspects of this subject are represented. Anthropologically, we interrogate ‘truths’ as competing sites of contestation between power and resistance, where differently perceived ‘facts’ are produced in narratives and counter-narratives.

**The US terrorism idiolect**

Given US National Intelligence Council estimates, that 25% of US oil will come from Africa by 2015, it is interesting to note examples of US security operations such as ‘Joint Task Force Aztec Silence’ in the Sahara-Sahel, the ‘Combined Joint Task Force’ in the Horn of Africa, and operations in the Gulf of Guinea, whose oil resources are also of importance to the United States. As AFRICOM states of itself, ‘United States Africa Command, in concert with other U.S. government agencies and international partners, conducts sustained security engagement through military-to-military programs, military-sponsored activities, and other military operations as directed to promote a stable and secure African environment in support of U.S. foreign policy’ (my emphases).5 This vocabulary transmits a war-making, militarising, ‘economic fundamentalism’ form of foreign policy (Zoubir 2009: 995), and follows the same linguistic style of its parallel vocabulary-making about the terrorist religious fundamentalist Other.

Following this statement on AFRICOM’s website is another (my emphases):

‘U.S. Africa Command’s theater strategic objectives:

- Defeat the Al-Qaeda terrorist organizations and its associated networks;
- Ensure peace operations capacity exists to respond to emerging crises, and continental peace support operations are effectively fulfilling mission requirements;
- Cooperate with identified African states in the creation of an environment inhospitable to the unsanctioned possession and proliferation on WMD;
- Improve security sector governance and increased stability through military support to comprehensive, holistic and enduring USG efforts in designated states;
- Protect populations from deadly contagions’.

I draw attention to these two AFRICOM statements because they set the scene — or ‘theater’ as AFRICOM likes to see it — that smacks of a Hollywood cowboys ‘n injuns script whereby American save-the-world characters charge across the Sahara to eliminate the Bad Guys. Perhaps the bizarre and abrupt final bullet point on ‘deadly contagions’ is an old Hollywood-Bush administration collaboration that AFRICOM forgot to delete.6 If this seems very unacademic of me, I recommend readers to the publications Jack G. Shaheen (2001) and Mahmood Mamdani (2004).

**Distorted scripts on an imagined theatre**

Thus, underlying US foreign policy and security practice in the Sahara are accusations that the Western Saharan liberation movement, the Frente Polisario, is ‘vulnerable’ to al-Qaeda. Morocco actively plays its part with US security anxieties to propagate accusations that the Sahrawi populations, refugee camps and Polisario’s government in exile, the República Árabe Saharaui Democrática (RASD), could become a ‘hotbed’ and ‘safe haven’ for terrorism.

To name but a few examples. In 2007, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch told the US congress that the Western Sahara conflict needed swift resolution because the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria represent a ‘potentially attractive

6. I’d like to thank Konstantina Isidoros for her kind permission to draw attention to the official websites of the US Africa Command and the US National Intelligence Council. [See link]

7. See Moroccan government press accounts on MAP website: e.g., ‘Autonomy project “a factor for peace and security in the region”, official’ (23 March 2010), ‘Algeria strikes Polisario convoy’ (13 August 2009).
safe haven for terrorist planning or activity’ (Agence France Presse 11 April 2007). Also in 2007, the US ambassador to Morocco produced more distorted truths, such as that the Sahrawi refugee camps were ‘...prey for recruitment by Al Qaeda and local terrorist groups’ (quoted in Zunes 2007). In both 2005 and 2008, the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center (ESISC) issued two near-identical reports proclaiming distorted truths that Polisario is ‘evolving ... [to give rise] to new fears ... terrorism, radical Islamism or international crime. This development would threaten the stability of the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa ... and, in the long run, of Europe as well’.

A prime example of Moroccan propagandising comes from the Moroccan-American Center for Policy (MACP), a team of well-paid former US diplomats who now lobby for Moroccan interests in Washington, DC. Their recent press releases demonstrate the peacock shrill of Moroccan hysteria, also evidenced in official government statements found on the website of Morocco government’s official mouthpiece, Maghreb Arab Presse (MAP). In one, MAP conveniently use the idea of a ‘breeding ground to new al-Qaeda threat’ to keep up the hard-sell on Morocco’s autonomy plan as the ‘best practical way forward’ for stability and security. In another, ‘Obama Counterterrorism Official says al-Qaeda Poses “Immediate Threat” in North Africa to American and Western Nationals’, again to promote Morocco’s autonomy plan as the only solution.

Most recently, Morocco, on 25 March 2010, at a security conference in its capital Rabat, issued a press release that ‘insecurity in the Sahel is main threat’ pointing to the ‘... separatist movements, such as the Polisario Front, which has been challenging the Moroccan [illegal territorial claim of] sovereignty over Sahara since 1975’.

On the other side of this discourse, are those of us who do not accept that the Polisario are ‘terrorists’ nor vulnerable to it: they are a liberation movement, a nation-state in exile and refugees from their homeland, Western Sahara, invaded by Morocco in 1975. As Zunes (2007) emphasises, and those of us with long-term, close-up experience of the Polisario and refugees camps agree, Polisario is a secular nationalist organisation who scrupulously honoured its 1991 ceasefire agreement with Morocco even when Morocco refused to honour their reciprocal commitments. The Sahrawi are notable for observing a peaceful Islam and a millennia-old literary tradition. They are the least likely group to want to become involved in an ‘al-Qaeda entity’ because their primary goal is to achieve their internationally accepted legal rights to self-determination and sovereign independence to Western Sahara, a country illegally invaded by Morocco with US and French backing. Any involvement with ‘extremist fundamentalism’ and ‘terrorism’ would devastate their chances to achieve their international legal right to a return to homeland.

8. ESISC, The Polisario Front (November 2005) and Front Polisario: une force de déstabilisation toujours active (October 2008). The report alludes to distortion of facts, such as in section VI.5, regarding accusation of misuse of humanitarian aid, the authors ‘take note’ that two quoted ‘top notch NGO’s ... affirmed “having been deliberately misquoted in a lying manner”. Lies appear to play some peculiar importance in this report.


10. See Zunes (2007) and Mundy (2009) on why Morocco’s autonomy plan is not the best way forward.
ditionally, as refugees inhabiting refugee camps, they are under an extremely public scrutiny by hundreds of foreign visitors such as humanitarian staff, politicians and academics all year round. The viciousness of Morocco’s propaganda machine can best be seen in its glossy websites that fraudulently misappropriate text and photographs to falsely portray the refugee camps as violently suppressed sites of torture and forced imprisonment of its inhabitants. These websites are evidence of pure lies in Morocco’s war of distorted truths — as evidenced by those of us who live in the camps.

Nevertheless, these allegations are precisely what the US wants to achieve with its heightened discourse and transplantation of its ‘al-Qaeda template’ onto the Sahara. If only the Polisario and its Saharawi population would just dissolve into thin air, then the US, France and Morocco could continue misappropriating and exploiting Western Sahara’s territory and natural resources unhindered.

Because the Polisario — and importantly, the Saharawi population split apart on both sides of the Moroccan Berm — refuse to give in to the US-French-Moroccan bullying, the US reconstructs them into terrorists and weaves another story of fear about al-Qaeda conveniently popping up like a jack-in-the-box in the Sahara. Yet one more ‘hard fact’ never appears in the US ‘eternal truth’ discourse: the outstanding matter that Morocco has violated the sacred tenets of modern political theory and international law by invading a neighbouring nation-state’s territorial boundaries ...

Distortions of truth: in/security and in/stability

How might this US ‘terrorism discourse’, with its own intertwining of sacred symbols and politics (that is, its perceived threats of an imagined monster complementing its on-the-ground geopolitical interests), be discussed anthropologically?

References to and the vocabulary about an imagined entity called ‘Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb’ becomes a sacred text and ‘eternal truth’ involving constructed discourses about religious-political identity which can conveniently be transplanted into new socio-cultural contexts — most recently, the Sahara.

Primarily embedded in US ‘militarised’ discourse, and trickling down through Western popular media and commentators (including Morocco’s fervent propagandising), this ‘Saharan terrorist entity’ is depicted as the antithesis to modernity, science and rationality, and as uncontrollable violent extremism threatening Western values and freedoms (i.e., US geo-political-economic interests, and Morocco’s own peacock shrills that it too is ‘modern’ and ‘democratic’).

Although, in anthropology, we acknowledge that there are a myriad of voices involved in the production of different knowledge/truths that each seek to reveal, it is with some tiredness of certain Washington ‘truths’ that I turn my anthropological lens to the shiny new US-perceived threat, the ‘Saharan terrorist’. This abstract entity can be deconstructed in anthropology and human geography theory using the concepts of ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) within an ‘imagined geography’ (Gregory 1994, Ó Tuathail 1996).

While the American spotlight has been creating the political-religious dimension of the heavily-loaded popular term ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ (which has piloted these latest stories of an ‘Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb’), the underlying socio-religious identity holds crucial sources of alternative ethnographic understandings to illuminate an entirely different representation to that which the US would have us believe. Ethnographically speaking, it is inconceivable that a Hollywood-type ‘Mr Al-Qaeda Bad Guy’ could suddenly jack-in-the-box into the Sahara from a far off land and be immediately accepted and ‘followed’ by local, indigenous Saharan populations. The US ‘al-Qaeda template’ creates an artificial Saharan frontier and a western epistemological order which writes new ‘eternal truths’ to ignore and overwrite ‘hard facts’ that these desert territories are united by common histories and marked by continuous historical exchanges wherein trust and reputation are paramount. The Saharan ‘economy of affection’ is tied by close kinship ties, connected by long-distance networks of solidarity, and governed by both


Islamic and customary norms of behaviour. Faith and mutual trust, trustworthy partnerships, ‘the fraternity’ (al-ikhā), the act of entrusting (al-waḍī’a) and the closeness (al-aqrāba) (Lydon 2008; 2005), the family, the pride of ‘people’ (identities of both/either tribe and citizen) — such socio-culturally rooted characteristics preclude foreign strangers from transplanting within these communities with ease or speed. For an al-Qaeda to operate in communities such as these, its main artery would have to be US dollars, not local currency so to speak.

Herein lies the Hollywood-style portrayal of an ‘Arab world’ as unstable, insecure, and full of threatening shadows, and therefore an ‘imagined geography’ of the Sahara. ‘Economies of affection’ are deeply rooted in indigenous Saharan social systems and cultural heritage to create and maintain stability and security. Not the instability and insecurity as the US-styled discourse wants to portray. For a ‘Mr Al-Qaeda Bad Guy’ to successfully supplant himself in these environments suggests other, external, factors that have interfered with the indigenous system of propinquity, stability and security. When the US interferes in the Sahara, it is creating its own instability and insecurity, systematically destroying the culturally rooted systems of indigenous stability and security. Entrenched in these US actions is ‘economic fundamentalism’: by investing in the creation and maintenance of ‘instability’, thereby creating ‘insecurity’ to scaffold a vast profit-making ‘security’ industry and secure economic-political dominance and control of the region. It is therefore in US interests to script-write a mythology of terror onto a Saharan landscape.

**Clearing the ‘mythology of terrorism’ lens**

An anthropological treatment of general US terrorism discourse requires a re-contextualisation in order to ‘clear the lens’. If we strip out the ‘Islam’, what is ‘fundamentalism’? Historical research and comparative analysis between different societies shows that fundamentalism is not unique to Islam, but can be evidenced in a diverse array of ethnographic settings. Firstly, ‘fundamentalism’ describes a wide range of religious and political developments. Using Munson’s (1993) definition, many conservative religious movements can be said to share ‘fundamentalist’ dimensions in their insistence on strict conformity to sacred texts and the moral codes based on them. They may or may not be or become militant. Marty and Appleby (1991) define fundamentalist groups as having started out as traditionalists, then upon perceiving some threat they react to the crisis and ‘fight back’. Marty and Appleby also discuss what it is groups may ‘fight back’ for, the resources they use to fight, who they fight against and ‘fight under’ (e.g. the Americans appear to believe this latter point is a fundamentalising Islamic God while the Americans believe they are fighting under the banner of ‘democracy’, or democratic economic extremism).

Secondly, fundamentalism arose in history related to the Christian tradition, describing conservative evangelicals inside mainline Protestant denominations. There are many examples of ‘fundamentalist impulses’, such as the Maccabean revolt in the 2nd century B.C. which insisted on strict conformity to the Torah and Jewish religious law; Calvin’s 16th century Genevan polity and the 17th century Puritanism, both insisting on strict conformity to the Bible and its moral codes (Munson 1993). Likewise, Asad (2007) reviews how history shows that the notion of martyrdom is an early Christian tradition; and argues that the more recent Islamic martyrdom is not pre-modern or medieval.

It is important to deconstruct these new uses of the labels ‘fundamentalism / extremism / terrorism’ which are now ascribed fashionably to Islam. These ascriptions are modern constructions, applied beyond the Christian fold and with new negative connotations ascribed to the Muslim world. It has become a metaphor through which Islam is presented by the US to its own western public. Any political resurgence that uses symbols of Islam is reported as manifestations of ‘Islamic fundamentalism / extremism / terrorism’. For example, the emergence of the Iranian Islamic clerics, Sadaat’s assassination in Egypt, Lebanon’s Shi’ite community. So too have new incarnations appeared since 9/11: Al-Qaeda, Pakistan’s Taliban, Afghanistan’s Taliban, Mali/Niger nomadic Tuareg ‘insurgents’, and now, this even newer incarnation of ‘Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb’.

**The ‘Columbus construction’**

How might we understand the ‘Saharan terrorist’ as a constructed, ‘imagined’ phenomenon? Edmund Leach’s 1977 Munro lecture, *Custom, Law, and Terrorist Violence*, considered the moral ambiguity of political power’s transmigration through identities of ‘bad’ ter-
rorism and ‘good’ state terror. His examination of the ‘Columbus construction’ (in which Columbus’ descriptions of natives in the New World as ‘two-headed dogs’ enabled his European court to legitimate and authorise brutal invasion) sheds light on how an ‘out-group’ is redefined and reconstructed to legitimate certain notions about and behaviours towards them. Munson illustrates how contemporary ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ is conveyed as political ‘extremists’, guerrilla ‘insurgents’ and religious ‘fanatics’ who despise US/ Western freedoms and values. These reconstructed notions and labels are then arbitrarily pasted from one context to another — something the US is getting good at by building a slow accumulation of respective ‘inside-outside’ products of prejudicial knowledge. We must also recognise the Bourdieu-Foucaultian agency of those with the dominating monopoly to do this defining of who is ‘fundamentalist/terrorist’. There are many different actors involved in producing many different scripts and performances, underlying which are equally as many different ‘hidden transcripts’, agendas and conflicts of interest. All these aspects create extreme dichotomies, such as the ‘democratic enlightened Observer’ versus the ‘primitive uncontrollable Observed’. These ‘Columbus constructions’ shed light on notions of dominance, power and political strength, so while one voice is more dominant and powerful, we should more stringently examine the voices that are less heard, for they in turn shed new dimensions of light on the dominant voices.

When Munson, Esposito and Asad undertook analyses to examine the contemporary ‘groundings for “Islamic fundamentalism” animosity’ (i.e. the roots of Muslim hostility), they found that this hostility has less to do with values, cultural and religious differences with the US, and more to do with US foreign policies in the Arab world (Munson 2004). These kinds of critical analyses illuminate how the US itself may be seen as engaging in ‘fundamentalist’ impulses. In so doing, its ‘Columbus construction’ of the ‘Muslim Other’ — and for the purposes of this article, the ‘Saharan terrorist’ — is a Western construction which presents the roots of hostility as threatening Western/Christian values, freedoms, democracy, rational thought etc., in order to gain its own public appeal. This American condition is now also invoking a new vocabulary that demonises a new ‘Other’ as the ‘Saharan terrorist’, thus enabling the US to legitimate its own hostility to its imagined and constructed ‘Other’ in order to gain public support, and finally legitimate its underlying self-interests and objectives. As Mundy (2007) argues, ‘When pressing its case for Western Sahara to foreign patrons, the Moroccan regime has also attempted to de-legitimize Polisario in various ways. The most common tactic is Rabat’s frequent attempts to highlight Polisario’s links — real, ideological and imaginary — to groups, persons and countries at odds with U.S. foreign policy’.

Constructing a ‘fearful void’

This brings me to a final aspect, that of the clash of notions about legitimate and illegitimate warfare. I raise this point because the US sees itself as being engaged in a global ‘war on terror’. Across both this global stage and the Saharan stage, it is defining itself as a legitimate actor engaged in legitimate warfare, whereas the ‘Others’ are illegitimately engaging in illegitimate actions. And yet comparative analyses of world-wide contexts illuminate the differentiation between the context of war and the context of peace, in which lie further constructed dichotomies. Contextualising the Sahara illustrates an indigenous preference for security, stability and peaceful existence. The Polisario is a response to several complex historical contexts: the origins of Polisario grew out of frustration with both colonial rule and messy colonial withdrawal, to become a nationalistic movement seeking liberation from the subsequent illegal Moroccan invasion and occupation of Western Sahara.

Human society creates rules about when and how to transgress moral boundaries. But the project of war is designed by different sets of actors who do not read the map in the same way. Thus the rules of law and the rules of war can lead to the legitimation to kill in one case but not the other. Leach (1977) found culturally specific differences between right and wrong, as too did Asad (2007) who asks what kinds of violence are legitimated and what role do notions of ‘civilised’ versus ‘uncivilised’ play in various discourses. He also especially notes the dichotomy between Western notions of their legal sanction of war as against ‘unlicensed’ militants, versus the latter’s unsanctioned rights of war against the former.

Asad joins numerous other authors in criticism of the oddity of the American phrase ‘war on terror’ that has so quickly dominated public discourse in recent years. These critics argue that war can only be a formal re-
lation of hostilities between sovereign states, not between a state and an abstract notion of diffuse international networks of militants. The assumption is that because there is legal definition of war, there is also a moral distinction between warfare (a state function) and terrorism (a so-called disruptive activity of ruthless individuals). This assumption then underlines traditional thought about the concept of ‘just war’. In contrast, the term ‘just terrorism’ appears to be an impossible contradiction. And yet, emerging from many, more compassionate, analyses of ‘terrorism’, is a very different picture: a person’s engagement in political action cannot be reduced to just ‘religious outrage’, instead there often exists non-religious national-social protest, whereby their actions are expressions of social protest and reform (see for example, Munson 1993; Wardenburg 1985). Thus the US-centred ‘Columbus construction’ of its so-called ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ often ignores the very modern nationalistic and social grievances that are attempting to mobilise positive and peaceful change.

Examining arguments about moral constraints of violence (and echoing Leach’s ‘Columbus construction’), Asad notes the brutality of the state army where even if state armies are subject to international humanitarian law, that law has never prevented their deliberate cruelties. The difference lies in the power and authority of who is more powerful to sanction their own crimes. Thus, we can see how different types of war receive different types of justification (i.e. the US legitimates its wars as ‘necessary’). ‘Necessity’ enables justification of it. Even though ‘terrorists’ too claim justification through necessity, terrorism remains perceived as evil. Interpreting motives of fighters is tricky but it remains central to arguments about the distinction between the conduct of state armies and non-state ones. Asad notes another impossible ‘western’ contradiction: he cites modern political law on the use of nuclear weapons — a suicidal war existing in the liberal imagination as a legitimate form of self-defence. Recognising moral absolutes and at same time agreeing to set them aside is a well-known contradiction central to liberalism, something that can be attributed to recent US trouble making.

Conclusion

A clear theme has emerged that questions assumptions about notions of ‘fundamentalism/extremism-terrorism’ as an Islamic political movement. Anthropological analyses have instead illuminated how these are often social movements in Moslem societies. Strip away the assumed aggressive militant characteristics, and one can find civic engagements expressed through the language of faith, whereby the symbols of faith are used for both social movement and political mobilisation. This civic engagement may grow into militant action (in any society, including the US itself), in which the expression of sacred script and symbols might be heightened with moral outrage, just as I argued at the beginning of this article that the US has its own sacred scripts and ‘eternal truths’.

My point here is that strong states are more able to protect their own, and convict others as violators of humanitarian law. In so doing, they reconstruct an image of that ‘other’ as violator, precisely in order to legitimate violent action against them. Thus the more the ‘Other’ fights back (in defence), the more this fuels the stronger party’s persistent ‘Columbus constructions’.

The more the US defines and constructs the abstract monster of a ‘Saharan terrorist’, the more likely it
might become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This raises the frightening thought — does the US want its prophecy to come true? Certainly, the US has every conceivable reason and use for creating such a monster in order to authenticate its claims, legitimate its actions, and fulfil its economic self-interests across the Sahara, North Africa and Sahel. However much the US insists it has only concerns for regional and global ‘political security’ at heart, there remains the fact that political security is linked to economic security under which lie economic interests. And the US, with Europe, is most definitely engaged in economic interests in the Sahara (Zoubir 2009). If the US had no economic interests, then it would not be sticking its political-military fingers in the Saharan pie (Barth 2003).

To conclude, a growing body of Sahara observers are becoming increasingly uneasy with the notion that these incarnations are truly what we are encouraged to believe they are. In Mali and Niger, the central-eastern Saharan Tuareg ‘insurgents’ are differently described by sceptical observers as, instead, desert nomads with no option but to fight with their backs against the wall to recuperate their indigenous land — land that they are denied access to by corrupt governments in receipt of US development aid; land upon which US-contracted uranium extraction now occurs (Keenan 2006a/b).

The US requires the Columbus construction of a ‘monster’ with which to legitimate the coercion and manipulation of an existing human and physical geographical landscape to make way for US interests and policies. Who, then, are the real troublemakers? So too is there a secondary aspect, that of the North African-Saharan-Sahelian governments that the US courts. In becoming US allies, these governments become ‘exporters’ of the US ‘war on terror’ (Mundy 2007) and ‘African surrogates’ (Zoubir 2009: 990-991). As Mundy notes: ‘Not only is Morocco an ally in the “War on Terror”, it is a major site and exporter of it. The coordinated suicide bombings of 2003 and the botched ones of 2007, along with the number of Moroccan “jihadists” participating in the Iraqi and Algerian insurgencies, not to mention the 2004 Madrid bombings and other European al-Qaida cells, suggest that something ominous is lurking behind Morocco’s peaceful façade’ (Mundy 2007). Echoing these concerns, McDougall also notes that ‘The manipulation of the Sahara as a hotbed of terrorism is not the achievement of the West alone, but has required the complicity of the Sahara’s sedentary neighbours’.

Last thoughts should be left with the persistent human rights violations on Morocco’s side of the Beren — namely those indigenous Sahrawi populations in the Moroccan Occupied Territory of Western Sahara. At time of writing, there are currently five Sahrawi human rights advocates, Ali Salem Tamek, Brahim Dahane, Yehdih Ettarrouzi, Ahmed Naciri and Rachid Sghayer, who are in Morocco’s ‘Salé prison and approach one month of sustained hunger strike. Numerous other human rights advocates who are political prisoners in Moroccan jails have also joined them in hunger strikes. Please see Amnesty International’s detailed archived records of Morocco’s persistent human rights violations over many years.14

References


13. I refer to the difference between indigenous Sahrawi populations, and the ‘Moroccan Sahrawi’ comprised of Moroccan settlers through whom Morocco attempts to confuse and stall the UN led self-determination referendum.


A second round of informal talks between Moroccan government and the Polisario Front conducted under UN auspices and in the presence of Algeria and Mauritania as observer countries, was held on 10-11 February 2010. Announced as a preliminary, informal meeting leading to the fifth round of direct negotiations between the Western Saharan independence movement and Morocco, these discussions followed four sessions of direct talks, which began in June 2007, without producing any tangible results. At least for the informed analyst, the latest meeting would likely hold few differences from the previous rounds — which was indeed the case — even if the international context has changed somewhat since the arrival of Barack Obama to the White House one year prior. The Western Sahara conflict, defined as a ‘forgotten conflict’ or ‘frozen conflict’ (Zoubir 2010) is approaching its 35th year; it has had significant damaging effects. A proposed regional trading bloc, L’Union du Maghreb Arabe (UMA, Arab Maghrib Union), inaugurated with great fanfare in February 1989, has been in hibernation since 1996, precisely because of this dispute. The question has poisoned relations between Algeria, the main sponsor of Western Saharan self-determination, and Morocco, which claims the territory it has illegally occupied since 1975. Even if the issue very rarely makes the headlines, the Western Sahara conflict has had a significant impact on the development of the region. Indeed, the lack of regional integration is a serious consequence: economic exchange between the Maghrib states represents only 1.3% of their trade, the lowest regional trade in the world. Economists in the United States have shown that an integrated Maghrib market and free trade area would produce highly beneficial results for the populations of the region (Hufbauer & Brunel 2008). In addition, the land border between Algeria and Morocco has been closed since August 1994, seriously affecting the economic life of the city of Oujda, which depended heavily on trade with and tourism from Algeria. Morocco has repeatedly called on the Algerian authorities to reopen the border, but Algiers has decided that reopening the border without a comprehensive agreement, which would include the settlement of the conflict in Western Sahara, would be useless, no matter the cost of a non-integrated Maghrib. Furthermore, not surprisingly, the tension between Algeria and Morocco has led to a rather costly and dangerous arms race.

In addition, the dispute has generated other consequences. It has affected relations between France...
(defending the Moroccan monarchy’s irredentist claims) and Algeria, as well as relations between Spain (the former colonial power in Western Sahara) and, on the one hand, Morocco, and, on the other, Spain and Algeria. The United States, which during the Cold War allowed the occupation of the former Spanish colony by Morocco (Mundy 2006a/b), has also suffered some of the consequences in its policy in the Maghrib: Its repeated calls for Maghrib integration have proven fruitless.

Only a geopolitical perspective can explain the stalemate that has persisted in the Western Sahara conflict. The alleged technical difficulties to ensure a referendum have been mere pretext to allow Morocco to continue its colonization of the territory. If today powers like the United States, France and Spain, support, albeit to different degrees, the concept of ‘autonomy for the Sahrawi people’, they have failed to impose it because international law is on the side of the Sahrawi people (Chinkin 2008).

The conflict has increased even more as a younger generations of Sahrawis have resorted to active, continued peaceful resistance, which has succeeded in alerting the international community on human rights issues. The case of the activist Aminatou Haidar is a perfect illustration. In fact, her hunger strike, triggered in November-December 2009 and the diplomatic reaction that ensued, have had such reverberations that the Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General to Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, asked the UN Security Council on January 28, 2010, during a closed-door meeting, to include human rights monitoring in the prerogatives of the Mission des Nations Unies pour l’Organisation d’un Référendum au Sahara Occidental (MINURSO, UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara) — the only United Nations peacekeeping force that does not include, as part of its mandate, the protection of human rights. The same request had been made in 2009 but France opposed it. On 30 April 2010, France once again, opposed the inclusion of the protection of human rights in MINURSO’s mandate. Therefore, UNSC Resolution 1920, which has extended MINURSO’s mandate for another year, does not contain any mention of human rights. In the meantime, the violations of human rights in occupied Western Sahara have in fact amplified despite their denunciations by respectable human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.

The lack of resolution of the Western Sahara conflict boils down to two main points: the conflicting positions of Morocco and Western Saharan nationalists, on the one hand, and geopolitical considerations, on the other hand. These geopolitical interests have been the main impediment to the resolution of the conflict because they strengthened the obstinate position of Morocco, which argues, thanks to external support, that it will only negotiate on the basis of ‘autonomy’ within Moroccan sovereignty. This proposal currently enjoys the implicit consent of France, the United States, and Spain, regardless of UN resolutions that refute any preconditions for the current negotiations.

**Morocco and the Sahrawi: Irreconcilable Positions**

Despite the acceptance of the original UN Settlement Plan by Morocco and Polisario in 1991, all attempts to organize the referendum on self-determination of the last colony in Africa have failed. Since 2001, Morocco has continuously opposed the inclusion of the option...
of independence to any referendum process based on self-determination. Today, the Moroccans consider the referendum process altogether as an ‘obsolete practice’. Moroccans are comforted in their position owing to the backing they receive from France and the United States in the Security Council. The Security Council has refused to impose a solution that includes the option of independence, as inscribed in UN resolutions. This not only includes the original 1991 Settlement Plan but also, in 2003, the Security Council failed to impose the second Baker Plan — because of the US about-face but also because France made clear it would oppose it by its Security Council veto. Recently, France, the United States (under George W Bush) and Spain have made no doubt as to their support for the proposal Morocco made in 2007 to supposedly grant Western Sahara ‘autonomy’ within the Moroccan Kingdom. Implicitly, these countries have recognized Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara, while adopting an official position that indicates otherwise. Thus, since the adoption on 30 April 2007, of UN resolution 1754, Moroccans have reiterated their position that they will not negotiate anything other than their own proposal, insisting that they have garnered support from France and, more importantly, from the George W. Bush administration and the current Barack Obama Administration, following Hillary Clinton’s declarations in Morocco in December 2009. During all the recent negotiations, Moroccans refused to discuss the Polisario’s counter-proposal, thus ignoring recent UN resolutions which insist on ‘negotiations without preconditions and in good faith […]’ with a view to achieving a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara’. Polisario’s counterproposal submitted to the United Nations in 2007, which conforms to international legality, does not reject outright the Moroccan ‘autonomy’ option, but insists that the any proposal be considered only as a third option (independence and integration being the others) as part of talks between the two parties. Polisario is also committed to accepting the results of the referendum whatever they are and to negotiate with the Kingdom of Morocco, under the auspices of the United Nations, the guarantees that it is prepared to grant to the Moroccan population residing in Western Sahara, as well as to the Kingdom of Morocco, in terms of Morocco’s political, economic and security interests in Western Sahara, in the event that the referendum on self-determination would lead to independence.

The perpetuation of this impasse is inevitable, despite the optimism of former US diplomat, Christopher Ross, formally appointed in January 2009 to serve as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s Personal Envoy to Western Sahara. Prudently, Ross first arranged for an informal meeting between the two parties in Dürstein, Austria, on 10-11 August 2009. Unsurprisingly, no progress was made despite a fairly positive statement issued at the end of the meeting. The two parties however agreed to pursue yet another informal round of discussions in Armonk, near New York. According to Ban Ki-moon, the meeting would be ‘based on guidelines provided by resolution 1871 (2009) and other previous resolutions of the Security Council’. But the talks produced little headway because reality on the ground was and still is favorable to Morocco, not only because Morocco has consolidated its colonization of the territory, but it also exploits illegally, with no fear of punishment, the natural resources of Western Sahara, primarily phosphates and fisheries. The European Union is complicit in this exploitation through the fisheries agreement with Morocco, which includes Western Saharan waters, notwithstanding the doubts that the European Parliament has expressed on the reasonableness of EU policy; in fact, it deemed EU fishing in Western Saharan waters to be illegal. In view of Morocco’s intransigence and the support it receives from external actors, it is thus not surprising that the second informal meeting held in New York to prepare for the 5th round failed, like the previous ones, to produce any tangible results. Given that neither side has accepted the proposal of the other as the sole basis for future negotiations, it is obvious that, short of unforeseen developments, the status quo will undoubtedly persist.

**Geopolitics as Impediment to Resolution of the Conflict**

The United Nations is responsible for the decolonization of Western Sahara, but the key to breaking the stalemate and implementing the legal solution lies in the hands of France and the United States, which, even if they do not recognize Morocco’s sovereignty over the territory, have allowed Morocco to consolidate its control over Western Sahara. The ingredients that have led to the status quo are in fact contained in

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2. [The second power sharing proposal developed by former US Secretary of State James Baker, the UN lead negotiator for Western Sahara between 1997 and 2004 — ed.]
UN resolutions, which while reaffirming the right to self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, encourage the Polisario to seek with Moroccans — the colonizers — a ‘mutually acceptable’ political solution. In other words, each party has a veto, even if Morocco has the advantage.

France, regardless of its ‘official’ position, considers Western Sahara as an integral part of Morocco. Since 1975, successive French governments have never hidden their opposition to an independent Sahrawi state that would purportedly fall under Algeria’s influence. In addition, the emergence of an independent Sahrawi state is seen as a destabilizing factor for the Moroccan Kingdom, in which France has considerable political, economic, military and cultural interests. With nearly 70 percent of total Foreign Direct Investments in Morocco, France is the largest trading partner and major investor. Of course, France’s steadfast support of Morocco’s irredentist claims has complicated further Algerian-French relations. The French government is of the conviction that the resolution of the conflict lies between Algiers and Rabat, an attitude that irritates Algiers.

The United States, too, supports the position of Morocco, a reliable ally in the Arab world (Zoubir 2009a). A priori, the U.S. does not oppose the right to self-determination of peoples, but in the case of Western Sahara, geopolitical considerations are the driving force in the US attitude toward this particular question. There were times, as under the George HW Bush administration, in the late 1980s, when the United States was open to the idea of an independent Sahrawi state. Then in 2003, the United States, supported the second Baker Plan, under which the Sahrawis were to enjoy autonomy for a period of five years before holding a referendum on self-determination that would include the three options, of which independence was one, as inscribed in UN resolutions. Moroccans have objected to such referendum in spite of the numerical advantage of Moroccan settlers in the territory, who would have been allowed to vote under the 2003 proposal. At the time, the George W Bush administration had promised Algerians that if Algiers and Polisario accepted the plan, the United States would impose that solution at the Security Council. However, perhaps not wishing to aggravate the rift with the French over the issue of Iraq, coupled with the threat of veto from France, the United States was pushed to renege on its promise. The Bush administration then supported the 2007 Moroccan autonomy proposal despite its illegality — for what gives Moroccans the right to offer autonomy to Sahrawis? — and its utter ambiguity (Theofilopoulou 2007).

It would be naïve to believe a reversal of the US position in this conflict under the current Obama Administration despite the seeming shift in attitude towards the autonomy proposal. There have been some indications that the Obama administration may not be decidedly biased in favor of Morocco. Indeed, in June 2009, it appeared that the U.S. no longer supported unequivocally the Moroccan autonomy plan; Obama evaded mentioning the autonomy plan in his letter to King Mohamed VI, which was interpreted as a reversal in US policy on the question. A passage in the letter was particularly revealing: ‘I share your commitment to the UN-led negotiations as the appropriate forum to achieve a mutually agreed solution [...] My government will work with yours and others in the region to achieve an outcome that meets the people’s need for transparent governance, confidence in the rule of law, and equal administration of justice’ (quoted in World Tribune 2009). Citing
diplomatic sources, the report in which the letter was quoted suggested that ‘The United States no longer supports or endorses the Moroccan autonomy plan . . . Instead, the administration has returned to the pre-Bush position that there could be an independent POLISARIO state in Western Sahara’ (ibid). United States officials refused to confirm or deny such reports, stating only that the US encourages the parties to engage in discussions under the United Nations auspices.3 Undoubtedly, by referring to international legality, which in the case of Western Sahara would include the option of independence, Obama seemed to abide by the values he promised to uphold. However, as UNSC Resolution 1920 demonstrates, the United States does not seem to have undertaken any shift in policy toward Western Sahara. What is certain is that the administration is torn between continuing to support a traditional ally and setting a new course that would contradict the interests of that ally. The conflicting pronouncements in Obama’s letter and those issued by Hillary Clinton during her visit to Morocco in November 2009 highlight the policy constraints of the new administration. During her visit to Marrakesh in November 2009 to attend the Forum for the Future, Hillary Clinton responded to the question as to whether the Obama administration had changed its position on the autonomy plan by saying that, ‘Our policy has not changed, and I thank you for asking the question because I think it’s important for me to reaffirm here in Morocco that there has been no change in policy’ (Clinton 2009a). In another interview, she was asked, what she meant by her affirmation that there was ‘no change in the Obama Administration’s position as far as the Moroccan autonomy plan in the Sahara is concerned’. Her response was:

Well, this is a plan, as you know, that originated in the Clinton Administration. It was reaffirmed in the Bush Administration and it remains the policy of the United States in the Obama Administration. Now, we are supporting the United Nations process because we think that if there can be a peaceful resolution to the difficulties that exist with your neighbors, both to the east and to the south and the west that is in everyone’s interest. But because of our long relationship, we are very aware of how challenging the circumstances are. And I don’t want anyone in the region or elsewhere to have any doubt about our policy, which remains the same. (Clinton 2009b)

This being said, the U.S. displayed a tougher stand toward Morocco during the hunger strike of Haidar. The U.S. was instrumental in resolving the case (Jamaï & Rhanime 2010), thus making it possible for Haidar to return to Western Sahara.

One of the major questions to be asked is whether the White House, despite the seemingly evenhanded approach, will succumb to the Senate’s pressure to endorse Morocco’s illegal annexation of Western Sahara (Zunes 2010), at the risk of alienating Algeria, a major actor in the war against terrorism in the region (Zoubir 2009b).

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Moroccan authorities have shut down the newspaper ever since this article was published, though Morocco ostensibly justified Le Journal’s closure on financial grounds).


Tucked away in the corners of the news media sits a report that the U.S. government will provide $5 million in trucks and military equipment to Mali. The aim of this donation is to help the Malian military fight the group known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Last December, AQIM kidnapped two Canadian diplomats, who were released after four months. This is what they do these days: kidnap, extort, run guns and drugs. Islam is a veneer.

AQIM comes out of the brutal Algerian Civil War (1991-2002), which took the lives of over 200,000 people, and was fought between the secular-authoritarian National Liberation Front and various Islamist factions. The war ended when the Islamists lost the armed conflict. A few hardened veterans turned to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat in the late 1990s, and this group became the AQIM (adopted into the al-Qaeda fold by its junior amir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in 2006). AQIM conducted a few spectacular operations, including kidnapping of tourists, bombing of Algerian military vehicles and suicide bombing. AQIM's leadership comes from that well-known class of jihadi graduates known as the ‘Afghan Arabs,’ people like Abu Musab Abdul Wadoud (Abdelmalek Droukal), who did his time in Afghanistan.

The association with al-Qaeda is a propaganda coup, with Wadoud telling the New York Times that the link not only strengthens their sense of theological unity, but it also brings ‘grief and sorrow to our enemies.’ This is bluster. AQIM is a small shop with a large sign, paying its franchise dues without increasing its own business. But since AQIM operates on the border between Algeria and Mali, and does some of its business in Mali, the U.S. government decided to help fortify Mali’s military. $5 million is not much money for the U.S., but for a country with total revenues of $1.5 billion, with a military budget of about $70 million per year, this small disbursement is considerable. And it is set to increase. Keep an eye on that.

The U.S. government has worried that the turmoil in Algeria would spread across the Sahara into places such as Mali. In 2002, the Bush administration set up the Pan Sahel Initiative, which became, in 2005, the Trans-Sahel Counterterrorism Initiative (later Partnership, TSCTP). The point was to take the military forces from the seven ‘willing’ Saharan countries and train them to fight their various foes, some of whom might be offshoots of al-Qaeda (AQIM, however, was not formed till 2006, when this military interchange was already fairly advanced). With the Trans-Sahel project, the U.S. government put in $500 million over five years, mainly for military hardware. As if the militaries of Ghana and Nigeria, which joined up, need
more funds.

Through the TSCTP, the U.S. government wanted not only to fight the Islamists on the battlefield, but also take on their extremist ideology. To this end, USAID got some funds to help revise textbooks, pay for schools that teach a ‘tolerant ideology’ and run rural radio stations ‘by broadcasting moderate views and providing information on government services.’ The money for these non-military functions was available in 2005 and 2007, but not in 2006. Because of this fluctuation, according to the General Accounting Office of the U.S. government, ‘the mission suspended its peace-building program in northern Mali.’

All attention focused on the military aspect, although even here there is some uneasiness. The U.S. Embassy in Bamako was quick to point out that this $5 million for the trucks and other military hardware comes not for the U.S. military, but from the U.S. State Department. Although, State is not the only one involved; from April to June this year, three hundred U.S. Special Forces ‘advisers’ trained the Malian military at three of its bases. These Sahelian initiatives are now run through Africom, the U.S. African Command, set up in October 2007. It operates a program called Joint Task Force Aztec Silence. The Cowboys are playing Cortez in the desert. The ‘Silence’ after Aztec is chilling.

The insurgents in northern Mali are various. The longest tension is between the Malian government and the ‘Taureg rebels.’ The Tauregs are the Berbers nomads of the Sahara, who live across the boundaries of the countries that make up northern Africa. Known as the ‘Blue Men of the Desert’ for their indigo robes, the Tauregs have faced a challenge to their independence and to their livelihood. The former has come from the attempt first by the colonial states and then by the new national states to integrate them into the state structure (and to fix international borders, to which the Tauregs scoff). The latter came from a century long deterioration of the land around the desert, of the long drought that has changed the Taureg’s ability to conduct their form of pastoralism (this is one of the major problems that effects Darfur, as has been so keenly brought out by Mahmood Mamdani in Saviors and Survivors).

The Tauregs have a long history of struggle with the Malian state, starting in 1962 in the Adrar N’Fughas mountains, when the Tauregs resented the attempt to bring them under the control of the newly independent state. A history of rebellion against the French had only strengthened their resolve to protect their way of life, and only a concerted military campaign by the new Malian state forged an uneasy peace. The droughts of 1968, 1974, 1980 and 1985 devastated the pastoral way of life, sending the proud Taureg peoples south to seek livelihood in the cities of Mali. Libya’s oil wealth was able to absorb many of the migrant Tauregs, who joined its military and its informal labor force.

A second rebellion opened up in 1990, and quickly the Malian state realized that a military solution was not possible. The government and the Tauregs signed the Accords of Tamanrasset, which led to a National Pact in 1992. The basic position was that the state would make a commitment to decentralization, and to some kind of development (between 1968 and 1990, Mali spent only 17% of its total infrastructural funds in
the north; between 1991 and 1993, it spent 48% of its funds in the region). But was this development always a chimera?

Mali came out of colonial rule in devastation. Nothing was left to it. The colonial Office du Niger indulged a fantasy, trying to recreate the inland Niger Delta into a cotton-growing region. Corvée labor and forcible relocation of the peasantry were the more ghastly sides of the process, but the structural point is that Mali was rendered into agriculture with little value-added processing or industry as part of its colonial development (the story of the colonial era is accessibly told in Monica van Beusekom’s 2002 study, Negotiating Development: African Farmers and Colonial Experts at the Office du Niger, 1920-1960). Mali’s ‘independence’ came with severe constraints.

The French were ejected, and a popular government led by the charismatic Modibo Kéita came to power. But the country was dependent on one crop (cotton) for more than half its GDP, it had little processing and industry and almost no sources of energy (all the oil is imported, and the hydroelectric plants at Kayes and Sotuba are much too modest for the needs of consumer consumption, not to mention industrial development). Poor soils and lack of access to water in the northern part of Mali put pressure on the agricultural side, and Mali’s distance from the sea (1400 miles on either end for this landlocked country) make it hard to take its agricultural products to the market. Further, the cotton subsidy regime in both Europe and the United States strike to the heart of Mali’s attempt to grow its already dismal economy.

Kéita turned the planning ministry over to Jean-Marie Koné, a moderate and not a Marxist, who had put his own stamp on the process. By 1965, Samir Amin had already concluded that the gap between Mali’s plan and its implementation had called into question the entire ‘planning function’ (Trois expériences africaines de développement: le Mali, le Guinée et le Ghana, Paris, 1965). Kéita was not given a chance. General Moussa Traoré left the barracks in 1968 and ended Mali’s first experiment with democracy. But Keita’s government did start a process that allowed Mali to become self-sufficient in cereal production by the early 1970s. That ended in the mid-1970s. If Malian socialism had been permitted some more time, it might have produced a model for a small land-locked country.

Traoré had none of Kéita’s imagination, and none of the socialist movements’ patience with devolution of power. When things turned bad, he went to Washington. The World Bank welcomed him in 1981, and Mali became the test case for its ‘structural adjustment’ policies. Ten years of grief for the Malian people came to an end in 1991 when a political movement removed Traoré and replaced him with another Man in Green. The tide had turned against the military, which handed over power in 1992 to the Alliance for Democracy in Mali. Its leader, Alpha Oumar Konaré became President.

Konaré cut his teeth in Kéita’s era as a student leader, and then as a member in the Marxist-Leninist Parti malien du travail, later joining Traoré’s regime as a minister and then throwing himself into the creation of a civil society (as editor of a cultural outfit, Jamana, as a newspaper editor and as founder of Radio Bamako). Mali inherited a criminal debt, over $3 billion, much of it driven up during the military rule. Sixty percent of Mali’s fiscal receipts went toward debt servicing. Salaries could not be paid. Konaré’s hands were tied. As one of his associates told Howard French of the New York Times, ‘We service our country’s debt on time every month, never missing a penny, and all the time the people are getting poorer and poorer.’ Konaré, now a liberal, begged the United States and Europe to either forgive the debt or restructure it. No development in the North could occur to bring peace to Mali, with the National Pact of 1992 in danger of being impoverished economically and politically. Washington held fast. Moral hazard was the name of the game. George Moose, Clinton’s Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, caviled, ‘virtue is its own reward.’ How could Mali be bailed out? That would set a bad example for the rest of the indebted countries.

In 1995, Howard French reported from Bamako for the New York Times, ‘Diplomats also speak of this large landlocked country as a bulwark against the spread of Islamic militancy from its northern neighbor, Algeria. Already Mali faces a destabilizing conflict involving Taureg tribesmen in the north, but any settlement has been thwarted by a lack of resources. At the same time, Mali’s debt burden, contracted under years of dictatorship, consumes so much of the country’s revenues that there is little left for development needs.’ The point was clearly made. No one listened. Konaré could not move any agenda. He left office in
2002, and went to the African Union. His successor is equally despondent.

But unlike Konaré, the current President Amadou Toumani Touré is a former military General. Ruling outside a political party, Touré has been equally unable to find a way out of Mali’s structural debt crisis. The festering unrest in the north continues. In 2006, Taureg rebels took two military bases in Kidal and Menaka. The government hastily conducted a peace deal (the Algiers Accord), making all those tired promises of development once more. In January 2009, the battle in the north recommenced with the Malian military moving against the camps of the Taureg leader, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, who was not part of the Algiers Accord. Bamako hopes to bring all parties to the table, although this kind of armed attack reduces confidence among the Taureg, and might move some to the AQIM and its offshoots (at least they have a trade that pays well).

The AQIM, despite the swagger of its leadership, has become a kind of trans-Saharan gang. Kidnapping of tourists is a source of its revenue: it demanded five million pounds for two Austrian tourists, who were freed in November 2008 (Austria denies that it paid the ransom). Certainly AQIM is now a major player in regional arms smuggling, and in drug running, the two growth industries in areas devastated by drought and debt. There is a suggestion that AQIM has sent militants to Iraq, but these numbers are very low, if they are at all true. The bulk of ‘foreign fighters’ in the Iraqi insurgency come from the Mashriq, the states of the Arabian peninsula in the main and Jordan. The AQIM is a criminal gang. Algeria, Libya and Mali should be able to form a regional process to disband them.

Touré is playing a double game: he has pledged to start a ‘total struggle’ against the terrorists, but won’t release his troops unless they are better equipped and trained by the United States. It wants air power (a reminder of the time when the Italians bombed the Berber with the view that the bombs ‘had a wonderful effect on the morale of the Arabs,’ according to the Italian air commandante in charge of the 1911 operation). Touré is using the AQIM threat to consolidate his power, and to bring in the cash. More money is on offer for counterterrorism than for development.

Washington’s counterterrorism spectacles see only al-Qaeda. The debt burden and the impossibility of governance are not on the agenda. Whether the State Department or the Defense Department give arms to the Malian military says more about the anxiety in the U.S. than about the dynamic in Mali. Once more the U.S. will strengthen the military against civil society, and once more we might see Mali fall the way of Guinea and others in the region that were set up to become dictatorships. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton quite rightly called the mass rapes by the Guinean military ‘criminality of the greatest degree.’ If better sense does not prevail, not long from now we might read of similar atrocities at the Modibo Kéita Sports Stadium in Bamako.
In a recent article, Washington columnist David Ignatius (2009) smugly concludes that ‘we have an enemy that makes even more mistakes than we do’, and because of that, al-Qaida’s extremist ideology has been and will continue to be a failure. I wonder if the three Spaniards, two Italians and one Frenchman currently held hostage by those claiming to belong to al-Qaida au Maghreb Islamique (AQMI) in the Malian Sahara would agree.

It is unlikely that you will have heard of these kidnappings in West Africa, three separate incidents occurring over six weeks in November and December. While the French researcher was taken from his Mali hotel the night of Nov. 26, the others were ambushed on roadways in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The Spaniard was kidnapped 160 kilometres north of the nation’s capital, Nouakchott, on 29 November, and the Italian in the far southeast near the Malian border on 18 December.

On 29 November, I was doing field research in that southeastern region, less than a kilometre from the Malian border. Despite the fact that Nouakchott and the location of the attack were at least 1,300 km away, local officials were very nervous about our presence, and harassed us about our travelling. Ten days later, these concerns for our safety appeared justified. So too did the rumours we’d heard about al-Qaida activity along the porous Malian-Mauritanian borders.

At the time, I responded to someone who asked if my family and friends back home would be worried when they heard the news: ‘No, because they won’t; there won’t be any news’. There was an odd sort of comfort in that assertion at the time. But as I reflect upon it in light of subsequent events, including the recent Nigerian attempt to blow up an American airliner, I realize there is a problem in our not knowing.

It comes back to Ignatius’s conclusion about al-Qaida’s ‘failure’.

For him and many others, the ‘Middle East’ is Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, extending recently to Pakistan and now Yemen. The issues are 9/11, wars (or potential wars) in and/or with the above, and the fate of the United States. Mauritania? Mali? Not on the radar. The AQMI? Ditto. Spain? Italy? Good vacation destinations. Even France is seldom accorded attention these days. But the kidnappers holding the European hostages belonging to these ‘non-important nations’ see things differently. They justify their actions in terms of the support these countries provided in Iraq and Afghanistan. Currently, they are only negotiating for the Spaniards, demanding $7 million US and the release of some al-Qaida prisoners. Mali has been tasked with facilitating the negotiations, but they have not gone

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well. Although all governments publicly espouse the opinion that the West cannot give in to terrorist blackmail, rumours abound that ransom payments have been negotiated in other Saharan situations. Kidnapping is widely seen as profitable.

And not only for al-Qaida. How do kidnappers and hostages travel hundreds of kilometres through desert and the Sahel region of Africa, chased by local military and surveyed by expensive western equipment (installed as part of the U.S.’s war on terror) with impunity? True, they seem to have tapped into the well-entrenched trans-Saharan contraband and drug-trafficking network, but they have done so thanks to handsome cash payments made to local people desperate to escape poverty. Dollars are dollars, whether they facilitate the transport of cigarettes, hashish — or hostages.

However, there is one important difference in Mauritania: trucks transporting tax-free tobacco had no effect on what was becoming the country’s most important industry — tourism; seemingly random kidnappings of westerners has. And that’s not all. In the summer, an American NGO worker was assassinated in Nouakchott’s central market and only weeks later, a suicide bomber attacked the French embassy not far away. International travel advisories flagged Mauritania as high-risk, ‘essential travel only’.

The impact on tourism was immediate. Air routes were cancelled or itineraries altered to piggyback on other countries’ priorities. Cash-cow charters to ‘ancient desert cities’ are as dry as the wadis they overlook; flights now leave and arrive at 2 and 3 a.m., underscoring Mauritania’s new marginalized position for all potential visitors, including businessmen. What kind of investment, especially much-needed development investment, is attracted to a high-risk, terrorist-active, ‘Islamic’ republic accessible to the world only in the wee hours of the morning?

Most ordinary Mauritanians have no idea why they are being ‘targeted’ by Islamists who blow themselves up and kidnap, and by the West, which isolates and impoverishes them. They recently embarked upon democratization after having lived under military and dictatorial rule for most of their almost half-century of independence (Mauritania was carved from the former French West Africa in 1960). The current president, Gen. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, elected in July 2009, was involved in the last two coups d’etat, including that of the first elected president in 2008. He fought his campaign as ‘the president for the poor’ who could bring security to the country. An assassination, a suicide bombing, two kidnapping incidents and an economy that barely deserves the name — this fledgling democracy is in trouble. If a retired general with the support of the military whose priority is to care for the poor can’t protect people or property, then perhaps it is the democratic system that is at fault.

It is not necessarily al-Qaida ideology that is succeeding or failing but al-Qaida dollars (reflected in schools and health clinics) and al-Qaida strength in the face of weakening governments that is attracting the support. Mistakes they may be making — but when we see how Mauritania and others are experiencing al-Qaida’s tactics and their consequences, we would be rash to assume that we are looking at ‘failure’ in the near future.

References

Introduction by Stephen Chan

AFRICOM brings together three separate US military commands. Militarization of Africa is being co-ordinated by AFRICOM. It was established by President George Bush, following the war on terror and to serve other US interests. AFRICOM will also reflect on new doctrines of counterinsurgency and that means militarization as well as taking on developmental functions too.

I will make three brief points. My first point is based on the War on Terror and prosecution of US interests – the way I look at what happened in Ethiopia and Somalia, for instance. Ethiopians initiated an action which took them into Mogadishu. I see that as a great disaster. This action was cleared by Washington, which seemed to be oblivious to the long standing enmities and military actions that have taken place between the two countries over the years. They were oblivious also to the fact that the Ethiopian army still functions along Warsaw pact lines, which means their attack on Mogadishu was always going to take place ‘tank first’ to destroy huge sections of the city. What it has done is to form a hardened cadre in southern areas of Somalia of more fundamental Islamic groups. In other words, it has created a rod with which to beat people’s backs rather than solved any of the new problems of the poor in terms of the normal enunciation of US interests.

My second point is on development. If this is going to have a developmental function, what on earth is that
Is AFRICOM here to stay? I’m afraid it is just like EU-COM: here to stay. Will it do any good? I will leave that to our speakers. Will the Africans have their say? I hope so.

The debate will be led by two speakers. The first is Daniel Volman and then Jeremy Keenan.

Daniel Volman is the director of the African Security Research Project in Washington DC, a member of the board of directors of the US Association of Concerned African Scholars (ACAS) and is a specialist on US security policy in Africa. He has been working on this field now for some three decades.

Jeremy Keenan will be known to a number of you as a professorial research associate here at SOAS. He is an anthropologist and an authority on the Sahara. He has written a number of articles and books in recent years on US approaches to counter terrorism in Africa. Jeremy has asked me to apologise for him: he may have to present sitting down as the years he spent tramping around the Sahara carrying his supplies has done some ‘interesting things’ to his back.

Contribution by Daniel Volman

I want to thank Stephen, SOAS and the Royal Africa Society for organising and hosting this event. I am going to be talking in fairly general terms about AFRICOM-leaving as much time as possible for Q&A. I have written extensively on the subject for last thirty years. If you need facts, figures and data, you can go to my website. I will leave my business cards on the desk. If want to follow up on this you can contact me directly.
1990s were relatively minimal, were actually handled by separate Commands. Like most American military activities in Africa they were conducted through European Command because for the most part the US thought they could rely on their European allies to handle any crisis with their own forces. The US was busy pursuing its global rivalry with the Soviet Union, engaged in the Korean or Vietnam war or in other various military projects in Latin America, as well as forming new relations with Asia. They felt Africa could safely be left in the hands of European allies. But that began to change in the late 1990s: Africa was now of direct importance to the US national security policy.

What is the AFRICOM mission? US policy makers have gone to great lengths to obscure and, to put it bluntly, deceive people about what AFRICOM is for. They talk a lot about African peace keeping operations, humanitarian relief operations and the like, but the people directly appointed to run AFRICOM, General William Ward, commander of AFRICOM, and his deputy director Vice Admiral Robert Moeller, are under no illusions about what their primary mission is. When they were first appointed and confirmed to office it never occurred to them not to tell the truth. And so in the statement they made in 2008, they talked about US interests in oil and concerns about terrorism in Africa. Since that time they have been pulled to one side and told not be so honest about Africa in public. They are now going much more closely to the official line on AFRICOM, which is to demonstrate a benign US interest in Africa. This is the line which has been most prominently proclaimed by the deputy Secretary of Defence for Africa, Theresa Whelan who held office until the turn of this year and was the highest ranking person in the defence department. She was charged with responsibility of creating AFRICOM. In public she never said anything about the true mission of AFRICOM, but unfortunately other members of the military didn’t know that they weren’t supposed to blow the cover. So, they actually quoted in their own publication statements that she made in a briefing to European command where all she talked about was oil, resources, terrorism, lines of communications access to bases etc. So, people who actually run military activities in Africa, although they will now be much more careful in public not to say these things, were never under any illusion as to what their primary missions were.

What is AFRICOM actually doing in Africa to fulfil these missions? Well, first of all, it’s carrying out a whole series of activities which are designed to strengthen the ability of key African regimes to stay in power, through arm sales and providing military training programmes by American military personnel travelling to America and training African military forces. There are also American military training programmes that bring African military officers to the US for training, as well as various other security assistance programmes to strengthen the military capability of, first of all, regimes — usually oppressive undemocratic regimes — which control countries which are primary sources of oil and other resources. I am thinking countries like Nigeria, Algeria, Angola, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, (the list of major oil producing countries is fairly long), as well as countries which have been willing and able to serve as proxies for the US on the global war on terror, particularly Kenya and Ethiopia. With regards to Somalia it is a primary area of concern for America. In North Africa, countries like Algeria, Chad, Mali and Niger are known as the Trans Sahara Counter-Terrorism region with regards to the perceived threat of terrorism.

But professional military officers who run US military activities in Africa know that this is a strategy which is likely to fail over time. You can only keep these regimes in power for so long, as they tend to collapse with the growing movement of democratisation in Africa or simply fragment and self destruct, which is a primary concern for the Pentagon. The day may come when the US may have to use its own forces to intervene directly in Africa. It is the same trajectory as we have seen in the Middle East under the US Central Command, which was established in essentially the same way in 1979. Central Command was created to fulfill the pledge made by President Jimmy Carter that the United States would be willing to use military force if necessary to protect the free flow of oil out of the Persian Gulf. And the pledge that has been known as the Carter doctrine has been the basis of US military involvement in the Middle East ever since. Central command started out as a small headquarters based in Florida. It had no control over or command of troops, but as I am sure you are all well aware it’s now running two major wars in the Middle East and major military bases in the region.

AFRICOM is essentially following the same trajectory. In addition to the assistance already mentioned, there has been a dramatic build up of US naval forces off the coast of Africa, particularly off the oil rich coast of
Guinea and also off the coast of Somalia. The US has established, essentially as part of Central Command, a base on the African continent in Djibouti, which originally focused on US involvement in the Middle East but is becoming increasingly focused over time on the Horn of Africa and East Africa. It’s the base from which the US launches military strikes into Somalia, for example. In addition the US has concluded what are known as ‘access agreements’. It’s understood that its not desirable for the US to build a lot of expensive highly visible military bases around Africa. Rather, what they need is access to as many local military facilities as possible. The US therefore concluded these base access agreements with governments right across the continent, because it has no way of knowing which part of Africa it might have to intervene in directly. What the US needs is access to as many different bases as possible. And, when asked if it has a base in Botswana or Ghana, it will say ‘no we don’t have bases in those countries’. And technically these people are telling the truth, but what they aren’t obviously going on to explain is that we have already reached agreements with governments in those countries, in that anytime we want to we can use their military bases. The US has the capability to set up very large military bases literally in a matter of 24-48 hours and that’s essentially what happens when an American president visits an African country. They take along a US military base with them and establish it for the duration of the trip and then remove it when they leave. They bring in thousands and thousands of marines for security, they bring in whole stock piles of military equipment and other supplies. They bring in their own power generating system because they know they can’t rely on local power grids; they bring along sophisticated communication equipment systems because they need to communicate back and forth with Washington. In addition to that they have begun doing contingency planning and other preparations for direct military intervention in Africa. It’s not because of the fact that they want to do this, but they understand that the time is coming when they are going to get the order to do this.

One important example of this was at what is known as a war games scenario, which was conducted by the US Army War College in May 2008. They had never done these scenarios for Africa before, but it was part of the build up to the inauguration of AFRICOM. In spring 2008 they did a total of four scenarios, with two of them for Africa. One of those was Somalia, although we don’t know very much about that because the people involved in it didn’t have much to say in public about it. But the people who were involved in the Nigeria scenario were so disturbed by the prospects they were facing that they went very public with a lot of detailed information about those scenarios. First of all the scenario was set in the year 2013, five years from now, and what it anticipated was that all oil supplies coming in from Nigeria would be coming to an end. That would mean that the US would lose access to roughly 10% of its oil imports. A lot of oil would still be coming to the US, but the loss of 10% of America’s total oil imports would thoroughly disrupt the US economy. People would go to their gas station and there would be no gasoline. People would go to their stores and there would no food because it’s all brought in on trucks. More and more of it is brought in to the US on ships. The US depends on access to petroleum, so they understood the implications if that happened. What they were thinking in terms of was not that the disruption was caused by MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) or insurgent movements in Nigeria, but by the fragmentation and destruction of the Nigerian government, which they considered was bent on committing suicide. What they anticipated was that the government would fragment, with the situation degenerating into a struggle for control of the oil resources and various elements of the Nigerian government. The Nigerian military would start fighting for control of the Niger Delta and that is what would bring Nigeria’s oil production to a halt, at which point the president of the US would essentially have two options, in their point of view. They explored all alternatives, such as getting the South Africans to intervene, or maybe the CIA could find a way to reach a resolution, but they eventually concluded that there were really only two options. One is that the President of the United States could get up in front of the American people and say there’s no gasoline at the gas stations and there’s nothing I can do about it, which would of course be political suicide for any President. The other alternative they could see was for the US to send 20,000 American troops into the Niger Delta in the hope that somehow they could get the oil flowing again. But these guys are not stupid people; they know that this is an impossible mission for the military. There’s no way that the military could get the oil flowing again—it would be impossible to protect with military force. But they could see that under these circumstances there would be irresistible pressure on any American president to send American troops to Nigeria.
In my opinion, this is why they went very public about this kind of information. They were really hoping, by alerting the American public about what was coming, that somehow pressure could be brought to bear on whoever is running the US whenever that happens to make sure that they never got that order, because they really understand how futile and crazy such a military adventure would be. They don’t want to think about it, they don’t want to be engaged in direct military interventions at that time. They can see that day coming.

That brings us to what has changed or not changed since President Obama came into office. He came into office, elected just after the official inaugurations of African Command. All the evidence I see is that he has essentially decided to continue on the same trajectory established under the Clinton and Bush administration. In his budget proposal for the fiscal year 2010, which began in Oct 2009, he asked for more money for arms to be sent to African regimes, more money for military training, more money for the operations of AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, more money for bases in Djibouti, more money for the naval operations off the oil rich coast of Guinea. And that was in addition to everything else that was contained in the budget. When Secretary of State Hilary Clinton went to Africa and made a tour of African countries, it was significant that virtually every single country she toured was a primary recipient of military assistance; countries like Kenya, South Africa, Angola, Nigeria. In addition, after discussions with Nigeria and the Nigerian military, she stated that the Obama administration would do whatever it could to fulfill its pledges within the budget request. She came out and said, in addition to everything we have promised to the Nigerians, if they have any more requests for military equipment to be used specifically in the Niger Delta, the US would be perfectly willing to provide that. It gives you a sense of how the trajectory is going to be continued and the dangers it poses for Africa, but also for the US as well because of all its military activity. In my opinion, first of all, this kind of military activity puts oil resources in jeopardy and strengthens the threat of terrorism. That’s what the people at the Pentagon understand. So, beyond that, it will inevitably lead to the day when the US will be forced to go into combat in Africa and take responsibility for the young men and women under their command, which they take very seriously. They don’t want to see them coming back in body bags from a disastrous military intervention they foresee happening in countries like Nigeria.

Contribution given by Jeremy Keenan

I want to start by welcoming Daniel to this country and to say how much I appreciate him as a colleague and a scholar of immense stature in Washington. I have shared several platforms with him, but this is the first time over here, so I give him a big welcome.

However, I fear that today might be the parting of the ways. That is not because I disagree with anything he says. On the contrary, I support his work totally. Rather, it is because I have been replaced from contributing to a new book, which both Daniel and I were contributing to, about AFRICOM. Its title is US strategy in Africa, AFRICOM, Terrorism and Security Challenges in Africa, being published by Routledge. On Monday, three days ago, I had some interesting telephone calls from their editor, basically telling me that my chapter was being withdrawn from the book. After a little beating around the bush we decided that this was political censorship. I was told I was being replaced by General ‘Kip’ Ward (Head of Africom), so at least I have been replaced by a General and also a Colonel, Col Kelly Langdorf. So, you have a General and a Colonel replacing a Professor of SOAS, which is probably about the right equivalence.

I see that Daniel is still left in as a contributor to the book and has clearly been approved, which makes me wonder what I have written that warrants censorship? Of course, the result of being censored is that the chapter will be around the world like chocolate cakes and will be read by ‘millions’ more than if it had been in a fairly boring textbook! My answer to the question of why I have been censored is that I provide a bit more explanation as to why AFRICOM was established, which, as Daniel has correctly said, was really all about the US oil crisis. But it also had to do with problems that America had in 2002 and 2003 with the War on Terror, which the US was using at that time to legitimise its military engagement in Africa.

It is all very well to use the pretext of the global War on Terror to secure Africa, but with the exceptions of the bombings of the two US Embassies in East Africa in 1998 that Daniel mentioned, there has been very little terrorism in Africa as a whole — certainly not in the regions where the oil is! However on the other side of the continent, what I might call the ‘oil side’, we get, beginning in 2002 and 2003, the fabrication of terrorism, centred on Algeria but then spreading across the...
Sahel and eventually linking in 2005 with Nigeria. The way in which this terrorism was fabricated is a very long narrative, which I don’t have time to go into here except to say that I have written two volumes on it. The first volume, *The Dark Sahara: America’s war on terror in Africa*, is here and you can buy it tonight. That whole long narrative was conducted by the Algerian secret military intelligence services — the DRS. It was conducted and orchestrated by the DRS, but with the knowledge and collusion of the US. In essence, they took 32 Europeans hostage and claimed it to be the work of Islamic extremists. They took the hostages through southern Algeria and then into Mali, the Sahel.

It was this operation that provided the pretext for the launch of a new front on the War on Terror in Africa: the Sahara-Sahelian front. How do I know the details of this? The simple answer is because I was there. I was in contact with every single party involved in the operation, including the Algerian intelligence and police services, the gendarmerie and military, as well as the hostages (after their release!), as well as people in the US at the Pentagon and the State Department who have corroborated key elements of what I am saying. Much of this corroboration is in my second volume, *The Dying Sahara*, coming out in Spring.

What was the US up to? It was part of an operation some of you may know of already, namely the Pro-active Pre-emptive Operations Group, known as the P2OG, or ‘Pee-Twos’ as some people call it. This was basically a secret, covert programme which was proposed by the Defence Science Board, a think-tank for the Pentagon, in June 2002 to infiltrate, flush out or even fabricate terrorism. The P2OG documents found their way into the public domain a few months later and were subsequently corroborated by Seymour Hersch in the US, and more recently by Nafeez Ahmed who wrote about it in the New Internationalist last month.

The first ‘pilot’ test of the P2OG was here in the Algerian Sahara and Sahel in 2002 and 2003. So, we have this very duplicious, highly criminal background of fabricated of terrorism to legitimise a new front on the War on Terror in Africa and hence the US’s militarisation of the continent. You will find countless reports of it if you dig into the media, especially into those stories that are focused on the vast, ‘ungoverned’ areas of Africa: Mali, Niger and Southern Algeria where this narrative took place.

I will move on now into the Obama era. If we take the few months running up to Obama’s election, there was a certain fear amongst AFRICOM people. With a new President coming into office, there was an anxiety amongst AFRICOM personnel that AFRICOM might get cut or even disbanded altogether. There was therefore a feeling during 2008 amongst certain elements of AFRICOM that they needed to deliver some sort of military success, because they hadn’t really done that. They needed to prove that they were correct in their assessment of the War on Terror and on the threats facing the continent. So, they did two things. One was to attack the Lords Resistance Army, which was a complete shambles – a disaster.

The second was on the counter terrorism front, where we have seen over the last twelve months a remarkable parallel with, almost a complete re-run of what I have just glossed over, namely the 2003 hostage takings in Algeria and Mali. What is interesting is that the people who have taken ‘westerners’ hostage this year (there were eight in three groups, with one of them, a British tourist, being murdered) were the same people who took the hostages in 2003. Although the name has changed from GSPC (Groupe salafiste pour le prédication et le combat) to AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb), it is essentially the same organisation, heavily infiltrated by the Algerian secret intelligence service (DRS [Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité, Department of Intelligence and Security, i.e., military intelligence]) and with its key leaders (emirs) linked to the DRS. In fact, the murder of the British hostage, Edwin Dyer, in May 2008 was undertaken by the second-in-command (Abdelhamed abou Zaïd) of the 2003 operation. So, the last twelve months has seen an almost complete replay of the 2003 operation. And, once again, the US has used these new hostage-takings to justify its presence in Africa and AFRICOM’s intervention in the Sahel region by saying that Al Qaeda is expanding in Niger, Mali and southern Algeria. The details of all this are in *The Dying Sahara*.

This latest scenario of ‘terrorist’ activities has been acted out in this part of the Sahara for other specific reasons: it contains the world’s second largest uranium deposits, and is a fundamental resources for France, supplying its electricity industry, which is 80 percent nuclear, with its uranium. It is also the region which will carry the central section of the proposed Trans-Saharan gas pipeline (TSGP) from Nigeria to Algeria. In other words, the nexus of where all this supposed Al
Qaeda activity is going on is actually one of the most important strategic energy locations in the world today. It is therefore interesting to note, but perhaps not surprising, that this latest batch of hostage-taking has drawn the UK’s counter terrorism people into the area, along with those of France and Spain, all of whom have major vested interests in these resources. A couple of months or so ago, we even had Scotland Yard opening a new office on North West Africa! I have been in correspondence with London mayor, Boris Johnson, asking him what the London police are doing in Timbuktu, but he has not yet come back to me with a satisfactory answer.

The last question I would like to comment on is whether President Obama actually knows what is being done in his name in Africa. I don’t think so. One reason for that is because he has massive problems on the home front. No matter how important Africa might be to America’s future, it is not going to be high on his agenda while he is faces so many domestic problems. My second reason is perhaps more important. I put the question: Who is advising him? His National Security Advisor, appointed by Obama himself, is General James Jones: smart, intelligent and touted as a future presidential candidate. General Jones was SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander for Europe) and head of US EUCOM (US European Command). The terrorism of 2002-2003 that I have mentioned above and which was fabricated in Algeria took place on General Jones’s watch. It is extremely unlikely that such a delicate operation would have been undertaken without his knowledge, especially as top US generals actually visited the area. I know, because I was there at the time of their visit. Now that General Jones is the NSA to President Obama, it is unlikely that he will blow the whistle on the peccadilloes of his past.

I would therefore like to give Obama the benefit of the doubt, certainly at the international level. America, as Daniel has said, is clearly continuing the AFRICOM polices of this predecessor, but I would put a question mark on whether Obama has actually been fully briefed on what is being done.