
Postcolonial Imperialism in Africa's Maghreb and Sahel

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This chapter focuses on the post-9/11 period in north west (NW) Africa's Maghreb and Sahel, a region that includes much of the Sahara. President George Bush's 'global war on terror' (GWOT) has been described, quite correctly, 'as merely an extension of the defence of the capitalist market' (Lal 2004:211).¹ This has certainly been the case in Africa where 9/11 and the ensuing GWOT have played a key role in facilitating what I refer to as the renewed imperialization of the continent. It has been most clearly demonstrated in the way in which the GWOT was rolled out across the Sahara-Sahel region of NW Africa during the years 2002-2005 and then revamped and re-energized in 2006 with the creation of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

There are three key strategic players in this latest phase of postcolonial imperialism in this part of Africa: the US, manifest through what Noam Chomsky has called America's 'grand design', Algeria, Washington's key ally and the region's most powerful sub-hegemon, and the European powers, most notably France. All three are characterized by their strategic use of terrorism, or, to be more precise, state and fabricated terrorism. Most commentators and analysts would add another player, namely Al Qaeda, to this threesome. But, as AQIM is primarily a construct of Algeria's secret intelligence services, the *Département du renseignement et de la sécurité* (DRS), I will not treat it as a separate player, at least for the moment. However, since the events of July 2010 to which I refer below, it is conceivable that AQIM might come to take on a life and dynamic of its own, independent of Algeria's DRS.

There are also three other sets of players who may play more significant and perhaps even determining roles in the not too distant future. These are the three weaker states of the region, namely Mauritania, Mali and Niger, who are currently

showing signs of resentment at Algeria's duplicity and bullying; Morocco and Libya, who are both intent on challenging Algeria's hegemonic designs in the region, and finally the local peoples, notably the Tuareg, who have been the immediate victims of the GWOT and whose suffering has led them to take up arms (2007-2009) in both Niger and Mali and to now threaten, once again, to take matters into their own hands.

The net outcome of the strategic objectives and actions of these three main parties – the US, Algeria and France (Europe) – has been to transform this vast region of Africa, some 1.5 million square miles (and twice that if the entire Maghreb is included), from a state of relative political quiescence and 'pacificity' into a zone of increasing political instability, insecurity and conflagration, or what the US military maps of Africa have branded since 2003 as a 'Terror Zone'.² This catastrophic plunge, over a period of 8-9 years, from a state of near-order to one of near-chaos was epitomized in July 2010 when France, the former colonial power across this entire region, declared war – in language reminiscent of George Bush's declaration of 'war on terror' – on AQIM.

I will deal with each of these three in turn, beginning with the US, followed by Algeria, France and other European powers, with final comments on the prospective roles of the hitherto lesser players, Mauritania, Mali and Niger, and, by no means least, the Tuareg population of the region, whose resistance to both AQIM and other incursive and exploitative interests in their region, notably international mining capital, could become decisive.

The US 'Grand Design' in Africa

The US's growing interest in Africa, reflected in the establishment of AFRICOM as a fully unified combat command on 1 October 2008, did not come about overnight, but was, as AFRICOM's website told us at the time, 'the culmination of a 10-year thought process within the Department of Defense'.³ That 'thought process' began in 1997, a landmark year in contemporary US history for two related reasons. First, it saw the founding of the neoconservatives' 'Project for the New American Century' (PNAC 1997). Second, it saw US dependency on foreign oil reaching the psychologically critical 50 per cent. The threat posed to national security by the latter development was not lost on the 'neocons'. They made it an election issue in 2000, with George W. Bush pledging to make energy security a top priority.

One of the new President's first executive decisions on taking office was to establish a National Energy Policy Development (NEPD) Group under the Chairmanship of his Vice-President, Dick Cheney. The 'Cheney Report' was published in May 2001 (National Energy Policy Group 2001). Its findings were stark: between 1991 and 2000, Americans had used 17 per cent more energy than in the previous decade, while domestic energy production had risen by only 2.3

per cent. It projected that US energy consumption by 2020 would increase by about 32 per cent, with the oil share remaining at around 40 per cent, more than a quarter of the world's total consumption (Keenan 2009:116-131).

With Saudi Arabian oil output appearing to plateau and possibly even decline, along with the security risk posed by dependency on oil from the Gulf region, the Cheney Report singled out sub-Saharan Africa as the key source of future US oil supplies. It forecast that by 2015, 25 per cent of US imported oil would come from the Gulf of Guinea. Some subsequent forecasts have put this figure at 35 per cent.⁴

While the crisis engendered by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US may have diverted public concern and attention away from the Cheney Report, the Pentagon, now effectively driving US foreign policy, had certainly not relegated it to the archives. In January 2002, Ed Royce, The Republican Chairman of the House of Representatives' Africa sub-committee, called for African oil to 'be treated as a priority for US national security post-9/11' (Institute for Advanced Strategic & Political Studies 2002). In April, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs Michael Westphal stressed that 'Africa matters to the United States' (Department of Defense 2002), pointing out that Africa was already supplying 14 per cent of US oil imports and had the potential to increase that amount substantially over the next decade. In June, US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Walter Kansteiner told a Nigerian audience that 'African oil is of strategic national interest to us' and that 'it will increase and become very important as we go forward' (Akosah-Sarpong 2002:10).⁵

9/11 was the PNAC's 'second Pearl Harbour'. It presented the neocons, who now effectively controlled the Pentagon, under the hierarchy of Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, and many of the other high reaches of the US Administration, with the opportunity that they sought. The launch of a GWOT provided the ideological means to secure the militarization of those regions, such as Africa, that US imperial interests required. Indeed, the Bush administration had already defined African oil as a 'strategic national interest' and thus a resource that the US might choose military force to control (Volman 2003). Thus, rather than acknowledge that US military intervention in Africa was about resource control, the Bush administration was able to use the pretext of the GWOT for justifying its militarization of Africa and securing access to and control over its oil.⁶

However, launching the GWOT in Africa was tricky, as most of the continent, especially sub-Saharan Africa, had hitherto scarcely suffered the atrocities of terrorism. The main terrorism incidents in Africa had been concentrated in Somalia, East Africa and the Maghreb, far from the oil-rich, West African countries surrounding the Gulf of Guinea.⁷

I have described in great detail elsewhere (Keenan 2009, 2013) how the US administration and its key ally, Algeria, overcame the problem posed by the lack of terrorism in Africa by fabricating it. The US colluded with Algeria's DRS in

the abduction of 32 European tourists in the Algerian Sahara in February-March 2003. The 'official' story is that the tourists were captured and held hostage by Islamic extremists belonging to the GSPC (*Groupe salafiste pour le prédication et le combat*). The truth is that the leader of the 'terrorists', whose *nom de guerre* was El Para,⁸ was a DRS agent. Through this and a number of subsequent fabricated incidents in the northern Sahel regions of Mali, Niger and Chad during the course of 2003-4, the Bush administration was able to justify the launch of a Sahara-Sahelian front, or what became known as a 'second front' in the GWOT in Africa.⁹

The idea of creating false flag incidents to justify military intervention is not new in US history. In 1962, for example, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff drew up and approved plans, codenamed Operation Northwoods, that called for CIA and other operatives to commit acts of terrorism on innocent civilians in US cities and elsewhere, thus giving the appearance of a Communist Cuban terror campaign in Miami, other Florida cities and even Washington that would create public support for a war against Fidel Castro's Cuba (Joint Chiefs of Staff 1962).¹⁰ The plan was ultimately rejected by President Kennedy. Forty years later, a not dissimilar plan was presented to the US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, by his Defense Science Board (Department of Defense, Defense Science Board 2002). Excerpts of the DSB's 'Summer Study on Special Operations and Joint Forces in Support of Countering Terrorism' were revealed on 16 August 2002, with Pamela Hess (2002), William Arkin (2002) and David Isenberg (2002), amongst others, publishing further details and analysis of the plan. The DSB recommended the creation of a 'Proactive, Preemptive Operations Group' (P2OG), a covert organisation which would carry out secret missions to 'stimulate reactions' among terrorist groups by provoking them into undertaking violent acts that would expose them to counter-attack by U.S. forces, along with other operations which, through the US military penetration of terrorist groups and the recruitment of local peoples, would dupe them into conducting 'combat operations, or even terrorist activities' (Floyd 2002; Ahmed 2009).

The P2OG Programme raises huge questions about all terrorist actions since 2002, such as the Madrid and London Bombings in March 2004 and July 2005 respectively, as well as the GWOT's Sahara-Sahel front. In his investigation of such operations, Nafeez Ahmed (Ahmed 2009) says that the US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh (Hersh 2005) was told by a Pentagon advisor that the Algerian (El Para) operation was a pilot for the new Pentagon covert P2OG programme. The timing of the developments between Washington and the Algerian Sahara are significant. The P2OG programme 'leak' came two weeks after Marion E. (Spike) Bowman, Deputy General Counsel for the FBI, presented crucial evidence to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in regard to proposed amendments concerning the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (Bowman 2002). Until Bowman's evidence, the American intelligence community

was anxious about working too closely with their Algerian counterparts for fear that they would pass sensitive information to Palestinian organizations. However, Bowman's statement, in which he presented the background and nature of what the FBI called the 'International Jihad Movement', dispelled many of the anxieties about collaborating with the Algerians by showing how close Algeria was to the US in its fight against Al Qaeda and terrorism.

The first attempt to fabricate terrorism in the Sahara-Sahel region was not El Para's operation in 2003, but a similar attempt by alleged Islamists to hijack and abduct four Swiss tourists on 18 October 2002, near Arak in southern Algeria. The operation, however, was botched and the tourists escaped (Keenan 2009:172-4). It is inconceivable, in the light of the very close 'post-Bowman' relationship between US and Algerian intelligence services, that the U.S. could have been unaware of the Arak operation. Why else were two officials from the State Department's Counterterrorism Office¹¹ (i.e. AF DAS Robert Perry and S/CT Deputy Coordinator Stephanie Kinney) simultaneously briefing the governments of Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania on the Bush administration's planned counterterrorism Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI)?¹²

Before the abduction of the 32 tourists in early 2003, there had been no terrorism in the conventional meaning of the term¹³ anywhere in this part of the Sahara-Sahel region. However, by May, with the 32 European hostages making global news headlines, EUCOM's commander, General James (Jim) Jones¹⁴ was speaking of 'large ungoverned areas across Africa that are clearly the new routes of narco trafficking, terrorist training and hotbeds of instability' (*World Tribune* 2003; Schmitt 2003).¹⁵ Indeed, even before the hostages had been released, the Bush administration, in line with General Jones's remarks, had designated the Sahara as a new front in the GWOT. Bush referred to El Para as 'Bin Laden's man in the Sahel', while EUCOM's deputy commander, General Wald, described the Sahara as a 'Swamp of Terror', a 'terrorist infestation', which 'we need to drain' (Powell 2004). More than anything else, it was this abduction of the 32 Europeans, effectively an act of state terrorism, that enabled the Americans to launch this new, fabricated Saharan-Sahelian front in the GWOT and so both create and underpin the ideological conditions for Washington's militarisation of those major parts of Africa that were strategically important to it.¹⁶

President Bush's PSI rolled into action on 10 January 2004 with the disembarkation in Nouakchott, capital of Mauritania, of a U.S. 'anti-terror team' of 500 US troops. U.S. Deputy Under-Secretary of State Pamela Bridgewater, in Nouakchott to oversee what locals called the 'American invasion', confirmed that these troops would work in Mauritania and Mali, while 400 US Rangers would be deployed into the Chad-Niger border regions the following week, along with Los Angeles-based defence contractors Pacific Architects and Engineers.

The US immediately portrayed Africa's new terrorist threat as having spread across the wastelands of the Sahel, from Mauritania in the west, through the little

known desert lands of Mali, Niger and southern Algeria, to the Tibesti Mountains of Chad, with beyond them the Sudan, Somalia and, across the waters, the 'Talibanized' lands of Afghanistan. Shortly after El Para's alleged escapades across the Sahel, western intelligence and diplomatic sources were claiming to be finding the fingerprints of this newly fabricated terrorist threat everywhere. It took only a few days after the Madrid train bombings (11 March 2004) for Western intelligence-security services to link falsely that atrocity to Al Qaeda groups lurking deep in the Sahara and to issue warnings that Al Qaeda bases hidden deep in the world's largest desert could launch terrorist attacks on Europe (Colonel Victor Nelson cited by Fisher-Thompson 2004; General Charles Wald cited by Miles 2004). In 2005, the US expanded the PSI into the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCIT), raising the number of countries involved from four (Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad) to nine with the inclusion of Senegal, Nigeria, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. This enabled Washington to link together two of Africa's main oil- and gas-producing countries, Algeria and Nigeria, along with seven neighbouring Saharan-Sahelian states, into a military security arrangement whose architecture was American.

Algeria's Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives of Algeria in this post-9/11 period, aside from the primary concerns of safeguarding the interests of its ruling regime (including guarantees of immunity from prosecution) that seized power in 1992 after annulling elections that would have brought to power the world's first democratically elected Islamist government, can be considered in three broad categories. These have been: to re-equip and re-establish the army in the wake of the international embargoes that prohibited most countries selling arms to Algeria during its 'Dirty War' of the 1990s; to re-establish its international standing after the 1990s; and to establish itself as the major power in NW Africa, including the Sahel. Whether, or for how long, Algeria will succeed in these objectives, especially the latter, is another question.

The army has played a decisive role in the development of Algeria's post-colonial state, especially through its security establishment, the *mukhabarat*, which holds the country in an iron grip. As the Algerian historian, Mohamed Harbi, remarked: 'Algeria has an army with a state at its service, rather than an army at the service of the state' (Algeria Amnesty Newsletter 2002). Following the cancellation of the 1992 elections and the ensuing 'Dirty War', the United States, European and most other countries were reluctant to sell arms to Algeria for fear of Islamist reprisals and criticisms from human rights groups. The result was that the Algerian army became increasingly under-equipped. As the door of international recognition creaked slightly ajar after Abdelaziz Bouteflika's 'election' to the presidency in 1999, the Algerian army and 'its state' preoccupied themselves with trying to acquire those modern, high-tech weapon systems that it lacked,

notably night-vision devices, sophisticated radar systems, an integrated surveillance system, tactical communications equipment and certain lethal weapon systems. Bouteflika also sought to overcome Algeria's pariah status and re-establish the country's position and reputation in international affairs – perhaps even at the US 'high table'. The Bush administration was seen as being able and likely to deliver on both.

Algeria's seduction of the US began before 9/11. In his visit to Washington in July 2001, Bouteflika and his foreign minister told the Americans all they wanted to hear in their attempt to get the US to double its investment in the Algerian oil sector over the next four years. In US-Algerian relations, they said, 'oil is oil and politics is politics' (Gorguissian 2001). Bouteflika, however, did not lose sight of what he really wanted from Washington. Almost as a harbinger of what was to befall America two months later (9/11), he told President Bush that his country had dealt with the fight against terrorists and that he was now 'seeking specific equipment which would enable us to maintain peace, security and stability in Algeria' (World Tribune 2001). A few days after Bouteflika's Washington visit, the Algerian army Chief of Staff, General Lamari, visited US EUCOM's (European Command) military HQ at Stuttgart where he sought further support for his army's modernisation effort. At the time of the 9/11 attack, the head of Algeria's DRS, General Mohamed Mediène, was actually in the Pentagon building.

9/11 provided both countries with the opportunities that they sought and precipitated a new era in US-Algerian relations. In terms of trying to throw off its pariah status, 9/11 provided Algiers with the horrifically real imagery with which to persuade the world of the correctness of its policy of 'eradication' in its 'dirty war' against Islamists. It was the chance to say 'we told you so'. To demonstrate its willingness to help the US in its 'War on Terror', Algiers provided the Americans with a list of 1,350 names of Algerians abroad with alleged links to Osama bin Laden and a list of alleged Islamist militants inside Algeria (El Hayat 2001). Above all, 9/11 provided Algeria with a golden opportunity to push for the high-tech weaponry that its army had been denied. Three days before his second meeting with President Bush in Washington in November 2001, Bouteflika started beating the terrorist drum. While reaffirming his country's support for America, he reminded the US administration that 'the Algerian people had had to confront terrorism alone, amongst general indifference' (Algeria Amnesty Newsletter 2002). He hoped that the US would now see Algeria's struggle against Islamic militants as comparable to its own war against Al Qaeda and thus be more willing to provide his army with the high-tech weaponry it needed.

In spite of America's tardiness on arms sales to Algeria, the two countries almost immediately became key allies in the GWOT, as evidenced by their collusion in the 2002 P2OG operation. This relationship with the US not only provided Algeria's generals with an effective guarantee of international immunity from

prosecution for their crimes in the 'Dirty War' of the 1990s, but it restored Algeria's role in international affairs, especially as Algeria became a 'global player' in the GWOT and as US policy towards Africa increasingly came to envisage Algeria, Nigeria and South Africa as constituting the three poles of surrogate US military control over the continent.

Creating the Al Qaeda Franchise in the Sahara-Sahel

Algeria's third objective of establishing itself as the regional sub-hegemon, especially in the Sahel, began to take shape in 2006. The opening of a 'Sahara-Sahelian' front in the GWOT played a key role in enabling the US to justify and legitimise its growing presence in Africa, especially as manifest in the ultimate establishment of AFRICOM in 2008. However, by 2006 the US and its allies, notably Algeria, were beginning to face a problem. This was that, in spite of the interminable barrage of US-Algerian generated propaganda and disinformation about terrorism in the Sahara-Sahel, the notion of the GWOT was not gaining much traction within the Sahara-Sahel region.

There were two main reasons for this. One was that the local populations, mostly Tuareg, knew that there was no real terrorism in the area and had always suspected their governments, especially Algeria, of being in some way involved in the El Para 'affair'. Secondly, all the governments of the region, without exception, were using the justification provided by the GWOT to crack down on all forms of legitimate political opposition, civil society, minorities, etc. Again, most of the region's population was aware of this strategy and, with a few exceptions, did not rise to the bait.¹⁷ The circumstances that provided the opportunity for the US and its Algerian ally to revamp the GWOT in the Sahara-Sahel and which led up to the rebranding of the GSPC as AQIM emerged in Mali in early 2006 (Keenan 2013).

Libya's leader, Mouamar Gadhafi, had seen renewed discontent amongst Mali's Tuareg in early 2006 as an opportunity to expand Libyan influence into Mali. He accordingly opened a consulate in Kidal, the administrative centre of Mali's northern Tuareg region, with the promise of massive financial aid. This was anathema to Algeria, which regarded Kidal as being within its sphere of influence. The Algerians and Americans were fully apprised of this situation and saw the possibilities of a Tuareg rebellion as the means of achieving their respective goals. A Tuareg rebellion could be blamed on Libya, thus discrediting Libya and driving it from the region, while Washington could use it to re-vamp its GWOT in the region.

In preparation for such an anticipated opportunity, on 15-16 February three US transporters airlifted some 100 US Special Forces, their dogs and communications equipment from what is now AFRICOM's headquarters at Stuttgart to the new, Halliburton-built base at Tamanrasset in southern Algeria. Both the US State Department and the US Ambassador to Algeria are adamant

that they were not informed by the Pentagon of this covert operation (Keenan 2013). The trigger for their incursion into Mali came on 10 April. The occasion was Gadhafi's address to the *mawlid*¹⁸ ceremony in Timbuktu in which he launched his idea for a 'Greater Saharan' state. He envisaged a day when the Tuareg of Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Algeria would form a federation with Libya as its base. Taken to its logical conclusion, such a state would necessitate the breakaway of much of northern Mali and northern Niger, part of Mauritania and a large part of southern Algeria. For Algeria, Gadhafi's provocative speech was red rag to a bull.

Algeria's DRS, in collusion with its US allies, did a deal with the local Tuareg political leader, Iyad ag Aghaly, to support a Tuareg rebellion in exchange for Tuareg help in the GWOT against the GSPC, a small, Algerian group of Islamist 'terrorists' that was to change its name to AQIM shortly after these events. The precise words of the deal were: 'We [Algeria] are ready to help you achieve what you want, but on the condition that you help us fight the GSPC in the Tuareg Malian Sahara' (Keenan 2013). The US Special Forces from Tamanrasset, along with their Algerian allies, crossed into Mali to give backing to the Tuareg rebels, who, at dawn on 23 May, raced into Kidal and Ménaka in 4WDs and trucks mounted with machine-guns. After looting the armouries, killing two soldiers and taking 20 soldiers hostage, the rebels withdrew to their bases in the Tigharghar Mountains between Kidal and the Algerian border. Algeria took responsibility for quartering the rebels in Tigharghar and managing on their behalf the long drawn-out peace talks. A number of US Special Forces remained in the area.

Algeria achieved its immediate regional objective of discrediting Gadhafi and ousting him from the region. But once the dust had settled, it was payback time. In September, the Algerians, working in hand with the Americans, called in their favour. Algeria instructed and paid Iyad ag Aghaly a considerable sum of money to organize an attack on an alleged GSPC 'terrorist' in northern Mali. The first attack in September was inconclusive. A second, one month later, resulted in five Tuareg being killed, two wounded and two taken hostage.

The international media, prompted and facilitated by the Americans, gave the incidents huge coverage, with the Americans saying that Iyad ag Aghaly's 'Democratic Alliance for Change,' as the May 23 rebel movement called itself, had actively thrown itself into the GWOT. The Alliance spokesman told Reuters that 'Our Democratic Alliance handles security in the region and we chase out those who are not from there, that's the position we've taken to control the zone'. This was the language that Washington wanted to hear: its GWOT was now firmly embedded in the Sahara with the Tuareg tribes, as the Americans called them, being on the right side! The two skirmishes laid the basis for much of the US-Algerian propaganda that has surrounded the post-2006 establishment of AQIM in the Sahel.

At the time of these incidents, many Tuareg who did not know about the deal between the DRS and Iyad ag Aghaly told me that the ‘reprisal’ attack against the Tuareg at Araouane had been undertaken by GSPC *repentis* (repentants). These were GSPC ‘terrorists’ who had accepted the Algerian government’s amnesty. In early 2006, Tuareg in southern Algeria came across several¹⁹ such *repentis* in the Mali and Niger border regions. They believed that these *repentis*, after turning themselves in, had been sent into Algeria’s extreme south by the DRS to ‘cause trouble’. There are good grounds to believe that it is these same *repentis* who came to form the hard-core of the GSPC/AQIM’s ‘foot-soldiers’ in the Sahel. With *repentis* in place and the deal between Mali’s Tuareg and the DRS accomplished, all that remained was to re-brand the hitherto insignificant GSPC with the Al Qaeda franchise.

The Structure and Organization of AQIM in the Sahara-Sahel

AQIM is, in effect, the Algerian GSPC under a new name. The name change was planned during 2006, probably in conjunction with the contrived ‘Tuareg-GSPC’ clashes described above, and formally announced in January 2007, with huge publicity in the US, Algeria and other western media. AQIM is structured into three ‘components’: the ‘real’ AQIM, AQIM *katibat* (brigades) that have been created by the DRS and AQIM *katibat* that have been infiltrated by the DRS. The ‘real’ AQIM, which is active around Algiers, its immediate hinterland and the Kabyle region to the east of the capital, is frequently quoted by the Algerian security forces as numbering around 600. The extent of its infiltration is uncertain, although it is generally believed that most of its *katibat* are probably subject to some degree of infiltration by the DRS.

AQIM in the Sahara-Sahel is very different from that in the north, being a hybrid of *katibat* that have been both ‘created’ and ‘infiltrated’ by the DRS. AQIM’s two main emirs in the Sahel are Abdelhamid abou Zaïd and Yahia Djouadi, both of whom have several aliases. Both are associated with the DRS, and can effectively be regarded as ‘DRS agents’. Abdelhamid, for example, was El Para’s main ‘lieutenant’ in the fabricated 2003 operation. He also managed the entire Malian end of that operation because of his greater familiarity with the Sahel regions. Yahia Djouadi is also believed to have been involved in the 2003 operation, although his alias at the time is uncertain. The core of Abdelhamid’s *katibat* would appear to be the ‘regrouped’ *repentis* described above, joined by a loose collection of ‘Islamists’ drawn mostly from Mauritania and Mali. They have also attracted a few local bandits and criminals. Yahia Djouadi’s group may also contain some of these Algerian *salafistes* at its core, but has probably recruited more young Islamists from within Mauritania.²⁰

The strength of AQIM in the Sahel is not known. Between its creation in 2006/7 and 2008/9, most estimates put it at around 200. Since then, estimates have risen to around 400, although local recruitment has almost certainly increased since the disastrous Franco-Mauritanian military raids into Mali on 22 July (Keenan 2013).

After the 'creation' of AQIM in 2006/7, it remained something of a 'phantom,' but still the subject of extensive US and Algerian disinformation and propaganda. One reason for this AQIM inactivity in the Sahel was because both northern Niger and northern Mali, from early 2007 onwards, became the terrain of new Tuareg rebellions, which had nothing to do with Algeria's GSPC/AQIM. Without any 'real' terrorism in the region, the governments of the region, all beneficiaries of Washington's TSCIT, referred to the Tuareg rebels as 'terrorists' and 'drugs traffickers,' or, in the case of at least one Washington analyst, 'putative terrorists' (Keenan 2013). Indeed, the strength of AQIM in the Sahara-Sahel during these years is not known, although most estimates put it at around 200 or less. Not until the resumption of Western hostage-taking in 2008 did estimates of AQIM's numbers creep up to nearer 400.

Even though 'real terrorism' in the region was virtually non-existent during the two years following the AQIM branding, the impression was being given to the world by both Algeria and the US that this new branch of Al Qaeda was posing a dangerous threat to the Sahel, NW Africa as a whole and even Europe. In fact, if we take the Tuareg rebellions out of the picture, the only AQIM incident in the entire Algeria-Niger-Mali nexus during the two years following the creation of AQIM was the attack on Djanet airport on 8 November 2007. The 'incident' occurred at 4:00 am, when, according to Algerian security sources, about ten terrorists in three off-road vehicles fired on Djanet airport with rocket propelled grenades and machine guns. Algerian media reports, all sourced to the security services, gave quite contradictory accounts of what had happened. Some said that the attackers damaged an *Air Algérie* plane; others that two helicopters and a military aircraft had been hit. Accounts of the terrorists' 'escape' were equally confused. Some said the attackers escaped across the border into Niger; others that the terrorists had all been caught and killed by an army helicopter-based operation. The security forces subsequently issued a statement saying that the 'terrorists' had been identified as coming from Al Qaeda training camps in northern Mali affiliated to AQIM. The same report said that the attackers had been targeting oil facilities in the region, and that they knew this because they had infiltrated the attackers' training camps.

The reports, issued by Algeria's security forces and widely published through the US and international media, were 'lies'. Aside from there being no oil facilities in the Djanet region, the attackers were not 'terrorists', but Tuareg youth (mostly teenagers) from Djanet itself. Of the myriad so-called 'security analysts' who cover the north African security situation, only Menas reported accurately what happened. It reported immediately 'that there was no terrorist attack on Djanet airport ... and that Algeria had once again fabricated a terrorist incident' (Menas 2007). It then explained that the youths' very amateurish attack had been intended as a demonstration of sympathy for the Tuareg rebels in Niger and a protest against the Algerian authorities in Djanet. The report was, of course, ignored by

western 'security services', especially American, which instead ensured that maximum media coverage explained how the Djanet attack demonstrated the increasing threat being presented in the Sahara-Sahel by AQIM, and that the terrorist organization's recent rebranding as an Al Qaeda franchise reflected its increasing 'internationalization' and 'reach'.²¹

The Djanet incident demonstrates quite unequivocally how both Algeria and its western allies were continuing to use fabricated, or in this case fictitious, terrorism for their own respective agendas. For the US, Djanet could be used to demonstrate the expansion of Al Qaeda across the Sahara-Sahel and thus provided further justification of the need for AFRICOM. For Algeria, the Djanet 'lie' diverted international attention from the escalating unrest against the regime.

However, the Djanet attack, coming just before GSPC/AQIM's resumption of Western hostage taking, fitted perfectly into Algeria's US-backed strategy of establishing itself as the controlling military power in this part of the Sahel. The means of asserting this strategy has been through the use of terrorism. Between February 2008 and September 2010 a further 20 Westerners have been taken hostage by AQIM in the Sahara-Sahel,²² leading Richard Barrett, the former British intelligence official and the UN's highest ranking official responsible for monitoring the activities of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, to say that while attacks by Al Qaeda and its operatives were decreasing in many parts of the world, the situation was worsening in north Africa (Keenan 2013). He was referring specifically to the activities of AQIM in the Sahel region of southern Algeria, Niger, Mali and Mauritania.

However, as all of these hostages have finished up in the hands of one or other of the three AQIM emirs mentioned above, who are strongly believed to be linked, either as agents or associates, with Algeria's DRS; and as all major Western intelligence services have varying degrees of awareness of the DRS-AQIM link, the key question focuses not just on Algeria's hegemonic designs, but on the extent to which Algeria is serving Western interests that go further than just providing the US with justification for AFRICOM and its own militaristic policies for the continent as a whole.

The Sahel's Riches and the Interests of France, the US, the EU and Others

The Sahel region of Niger, Mali and Mauritania is immensely rich in minerals. Areva's uranium mines at Arlit in northern Niger are one of the richest and most productive in the world, providing France with some 40 per cent of the uranium it needs to produce some 80 per cent of its energy. AQIM's increased activities in the Sahel over the last year especially have raised the possibility of external intervention. France and the US have held high-level discussions on the subject. Other EU countries, notably the UK, Spain, Germany, Holland and Italy are involved in varying degree in the region's security.

Algeria, however, is adamant that the problems of the region, namely AQIM, should and can be met by the four countries affected (Algeria, Niger, Mali and Mauritania), without any external intervention, and has therefore been at the centre of a number of new, although largely theatrical, initiations of new military-security institutions for the region. Algeria is using the AQIM threat to the Sahel to assert itself as the region's major power and the only one with the military ability to remove the Al Qaeda threat. In this, it has Washington's blessing. In so doing, it believes that it will be able to establish itself and its national interests as the major power and influence in the Sahel region. To achieve this goal, however, Algeria must first reduce France's standing and influence in the region. The presence and influence of the former colonial power are major impediments to Algeria's own hegemonic designs on the region.

As for where the US fits into this triangle, there are many who believe that the US would welcome a weakening of French influence in the region and to even inherit the old empire. The US is also clearly happy to see its ally in the GWOT continue to orchestrate 'sufficient' terrorism in the region for its own needs and to establish itself as the dominant military power in the region.

However, with two Frenchmen taken hostage, the stakes have been raised very much higher. One (Pierre Camatte) was released in February 2009, allegedly for a ransom. The other (Michel Germaneau) was abducted in April and either died or was executed by AQIM. On 22 July, France, with Mauritanian assistance, undertook two disastrous military raids into Mali, ostensibly to free Germaneau. Whether Germaneau had already died of heart illness or been executed by AQIM as retribution for killing 6-7 AQIM members in the raid is still not known. Either way, however, there is evidence that Algeria's DRS led France into a trap. Not only did France find no trace of Germaneau or his captors, but the raids branded France as the new infidel.

Then on 16 September, less than two months after both France and Mauritania had 'declared war on AQIM', AQIM proceeded to kidnap five French employees (plus 1 Malagasy and 1 Togolese) from the Areva's Arlit uranium mines in northern Niger. At the time of writing (October 2010), the hostages are being held by AQIM in northern Mali.

How this new crisis will be resolved remains to be seen. On the one hand, France has been embarrassed and weakened in the region, and may become more so if the hostages are killed, if a military assault ends in another failure, if France is humiliated by AQIM in the negotiations, or, perhaps, if France has to seek Algeria's help to extricate itself from the crisis. All such outcomes are likely to enhance Algeria's position in the region. On the other hand, there is growing suspicion amongst nearly all Algeria's neighbours – Morocco, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Libya – that Algeria has in some way or another been orchestrating the AQIM terrorist situation. One Mauritanian Minister even accused Algeria as being the *porte-parole* (spokesperson) for AQIM, while America has been accused in the

Moroccan media of appeasing Algeria over its involvement in 'terrorism'. Indeed, there are currently signs that the three 'weaker' countries of the Sahel – Mauritania, Niger and Mauritania – may turn to support (against Algeria) from not just Morocco and/or Libya, which would be anathema for Algeria but to France and the EU. Indeed, at this particular moment, this part of the Sahel is beginning to receive high-level attention from the EU, which feels threatened by this latest security crisis. Algeria will do all that it can to prevent such EU intervention. But Algeria may have overstepped the mark and it may be too late to stop such intervention, in which case Algeria's designs in the Sahel will not be achieved quite as easily as it had perhaps imagined when it created AQIM.

The region, after eight years of largely fabricated and fictitious terrorism, has finally become the Terror Zone that the US military marked on its maps of Africa in 2003. Since 22 July, there are indications that AQIM is attracting new recruits in the region and may become Washington's self-fulfilled prophecy. But the Sahel's largely unexploited wealth and resources are such that the West, either with or without the help of Algeria, seems set on re-establishing its 'control/security' over the region. How this will be achieved depends on many factors, some of which are as yet perhaps unforeseen. There is, for instance, the question of the extent to which the Tuareg, aggrieved on almost all fronts, might take matters into their own hands. There is also the question of Chinese and other interests in the region, which are unlikely to be abandoned over a such a small matter of security.

Notes

1. Deepak Lal, Professor of International Development Studies at UCLA, was an advisor to both The World Bank and IMF.
2. These maps were compiled originally by US EUCOM in 2003.
3. See <http://www.africom.mil/AboutAFRICOM.asp/>. Since then, Africa's strategic importance to the US has undergone several reappraisals as a result of the US's increased awareness of its own energy crisis, the post-9/11 GWOT and the rapid growth of China's growing economic investment in Africa.
4. In 2002, sub-Saharan Africa was already supplying 14% of US oil imports; by 2006, the US imported 22 per cent of its oil from Africa, and by 2007 the country was importing more crude oil from Africa than the Persian Gulf (US Dept. of Energy 2007).
5. Five years later, following the announcement of AFRICOM, EUCOM commander General Bantz Craddock told journalists in Washington that '[When] you look at West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea, it becomes more focused because of the energy situation', with the result that protecting energy assets 'obviously (*sic*) is out in front' (National Intelligence Council, 'External Relations and Africa,' discussion paper, 16 March 2004, at www.dni.gov/nic/PDF_GIF_2020_Support/2004_03_16_papers/external_relations.pdf (10 May 2007). Ryan Henry, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, told journalists at a Foreign Press Centre briefing in Washington in June 2007 that the new US African Command 'is about resources, specifically oil, specifically the oil in the Gulf of Guinea and that's what this command is about'.

6. US policy towards Africa cannot be reduced to or explained solely by America's increasingly serious energy crisis. Besides oil, the USA is dependent on Africa for many other raw materials such as manganese (for steel production), cobalt and chrome, both vital for alloys especially in aeronautics, vanadium, metals in the platinum group, antimony, gold, fluor spar, germanium, industrial diamonds, and many other lesser known materials such as columbite-tantalite (coltan for short), a key component in everything from mobile phones and computer chips to stereos and VCRs (Keenan 2009:127-9). Other reasons for US policy towards Africa in the Bush era include the role of the 'religious right' and military and intelligence 'turf wars' (Keenan 2009).
7. In 1993, 18 US soldiers were killed in Mogadishu in an incident that some 'terrorism analysts' now attribute to 'Islamic terrorists'. In 1998, some 200 people were killed when U.S. embassies were bombed in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. In 2002, a hotel was bombed in Mombasa, allegedly by Al Qaeda 'terrorists' and 2 surface-to-air missiles fired at an Israel-bound airliner. Northern Algeria has been subjected to both Islamist and state terrorism since the early 1990s, while there have been incidents in Morocco (bombings in Casablanca on 16 May 2003) and Tunisia (el-Ghriba synagogue, April 2002).
8. El Para was his *nom de guerre*, from his time in the elite parachutist regiment. His proper name is allegedly Saifi Am(m)ari. His many aliases include El (Al) Para (Bara), Abderezak, Abou (Abu) Haidara, Ammane Abu Haidra, Abderezak Zaimeche, Abdul Razzaq, Abdul Rasak, Abdalrazak, Al Ammari Al Arussi, El Ourassi and further combinations and alternative spellings of these. It is believed that he may have trained at Fort Bragg, as an elite green beret in 1994-1996.
9. In his State of the Union address of 29 January 2002, President Bush spoke of the expansion of the war on terror to new fronts. Since then, the term 'front', and especially the term second front, has become almost synonymous with the attempt to globalize the GWOT. Afghanistan is usually understood to be the first front. The term 'second front' has been applied at one time or another to most parts of the world, including SE Asia; Iraq; Latin America in the context of the election of left wing presidents in Brazil and Ecuador; Colombia in terms of the FARC campaign and, after 2003, the Sahara. In the latter case the 'first' front is sometime understood to be the Horn of Africa and East Africa. See, for example, Pyne (2002); Clays (2003).
10. The Northwoods document was published online in a more complete form by the National Security Archive on 30 April 2001: 'Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962', *National Security Archive*, 30 April 2001.
11. Details of AF DAS Robert Perry and S/CT Deputy Coordinator Stephanie Kinney's mission were confirmed publicly by the Office of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, Washington D.C. on 7 November 2002.
12. Even though the PSI forces were not officially brought into the region until January 2004, US Special Forces, believed to be attached to the P2OG programme, were operating covertly in the region as early as November 2002. The State Department explained the PSI as: 'a programme designed to protect borders, track movement of people, combat terrorism, and enhance regional cooperation and stability. It is a State-led effort to assist Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania in detecting and responding to suspicious movement of people and goods across and within their borders through training, equipment and cooperation. Its goals support two U.S. national security interests in Africa: waging the war on terrorism and enhancing regional peace and security'.

13. By 'conventional', I mean that terrorism is the threatened or employed use of violence against civilian targets for political objectives.
14. Later to become President Obama's National Security Advisor (NSA), before stepping down in October 2010.
15. EUCOM's second-in-command, air force General Charles Wald described these groups as 'similar to Al Qaeda, but not as sophisticated or with the same reach, but the same objectives. They're bad people, and we need to keep an eye on that' (*World Tribune*, 6 May 2003).
16. General Jones envisaged a new concept of US military basing in Africa. With Cold War-style bases containing large numbers of US forces neither militarily appropriate nor politically feasible, General Jones was planning a far more flexible facilitative arrangement which would enable the US military to deploy quickly, as and when required, through what he called a 'family of bases'. These would include forward-operating bases, or what he called 'lily pads', perhaps with an airfield nearby, that could house up to 3,000-5,000 troops, and 'forward-operating locations,' which would be lightly equipped bases where Special Forces, marines or possibly an infantry rifle platoon or company could land and build up as the mission required (Schmitt 2003).
17. For details of this strategy, see Keenan (2013). The main incidents in this strategy include the attempts by the Niger government in 2004 to provoke the Tuareg to take up arms, the alleged terrorist attack on the Lemgheity garrison in northern Mauritania in 2005 and the Tamanrasset riots of 2005.
18. The Prophet's birthday.
19. The precise number is not known. Tuareg described finding a few groups numbering about two or three. The total number is therefore unlikely to have been more than a few dozen.
20. A third *katibat* is believed to centre around Mokhtar ben Mokhtar (MBM), an independent 'businessman', who has waged his own war against Algeria since the late 1990s. Details of MBM and his activities are given in Keenan (2009, 2013). His relationship to both GSPC/AQIM and the DRS can be best described as freelance.
21. An official at the British FCO responded to the Menas report by saying: 'The Algerians reported that there was a terrorist attack on Djanet airport. Therefore it is a fact' (Keenan 2013). The truth and the accuracy of the Menas report was revealed three years later, when a DRS journalist, Salima Tlemçani (2010), inadvertently reported both the head of the regional government and the Tuareg Supreme chief as confirming the Menas account of events.
22. Also, 1 Malagasy and 1 Togolese employed by the French company, Areva. For details of all hostage takings, see Keenan (2013).

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