



## THE SAHEL BEDLAM

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**T**he countries which lies south of the Sahara desert in north west Africa Sahel belt - Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso - remain below the radar of international affairs. Soldiers die there virtually every week in what are often referred to as “mopping up” operations led by troops of the G5 group of nations which, under the military umbrella of France are tasked with making the Sahel region safe from the incursions of jihadi terrorism. If the soldiers and officers killed are African, their deaths usually go unreported internationally, if they are French they will make it on French news but not elsewhere in Europe.

Four US special operations personnel were killed in an attack in October 2017 in western Niger. A report to the US Congress published soon after expressed concern about US military rules of engagement and force protection in what is a shadowy war with an unclear strategy, of which the American public knows nothing. Meanwhile a small number of special Italian and British forces are deployed in Niger but all this is very hush hush. Parliaments in Rome, Paris and London, let alone the US Congress have never debated a cancer which is quietly metastasizing across borders which are difficult to patrol into Nigeria, Cameroon and Ivory Coast.

On a flying visit to Algiers on his way to Doha on 6 December, the French president Emmanuel Macron tried to break the continuing deadlock between France and Algeria on how to handle the situation in Mali. This matters to the French president because the Barkhane military operation launched in August 2014, which followed the Serval operation of January 2013 which prevented the collapse of Mali, has witnessed the deployment of 4,000 French troops in the five aforesaid countries, 1,700 of which are in Mali, by far France’s major military operation abroad today.

The troops in Mali are centred on Gao but also operate out of two military bases further north which lie 120 kilometres from the boarder with Algeria, Kidal and Tessalit. Quite apart from the cost of the operation, the reputation of the French army is at stake as is the broader security of a region as large as Europe where France has many economic interests, notably the mining of uranium at Arlit in Niger, which acts as a corridor for illegal immigration of Africans hoping for a better life in Europe. The region also boasts coltan, manganese, lithium and rare earth minerals.

On 24 October 2017, the US Chief of Staff General Joe Dunford said that his services were convinced that fighters of Islamic State, defeated in Syrian and Iraq were intent on moving to the Sahel. Hundreds (or thousands depending to the source one consults) of IS foot soldiers hail from Libya, Tunisia, Morocco (virtually none from Algeria) and countries to the south of the Sahara. Africom, the US military command for Africa has, from its inception in 2007, defined its mission in narrow security terms. Reducing long standing social, economic and tribal conflicts hardly allows a nuanced understanding of their complexity. If the US and, to a lesser degree, France define the problem as a bed of nails, the only answer is a hammer.

This explains why France and Algeria are at loggerheads over how to bring greater security to the Sahel. The first complains that the peace protocol signed in Algiers in May-June 2015 between the Republic of Mali and the Azawad, an unwieldy coalition of Touareg, Arab and Peul groups has never really worked. The cease fire is regularly broken as troops belonging to the UN sponsored MINUSMA, the force which guarantees the security of Mali are ambushed. Coordination between the forces fighting Azawad is problematic: they include MINUSMA, French troops operating in the framework of Berkane, US special forces and the G5 set up under French authority which includes the five Sahel countries.

A seasoned French observer of the region, Jean Pierre Séréni recently described the situation in Mali as “bedlam” as troops which are often poorly coordinated and boast very different operational skills try and work together. Their modus operandi is a recipe for confusion as attackers surge from nowhere to occupy a village or a town for a few hours, kidnap or kill a Malian official and disappear into the bush or the desert. The attackers morph from Islamist terrorists to smugglers of people, weapons or drugs as large amounts of Latin American cocaine wash across the Sahel to Europe. Money from smuggling offers a basic income to many impoverished communities.

This increasingly visible foreign military presence is not easily accepted by local people. Foreign military bases are springing up between Agadez and Niamey, the capital of Niger while foreign soldiers are ever more visible around Bamako, the capital of Mali. African troops are also known to mistreat locals in what Séréni describes as a “steadily deteriorated” security situation.

Mr Macron insists Algeria should commit troops – the Armée Nationale Populaire is 400,000 strong and very well equipped – and money. France is still well short of the total of Euros 423m needed to cover the expense of the operation in the twelve months to July 2018 despite commitments from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the US. But Algeria is adamant the international forces deployed in the Sahel must be put under the command of the African Union, an organisation to which neither France nor the US, belong. Algeria will not commit troops outside its borders except to insure its own immediate security. Its troops have intervened in Tunisia with the full agreement of the Tunisian government to help fight jihadi groups in 2012-17. They have crossed the border into Libya in the wake of the terrorist attack on the country’s gas field of Tigentourine in January 2013. But senior Algerian officials hold firm to the argument that the challenges thrown up in the Sahel cannot be solved by using a hammer. Furthermore, they remind Paris that the French led and NATO supported operation in Libya in 2011 destroyed the Libyan state, thus releasing thousands Touaregs who had escaped political repression in Mali to work in the Libyan army, to return home and opening the floodgates of Colonel Gaddafi’s weapons dumps to terrorists groups. In a speech to the Tunisian National Assembly earlier this month, Mr Macron conceded as much, criticising his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, in no uncertain terms. For Algeria, the Sahel crisis requires patient diplomatic handling as much if not more than an army hammer.

The country's foreign policy is however complicated by the ill health which has dogged President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for years. Despite being all but invisible to his people he is considering standing for a fifth mandate next year. While the key principles of Algerian security and foreign affairs are well established, the battle that rages around Bouteflika's succession slow foreign policy decision making and lead to greater caution than would otherwise be the case. That said, two things should be obvious to European leaders. First, there is no hope of any lasting political solution to the confused situation in Libya until the EU and the US accept that Algeria and Egypt are primus inter pares in the UN led negotiations to broker a political solution. Second, for all its internal weakness, Algeria remains a key to the future stability of the Sahel. It is of more than symbolic importance when the very influential - both formally and informally, Secretary General of the Russian Security Council, Nicolai Patrushev, visited the region recently with two ports of call, Tel Aviv and Algiers?