

France steps up military intervention in Sahel

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France has seized upon reports of the execution of a French aid worker by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in July to escalate its military intervention in its former colonies in the strategic Sahel region of Western Africa.

French aid worker Michel Germaneau, 78, who was kidnapped in April while working for a children's charity in Niger, was reportedly executed by AQIM in retaliation for a joint Franco-Mauritanian raid on July 22 on an AQIM camp in northern Mali. The raid ostensibly was an attempt to liberate him. On July 25, in a recording broadcast by the Al Jazeera TV network, AQIM said Germaneau had been killed in "revenge" for the death of its members in the raid.

Having announced the death of Germaneau on July 26, the French government declared that it would wage war in the Sahel region, an area along the south of the Sahara desert, running through Mauritania, Mali, Niger and southern Algeria.

On July 27, French Prime Minister François Fillon declared, "France is at war with Al Qaeda... Combat against terrorism, and AQIM in particular, will intensify". He added that "roughly 400 fighters are waging a merciless struggle against the countries of the region and against our interests".

On August 16, the government set the "Vigipirate" anti-terrorist alert system to "red" status, the second highest possible alert level.

France will increase its own military activities and its collaboration with regimes in the Sahel. Axel Poniatowski, head of a parliamentary foreign affairs commission, said, "France will provide 'logistical support' for military actions by Mauritania, Mali, or Niger against AQIM".

The BBC commented, "France, as well as other European nations and the United States, have been training soldiers here for many years. This is the first time, however, they have admitted to being involved in an operation against AQIM".

On July 26 and 27, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner visited Mauritania, Mali and Niger. Speaking in Niamey, the capital of Niger, he said, "We will be alongside our Nigerien, Malian, Mauritanian friends". Asked about the possibility of installing bases in the region, he said, "We are not going to install bases. We have very clear defence agreements".

In fact, reports suggest French troops already treat bases in the region as their own. The news magazine *Le Point* writes, "France is, with the US and UK, one of the three countries with Special Forces that can carry out completely independent

operations. The units, highly trained in desert warfare, have been in the Sahel for months, train regional armed forces, know the region well, and can even if needed operate clandestinely there. They have already done it, and more than once! French units know the Sahel, and the technical means at their disposal—reconnaissance satellites, planes to intercept communications, etc.—are perfectly adapted to this theatre of operations".

Questions on the official story

Reports from Al Jazeera and British business intelligence firm Menas question the credibility of French official statements, including on how the raid took place, its location, and even whether Germaneau was in fact executed. There is also evidence of an aerial raid launched from Tessalit—an old French colonial base in north-eastern Mali near the Algerian border, also used by US Special Forces—in which Algeria could have been involved. French officials denied that there were aerial operations, or that Tessalit or Algerian forces were involved.

On August 8, Al Jazeera published a report by Jeremy Keenan, an expert on the region at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. He charged that "France, Mauritania and Algeria have gone to extreme lengths to cover up what actually happened". He noted a July 22 AFP dispatch that cited "a foreign military source in Bamako as saying that the raid on a suspected al Qaeda base (in north-west Mali) was just a smoke screen".

He continued, "based on the reports received from well-placed regional sources shortly after midday on July 22, there had been intense air traffic around Tessalit during the night and early morning, and that Algerians, supported by French special forces, had led an assault into the adjoining Tigharghar Mountains in an attempt to rescue Germaneau".

Keenan wrote that French President Nicolas Sarkozy was advised by his defence council at a July 19 meeting, "in which the prime minister, foreign and interior ministry, the head of the armed services, representatives of the foreign, interior and military intelligence services and [Sarkozy's chief of staff]

Claude Guéant participated”. He added, “[T]he decision to intervene in the Sahel was not taken lightly and would certainly have involved an appreciation of the views of Algeria’s DRS”, its military intelligence service.

Guéant reportedly met with DRS chief General Mohamed Mediène in Algiers on June 20.

Keenan questioned whether Germaneau was executed after the July 22 raid, or if he died before. He suffered from heart disease and had been denied access to critical medicine. Keenan writes, “[T]he last evidence that he was alive was received by the French authorities on May 14. Sources in the region believe that he may have died shortly after that time”.

He pointed out, “The only testimony of his execution has come from a local Kidal dignitary, who has been involved in previous hostage negotiations and is a thoroughly discredited source. Moreover, the very vague nature of the demands that accompanied the threat to execute Germaneau on July 26, combined with the fact that no negotiators appear to have been mobilised within Mali, as has been the pattern with previous hostage cases, must also have alerted the French authorities to question whether Germaneau was still alive”.

Geo-strategic interests and France’s “war on terror”

The declaration of a new “war on terror” is an ominous, reactionary event, whose basic social content is now well known. Intelligence services and special forces will be given free rein to use massive violence against ex-colonial regions, while the population of their home country is to be terrorised by constant warnings from the political establishment of possible attacks.

The military escalation in the Sahel under the banner of a “war on terror” is aimed at pursuing France’s strategic and commercial interests. The 2008 French white paper on defence, which outlined France’s global geo-strategy, identified the Sahel as one of four critical regions for French imperialism. The region is a key supplier of oil, minerals, and uranium.

Uranium is one critical interest for French imperialism in the region. France’s nuclear industry—which supplies 78 percent of the country’s electricity generating capacity and makes €3 billion in yearly profits from energy exports alone—relies on Niger for 25 percent of the 12,400 tonnes of uranium oxide concentrate that it consumes yearly.

The world’s third-largest uranium producer, Niger is expected to increase its yearly uranium output from 3,500 to 10,500 metric tonnes. French state-owned nuclear company Areva has exploited these uranium reserves for 40 years. It mines the Arlit and Akouta deposits, which produced over 3,000 metric tonnes in 2008. Areva has invested €1.2 billion in the Imouraren deposit, which is expected to produce almost

5,000 metric tons per year for over 35 years.

French hegemony in the region is threatened by the growing influence of China. Beijing has emerged as a rival buyer of uranium in Niger, from the Azelik and Teguidida deposits. It has also paid \$5 billion for the right to prospect for oil in the Agadem oilfield in eastern Niger. *Africa Confidential* writes, “China’s relatively new involvement vastly strengthens Niger’s power to bargain with France”.

France’s military intervention has the backing of Washington. Last November, US Coordinator for Counterterrorism Daniel Benjamin told the US Senate, “French ties in this region remain pivotal, and France has expressed a sincere desire to cooperate with the United States in this area of the world. The Paris meeting in September was the first senior-level meeting that mapped out a way forward for such cooperation. Our strategic counterterrorism priorities in this region are very similar, focusing as they do on building law enforcement, military capacity, and development”.

On July 30, the *Wall Street Journal* commented that “Paris’s plan to increase its involvement [in the Sahel], gives reason to hope that France is ready to retake the lead in this increasingly hot front”. It added that “predictably, not of all of France’s former colonies are welcoming the erstwhile colonial master’s return to assertiveness”.

In the face of growing competition for markets and natural resources, France’s raids in the Sahel set precedent for further military escalations. French media recently indicated that the ruling class is considering fighting major wars against Turkey, Egypt, or even China. (See: “Media demands France prepare for world war”)

A French “war on terror” in Africa will be used to legitimate France’s deeply unpopular participation in the US-led “war on terror” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to which France is deploying the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle. A recent poll found that 70 percent of the French population opposes the war in Afghanistan. In an August 26 speech, however, Sarkozy said France would “remain engaged in Afghanistan, with its allies, as long as is necessary”.



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