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## Behind the cliché of the Chadian 'desert warriors', militarized politics and Idriss Déby's global political capital

BY MARIELLE DEBOS

### Key Messages:

- The military success and efficiency of the Chadian military should not overshadow brutal practices and human rights violations. Western supporters of the Chadian military, including France and the US, should not turn a blind eye to impunity and injustice and their long-term consequences.
- The global and political capital being offered to Idriss Déby in exchange for Chad's military interventionism is neither effective nor just. The longer-term consequences of the militarization of both regional and domestic politics in Chad must be considered.
- The divided Chadian military is currently mobilized outside the country, but could play a dangerous role if mobilized within, particularly as Déby's successor arises.

In 2010, when Chad and Sudan signed the peace agreement that brought an end to their five-year proxy war, few people expected that this land-locked country would soon become an emerging regional power. In less than a decade, however, Chad has radically changed its status on the regional and global scenes. Chad is now a key ally of France and the US, within the framework of the 'war on terror'. Operation Barkhane, which replaced Operation Eperview, established in 1986, the French anti-terrorist operation, took up a new base in N'Djamena in August 2014. Chad also serves as a base for US support to Nigeria in combating Boko Haram.

Chad has a long history in meddling in regional conflicts, but has recently appeared eager to assert itself as a regional military power with the blessing of its Western allies. In 2013, the Chadian military played a decisive role during the French-led action in Mali.

Chadians now comprise the first contingent of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), with more than 1,200 men. MINUSMA was established in April 2013 in the wake of the French military counter-operation. Its mandate is to support political processes in Mali and to carry out a number of security-related tasks. Because of ongoing attacks from militant groups, including Al-Qaeda's North African wing, there is a high casualty count among uniformed personnel. The Chadian army also participates in military operations against Boko Haram as part of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF),<sup>1</sup> which it provides with one third of its troops (about 3,000 out of 8,700 soldiers, police and civilians).

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, I provide background information on the Chadian army. While this army is now considered one of the best in the region, little is known about its composition and the way it is governed. In this respect, I argue that the successful offensive operations led by the Chadian army should not overshadow its all too common brutal practices and the lack of accountability. Second, I argue that the key question is not only who is the best to do the job in the Sahel and Sahara but also, what are the impacts of the militarization of international interventions in the region. Chad's allies tend to ignore the human rights violations and the undemocratic practices there,<sup>2</sup> such as the recent re-election of Idriss Déby in a disputed election.<sup>3</sup> The support given by France and the US to the militaries of Chad and other partner countries and their tendency

to turn a blind eye to the routine way that impunity and injustice operate could have serious longer-term consequences.

### The blind spots of Chad's military interventionism

In Mali as in the lake Chad Basin, the Chadian army has been praised for its effective offensive operations. The way the supposed qualities of this army are described reactivate the old *cliché* of the Chadian desert warrior who, already in the colonial period, was a source of fascination for the French military. Behind this picture, however, there lie less glorious realities. Chadian forces also enjoy a reputation in Chad – and in the Central African Republic – for their brutality and human rights violations. In April 2014, Chadian forces had to withdraw from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) because of accusations that they had killed thirty unarmed civilians. Moreover, Chad has a long history of interference in the CAR and there were reports of financial and military support being given to the Seleka rebels.<sup>4</sup>

In Mali, allegations of rape and sexual violence had been leveled against Chadian soldiers.<sup>5</sup> Mid-May 2016, Chadian soldiers from the MINUSMA were accused of killing a civilian herder.<sup>6</sup> Little is known on the fighting against Boko Haram. The Chadian army has recently realized that public relations matter and journalists who reported on fighting in Nigeria were embedded.

<sup>1</sup> The MNJTF is a multinational formation of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Its headquarters are in N'djamena. The African Union Peace and Security Council authorized the deployment of the MNJTF in January 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Charbonneau, Cédric Jourde, *Les dilemmes de la résolution face aux défis de la 'guerre au terrorisme': le Mali dans une perspective sahélienne*, Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix, Report no. 1, May 2016; Nathaniel K. Powell, 'A Flawed Strategy in the Sahel: How French Intervention Contributes to Instability', *Foreign Affairs*, 1 February 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Marielle Debos, 'Biometric voting in Chad: New technology, same old political tricks', *Theconversation.com*, 6 May 2016. Accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/biometric-voting-in-chad-new-technology-same-old-political-tricks-58663>

<sup>4</sup> Roland Marchal, 'CAR and the regional (dis)order', in Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Lombard (eds.), *Making sense of the Central African Republic*, London, Zed Books, 2015, pp. 166-193.

<sup>5</sup> Such violence is all too common during peacekeeping operations. French peacekeepers in CAR face questioning over accusations of raping children.

<sup>6</sup> RFI (Radio France International), 'Mali: quelle enquête après une possible bavure des militaires tchadiens?', 27 May 2016.

## BEHIND THE CLICHÉ OF THE CHADIAN 'DESERT WARRIORS'. MILITARIZED POLITICS AND IDRISSE DÉBY'S

However, those who witnessed the operations of the Chadian army talk of serious human rights violations.<sup>7</sup>

Human rights violations are all too common during military operations, whether the troops come from African or European countries.<sup>8</sup> Such abuses are unfortunately not mere accidents. As far as gender-based violence, sexual violence and sexual exploitation are concerned, the root causes include the promotion of a militarized masculinity<sup>9</sup> and the small number of women involved in the military. The MINUSMA is composed of 8,576 male soldiers and only 125 female soldiers (for the Chadian contingent: 1,074 and 13).<sup>10</sup>

The Chadian army has a poor human rights record abroad and at home. While it is true that this army is composed of former rebels, the rebel past of the soldiers does not explain their practices after their integration into the regular forces. More important is the fact that abuses committed by military leaders are not punished. Impunity has become a fully-fledged mode of government.

### A two-class army

Despite twenty-five years of announcements and unfulfilled projects, the Chadian armed forces have never been seriously reformed. In 2011, a major census was organized and 14,000 'fake soldiers' were dismissed. However, armed forces continue to recruit, far in excess of what is required by a response to regional threats. The Chadian army is *de facto* composed of two armies: the ordinary army known as *Armée Nationale Tchadienne* (ANT), and the presidential guard, which was renamed the General Directorate of

Security Services for National Institutions (DGSSIE) in 2005. In ten years, the numbers of DGSSIE troops have almost doubled. A report by the French National Assembly indicates that the ANT and the DGSSIE both have about 14,000 soldiers in them.<sup>11</sup>

The DGSSIE is the elite force of the army and constitutes the core of Chadian forces deployed abroad. There is a gap between the treatment of the DGSSIE guard and that reserved for other bodies. The DGSSIE receives disproportionate funding in comparison with the rest of the army. It is much better equipped and its troops are trained. Members of the DGSSIE are also much better paid than those of the ANT.<sup>12</sup> The DGSSIE depends on the Presidency and is not under the command of the army's General Chief of Staff.

Idriss Déby retains a clear personal control over the DGSSIE.<sup>13</sup> The elements of the DGSSIE are recruited from the Zaghawa and the Bideyat and to a lesser measure from the Gorans and Arabs.<sup>14</sup> Key positions are held by officers close to Déby. One of Déby's sons, General Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, was appointed at the head of the DGSSIE in April 2014.

As for the ANT, it has limited capabilities. It is also controlled by Idriss Déby's close relatives, but it recruits among all ethnic groups. ANT soldiers do not all belong to Déby's followers. During the April 2016 presidential election, military officers made sure that the troops voted for the 'right' candidate. Soldiers thought to be voting for the opposition disappeared and have not been heard from. The number of those missing is unknown: human rights organizations speak of 20 to 60 persons. The United States Ambassador to the United Nations,

<sup>7</sup> Interview, N'Djamena, April 2016.

<sup>8</sup> French peacekeepers in CAR face questioning over accusations of raping children.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Whitworth, *Men, militarism and UN peacekeeping: A gendered analysis*, Boulder (CO), Lynne Rienner, 2004; Annica Kronsell, *Gender, sex and the postnational defense: Militarism and peacekeeping*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> 'MINUSMA', Réseau de recherche sur les opérations de paix, last update on 31 January 2015. <http://www.operationspaix.net/182-operation-minusma.html>

<sup>11</sup> French National Assembly, *L'évolution du dispositif militaire français en Afrique et le suivi des opérations en cours*, Report no. 2114 by the Commission for National Defence and the Armed Forces, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Ben Shepherd, Paul Melly, 'Stability and vulnerability in the Sahel: the regional roles and internal dynamics of Chad and Niger', *NOREF report*, April 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Marchal, 'An emerging military power in Central Africa? Chad under Idriss Déby', forthcoming.

Samantha Power, publicly raised the issue when she visited Chad shortly after the election. French diplomats who are usually so eager to praise their Chadian military partner waited a month before calling for an investigation.

### A militianized army

The Chadian army (both the DGSSIE and the ANT) has been militianized. The hierarchy has not disappeared, but there is considerable vagueness about the missions and responsibilities of the officers. Those who make the decisions are not always those who, according to official texts, should be taking them. For example, Chad was not able to provide a chart of registered battalion commanders even though this was necessary if the country was to benefit from an assistance program from the US government.<sup>15</sup>

Flexible chains of command, an incomplete control over personnel, and the absence of *esprit de corps* are not necessarily weaknesses. This mode of government, erratic at first sight, has some advantages. Patronage-based networks are used within the military to manage troops and ensure a form of discipline. As the historian Mahamat Saleh Yacoub explains, 'military discipline often comes down to obedience to a specific leader, often a parent.'<sup>16</sup> In addition, recruitment, placement and career advancement are part of political strategies. The high number of senior officers demonstrates the need to constantly thank the faithful and the new recruits.

### Oil money and defense spending

While past and recent reform programs have had limited impact, oil money has transformed the armed forces. Defense spending per capita and as a percentage of

<sup>15</sup> French National Assembly, Report no. 2114, op. cit, p. 229.

<sup>16</sup> *Des Rebelles aux seigneurs de guerre: La désagrégation de l'armée nationale, N'Djamena*, Editions Al Mouna, 2005, p. 141.

Gross Domestic Product has grown fast for the past ten years (4.86% of GDP in 2014).<sup>17</sup> The first oil-related income was a bonus paid by the oil consortium in 2000. At least US\$ 4.5 billion of this signature bonus paid by Chevron was spent on weapons.<sup>18</sup> In the following years, Chad radically defied the World Bank, which had agreed to back the Chad-Cameroon oil project on condition that the profits went towards development and long-term poverty alleviation. The Bank invested massively – financially and politically – in the project. It had however underestimated the regime's capacity to skirt external pressures. The original mechanism for monitoring oil revenues that was imposed in 1999 was already dismantled in 2006. Idriss Déby argued that security was a *sine qua non* condition for development. Arms imports were five times higher in 2004–2008 than in 1999–2003.<sup>19</sup> A report by CCFD-Terre solidaire puts forward one set of figures: 'Chad's military spending increased from 35.3 billion FCFA (53 million euros) in 2004 to 275.7 billion FCFA (420 million euros) in 2008, thus increasing by a factor of 7.79'.<sup>20</sup> Between 2006 and 2010, Chad became the third largest importer of arms in Sub-Saharan Africa, appearing for the first time amongst the top ten.<sup>21</sup> The army acquired warplanes, attack helicopters, tanks and missiles and became one of the best equipped on the continent. Since 2008, the military parades of 11 August (Chad's Independence Day), are an opportunity to put on displays of force.

### Western security cooperation and Idriss Déby's global capital

<sup>17</sup> David Chuter, Florence Gaub, *Understanding African armies*, ISS report no. 27, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Celeste Hicks, *Africa's new oil: Power, pipelines and future fortunes*, London, Zed Books, 'African Arguments', 2015, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Pieter Wezeman, *Arms flows to the conflict in Chad*, SIPRI Background Paper, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> CCFD-Terre Solidaire, 'Le Développement piégé: les transferts d'armes et le développement au Tchad (2005-2010)', 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Siemon T. Wezeman, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, *Arms flow to Sub-Saharan Africa*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 30, 2009.



In addition to oil wealth, the Chadian army is supported by France and the US. This support has become more important for Chad as oil prices have fallen. The budget allocated to French structural cooperation amounts to 12 million euros per year,<sup>22</sup> to which must be added donations and aid initially provided by Operation Epervier and now supplied by Operation Barkhane. Many Chadian officers – starting with the current army chief, Idriss Déby, who was trained at the *Ecole de guerre* – were (and continue to be) trained in France. The influence of France on the training of officers is considerable, even if the former colonial power is now challenged in this area by the United States.

Chad also benefits from United States support. Following 9/11, the US launched the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), a counterterrorism program that aims to bolster the militaries of Chad, Mali, Niger and Mauritania. In 2005, the program, renamed the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), expanded to include Nigeria, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Between 2009 and 2013, the United States obligated approximately \$13 million in TSCTP funds to Chad.<sup>23</sup> The US trained a small unit called the Special Anti-Terrorism Group (SATG). It was deployed to Mali in support of the French Operation Serval in the winter and spring of 2013.<sup>24</sup> In the past few years, as the US considered its former Nigerian security partner as no longer reliable, Chad has gained a central place in the US strategy in the Sahel under its Africa command (AFRICOM) program.

### Beyond the stability framework

Eight years ago, the rebel coalition led by Mahamat Nouri launched an attack on the capital that seriously threatened the occupant of the presidential palace. Idriss Déby is much more powerful today. Combatants have surrendered – only a small section of them based in South Libya are trying to launch a new uprising.<sup>25</sup> The presidential guard has never been so strong even if analysts of Chad have rightly expressed alarm at the weaknesses of the regime.<sup>26</sup>

However, the key question is not only whether today's Chad is stable or not. The country and its partners face challenges such as: how to avoid the exacerbation of local grievances due to counter-terror operations?<sup>27</sup> How to prepare avenues for a more democratic mode of government and a less unjust social and economic order? It is crucial to look beyond military actions and to reflect on the longer-term consequences of the militarization of both regional and domestic politics in Chad. In this respect, the global political capital being offered to Idriss Déby in exchange of its military interventionism is neither effective nor just.

Here is a set of more specific questions that policymakers should bear in mind.

First, although using oil money to buy weapons had indeed raised a stir in 2006, Western states as well as international financial institutions seem hardly bothered by it these days. Are the risks associated with poor management of oil resources no longer relevant? Idriss Déby has eschewed saving money. Now, with the declining price of oil, public funds are evaporating. The problem of poverty remains unresolved. The rising living costs as well as the rape of a teenage girl by the sons of

<sup>22</sup> French National Assembly, Report no. 2114, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Nickels, Margot Shorey, 'Chad: A Precarious Counterterrorism Partner', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 8, no. 4, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Lesley Anne Warner, 'The Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership Building Partner Capacity to Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism', Centre for Naval Analyses, March 2014, p. 77. The author notes that 'prior to deployment, the SATG was highly capable, but as President Idriss Déby feared a coup, they were not given logistics support capability'.

<sup>25</sup> 'Le "FACT" nouvelle rébellion créée dans le nord du Tchad', *Voice of America*, 8 April 2016.

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Tchad: entre ambitions et fragilités*, Africa Report no. 233, 30 March 2016.

<sup>27</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, Africa Briefing no. 120, 4 May 2016.

some of the president’s closest associates<sup>28</sup> triggered massive protests that were violently repressed.

Second, the effectiveness of the Chadian military on the ground in Mali and against Boko Haram appears to have meant that the human rights violations by the same army have been forgotten. So can it come as any surprise that an army which has never actually been reformed and whose soldiers are trained to be warriors (and not peacekeepers), is attacking civilians?

Third, how to make sense of this ‘shift in the security burden’?<sup>29</sup> Are African states finally assuming greater responsibility in resolving the continent’s crises? Or do we observe the emergence of a new mode of warfare where some units of African armies (or even local militias)<sup>30</sup> are specifically trained to do the job? Westerners no longer scruple to train units that have emerged from the praetorian guards – units whose recruitment is ethnically polarized and which are known for their human rights violations. We may well wonder about the uses Idriss Déby might make of such well-equipped and well-trained units when they are not mobilized outside the country. We may worry even more about the political role they may play on the day the question of Déby’s successor arises.

*This paper is based on chapter 5 of Marielle Debos, “Living by the gun in Chad: Combatants, impunity, and state formation,” to be published in October, 2016 by Zed books, London.*

*This report was made possible by a grant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark with support from the World Peace Foundation. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.*

<sup>28</sup> Zeinab Mohammed Salih, ‘Chad teenager’s gang-rape galvanises protests and opposition to President’, *The Independent*, 28 February 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Celeste Hicks, ‘Chad and the West: Shifting the Security Burden?’ Egmont Institute Africa Policy Brief no.12, July 2015.

<sup>30</sup> This hypothesis was put forward by Danny Hoffman in the conclusion of his book: *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

