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Niger, the war is against civilians



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Two issues prioritize the fight against Muslim fundamentalist terrorism in the Sahel by the different European armies that together with AMERICAN forces try to contain the *khatibas* of *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (Support Group al-Islam and Muslims (JNIM)) -affiliated with *al-Qaeda* global- and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS), groups that operate freely in the vast region that lacks secure borders and escapes the effective control of their states.

The first is to prevent the displacement of more civilian population given the actions of the *muahidines* who compulsively recruit the men of the communities, and the increasingly onerous *zakat* (tithe) demanded by the terrorists, which if not complied with give rise to

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massacres, destruction of their villages, the burning of their fields and the slaughter of their animals, actions that make thousands of these peasants are forced to abandon everything and move to safer places, but without possibilities to earn a living, depending on the assistance of governments or international institutions. With no chance of returning to their places, the displaced are crammed into refugee camps, so the vast majority will join the millions of Africans who will seek to reach Europe.

The second reason for the reactivation by the European nations together with the United States is to cut off the increasingly important Russian presence on the continent, which fundamentally in the military field seems to give more confidence to their governments, as in the cases of the Central African Republic and Mali.

The inefficiency or ill will of the Western powers that, with operations such as the French *Barkhane* that will rise next year and will be replaced by the *European Task Force Takuba*, composed of several nations of the European Union, which fight against the rigorists since 2012, have not even been able to contain these groups that since a small revolt in northern Mali, in 2012, they have radiated to numerous nations of the continent, reaching as far away as Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) or recently Uganda, whose capital Kampala is being subjected to constant attacks.

But perhaps Burkina Faso is the most emblematic case (See: Burkina Faso, speculations about terror), where terrorists forced federal forces to practically leave the northern region and already use the rest of the territory to attack other nations further south.

On that same path is Niger, where since 2016 the Wahhabi gangs, arriving from Mali, initiated military actions in the west of the country in the Tillabery region, forming a second front of war against terrorism as Niamey fought with the Nigerian insurgency of *Boko Haram* in the southeast of the country.

But the killing of hundreds of civilians in recent months raises a rethink of the security crisis, which rose to international attention after the death of four American green berets in the village of Tongo-Tongo, Tillabery, exposing Washington's secret maneuvers in the country.

Between late 2019 and early 2020, the Nigerien army had to abandon its bases along the border with Mali after the bloody terrorist attacks, which resulted in numerous casualties in the troops leaving dozens of villages unprotected.

Attacks on communities are forcing a change in government strategy that has so far failed to prevent, despite pressure from government troops, tens of thousands of people from leaving their lands, particularly in Tillabery, one of the areas most affected by violence due to its borders with Burkina Faso and Mali.

In the Darey Dey area, 100 kilometers south of the city of Balleyara (Tillabery), the *mujahideen* who in March had already killed 66 people, last August again attacked killing another 37 people, burned houses and barns and stole livestock, bringing the number of civilians killed to about 450 so far this year in western Niger alone.

Civilian populations are not only victims of attacks by insurgents, but also suffer abuses and in many cases are killed by regular troops, who are using for their own benefit the investments that European Union countries are making in the field of security, estimated at more than 800 million dollars, with the intention of turning that country into the main base of foreign forces in the Sahel, given that France is about to abandon Mali. That is why in Tillabery and in the neighboring region of Tahoua, self-defense groups have emerged not only to defend themselves against terrorists, but also against federal troops. Which shows the absence of the State and brings the country closer to an already latent ethnic war since the *Zarma*, the largest racial group of Tillabery has armed and organized itself in patrols like the Arabs and the Tuaregs, after in March of this year 130 of their own were killed at the hands of the *Fulansi shepherds*, suspected of having allied *himself with Daesh*.

Weapons and hunger

Given these circumstances, the economic situation of the country, one of the five poorest in the world, is even more aggravated. Displacement has increased exponentially in both Tillabery and Tahoua. From 80,000 people in December 2019 they have exactly doubled until last August. In May this year, after being attacked by the self-defense groups, terrorists stormed several villages in the Anzourou sector, forcing 12,000 people to flee

their homes, the largest displacement in the last five years. Meanwhile, many populations in that region are already in food crisis.

While the civilian population suffers from myriad hardships, from armed violence by both terrorists and army units to the health and food crisis, military investment in the country continues to rise.

The United States on the 7th, during a ceremony at *Niger Air Base 101* in Niamey, delivered the second of the three promised *C-130 Hercules* aircraft, the first had been delivered last January to support humanitarian operations, troop movements and vehicles to counter extremist actions.

Foreign "donors" have invested more than \$800 million in programs, training courses and weapons delivery for new police and military units and have built several military training centers in addition to delivering trucks, motorcycles, helicopters and surveillance drones.

The Nigerien army, together with members of the *Group 5 Sahelforce* (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Mauritania), of which it is also a part, has received huge sums from foreign countries, which it used directly in its operations in the Sahel, but has not managed to push back the fundamentalists, who continue to attack with increasingly bloody operations.

European contributions, which claim to also be aimed at monitoring the "human rights monitoring mechanisms for the G5 Sahel Joint Force" and human rights training courses for Nigerien soldiers and police through the *European Union Capacity Building Mission* (EUCAP) in Niger, have not proven effective.

Between March and April 2020 in a village of Inates (Tillabery), 136 civilians were missing or killed by Nigerien soldiers supported by French forces in Operation *Almahaou* (whirlwind in the *Zarma language*), composed of some 2,500 men from Niger's best-equipped troops. Already close to two years of the events, the legal investigation has not been issued while sources close to the Government say that the investigative commission has only been formed to please the "donors" of a war whose main objective seems to be civilians.

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