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The West's War against African Development Continues

The African Union, Algeria and Mali

by DAN GLAZEBROOK
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Africa's classic depiction in the mainstream media, as a giant basketcase full of endless war, famine and helpless children creates an illusion of a continent utterly dependent on Western handouts. In fact, the precise opposite is true – it is the West that is reliant on African handouts. These handouts come in many and varied forms. They include illicit flows of resources, the profits of which invariably find their way into the West's banking sector via strings of tax havens (as thoroughly documented in Nicholas Shaxson's *Poisoned Wells*). Another is the mechanism of debt-extortion whereby banks lend money to military rulers (often helped to power by Western governments, such as the Congo's former President Mobutu), who then keep the money for themselves (often in a private account with the lending bank), leaving the country paying exorbitant interest on an exponentially growing debt. Recent research by Leonce Ndikumana and James K Boyce found that up to 80 cents in every borrowed dollar fled the borrower nation in 'capital flight' within a year, never having been invested in the country at all; whilst meanwhile \$20billion per year is drained from Africa in 'debt servicing' on these, essentially fraudulent, 'loans'.

Another form of handout would be through the looting of minerals. Countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo are ravaged by armed militias who steal the country's

resources and sell them at sub-market prices to Western companies, with most of these militias run by neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi who are in turn sponsored by the West, as regularly highlighted in UN reports. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, are the pitifully low prices paid both for African raw materials and for the labour that mines, grows or picks them, which effectively amount to an African subsidy for Western living standards and corporate profits.

This is the role for which Africa has been ascribed by the masters of the Western capitalist economy: a supplier of cheap resources and cheap labour. And keeping this labour, and these resources, cheap depends primarily on one thing: ensuring that Africa remains underdeveloped and impoverished. If it were to become more prosperous, wages would rise; if it were to become more technologically developed, it would be able to add value to its raw materials through the manufacturing process before exporting them, forcing up the prices paid. Meanwhile, extracting *stolen* oil and minerals depends on keeping African states weak and divided. The Democratic Republic of Congo, for example – whose mines produce tens of billions of mineral resources each year – were only, in one recent financial year, able to collect a paltry \$32million in tax revenues from mining due to the proxy war waged against that country by Western-backed militias.

The African Union, established in 2002 was a threat to all of this: a more integrated, more unified African continent would be harder to exploit. Of special concern to Western strategic planners are the financial and military aspects of African unification. On a financial level, plans for an African Central Bank (to issue a single African currency, the gold-backed dinar) would greatly threaten the ability of the US, Britain and France to exploit the continent. Were all African trade to be conducted using the gold-backed dinar, this would mean Western countries would effectively have to pay in gold for African resources, rather than, as currently, paying in sterling, francs or dollars which can be printed virtually out of thin air. The other two proposed AU financial institutions – the African Investment Bank and the African Monetary Fund – could fatally undermine the ability of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund to manipulate the economic policies of African countries through their monopoly of finance. As Jean Paul Pougala has pointed out, the African Monetary Fund, with its planned startup capital of \$42billion, “is expected to totally supplant the African activities of the International Monetary Fund which, with only US\$25 billion, was able to bring an entire continent to its knees and make it swallow questionable privatisation like forcing African countries to move from public to private monopolies.”

Along with these potentially threatening financial developments come moves on the military front. The 2004 AU Summit in Sirte, Libya, agreed on a Common African Defence and Security Charter, including an article stipulating that “any attack against an African country is considered as an attack against the Continent as a whole”, mirroring the Charter of NATO itself. This was followed up in 2010 by the creation of an African Standby Force, with a mandate to uphold and implement the Charter. Clearly, if NATO was going to make any attempt to reverse African unity by force, time was running out.

Yet the creation of the African Standby Force represented not only a threat, but also an opportunity. Whilst there was certainly the possibility of the ASF becoming a genuine force for independence, resisting neocolonialism and defending Africa against imperialist aggression, there was also the possibility that, handled in the right way, and under a different leadership, the force could become the opposite – a proxy force for continued neocolonial subjugation under a Western chain of command. The stakes were – and are – clearly very high.

Meanwhile, the West had already been building up its own military preparations for Africa. Its economic decline, coupled with the rise of China, meant that it was increasingly unable to continue to rely on economic blackmail and financial manipulation alone in order to keep the continent subordinated and weak. Comprehending clearly that this meant it would be increasingly forced into military action to maintain its domination, a US white paper published in 2002 by the African Oil Policy Initiative Group recommended “A new and vigorous focus on US military cooperation in sub-Saharan Africa, to include design of a sub-unified command structure which could produce significant dividends in the protection of US investments”. This structure came into existence in 2008, under the name of AFRICOM. The costs – economic, military and political – of direct intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, however – with the costs of the Iraq war alone estimated at over three trillion dollars - meant that AFRICOM was supposed to primarily rely on local troops to do the fighting and dying. AFRICOM was to be the body which coordinated the subordination of African armies under a Western chain of command; which turned, in other words, African armies into Western proxies.

The biggest obstacle to this plan was the African Union itself, which categorically rejected any US military presence on African soil in 2008 – forcing AFRICOM to house its headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, a humiliating about turn after President Bush had already publicly announced his intention to set up the HQ in Africa itself. Worse was to come in 2009, when Colonel Gaddafi – the continent’s staunchest advocate of anti-imperialist policies – was elected Chairman of the AU. Under his leadership, Libya had already become the biggest financial donor to the African Union, and he was now proposing a fast-track process of African integration, including a single African army, currency and passport.

His fate is clearly now a matter of public record. After mounting an invasion of his country based on a pack of lies worse than those told about Iraq, NATO reduced Libya to a devastated failed state and facilitated its leader’s torture and execution, thus taking out their number one opponent. For a time, it appeared as though the African Union had been tamed. Three of its members – Nigeria, Gabon and South Africa – had voted in favour of military intervention at the UN Security Council, and its new chairman – Jean Ping – was quick to recognize the new Libyan government imposed by NATO, and todownplay and denigrate his predecessor’s achievements. Indeed, he even forbade the African Union assembly from observing a minute’s silence for Gaddafi after his murder.

However, this did not last. The South Africans, in particular, quickly came to regret their support for the intervention, with both President Zuma and Thabo Mbeki making searing

criticisms of NATO in the months that followed. Zuma argued – correctly – that NATO had acted illegally by blocking the ceasefire and negotiations that had been called for by the UN resolution, had been brokered by the AU, and had been agreed to by Gaddafi. Mbeki went much further and argued that the UN Security Council, by ignoring the AU's proposals, were treating “the peoples of Africa with absolute contempt” and that “the Western powers have enhanced their appetite to intervene on our Continent, including through armed force, to ensure the protection of their interests, regardless of our views as Africans”. A senior diplomat in the South African Foreign Ministry's Department of International Relations said that “most SADC [Southern African Development Community] states, particularly South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola, Tanzania, Namibia and Zambia which played a key role in the Southern African liberation struggle, were not happy with the way Jean Ping handled the Libyan bombing by NATO jets”. In July 2012, Ping was forced out and replaced – with the support of 37 African states – by Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma: former South African Foreign Minister, Thabo Mbeki's “right hand woman” – and clearly not a member of Ping's capitulationist camp. The African Union was once again under the control of forces committed to genuine independence.

However, Gaddafi's execution had not only taken out a powerful member of the African Union, but also the lynchpin of regional security in the Sahel – Sahara region. Using a careful mixture of force, ideological challenge and negotiation, Gaddafi's Libya was at the head of a transnational security system that had prevented Salafist militias gaining a foothold, as recognized by US Ambassador Christopher Stevens in 2008: “The Government of Libya has aggressively pursued operations to disrupt foreign fighter flows, including more stringent monitoring of air/land ports of entry, and blunt the ideological appeal of radical Islam...Libya cooperates with neighbouring states in the Sahara and Sahel region to stem foreign fighter flows and travel of transnational terrorists. Muammar Gaddafi recently brokered a widely-publicised agreement with Tuareg tribal leaders from Libya, Chad, Niger, Mali and Algeria in which they would abandon separatist aspirations and smuggling (of weapons and transnational extremists) in exchange for development assistance and financial support...our assessment is that the flow of foreign fighters from Libya to Iraq and the reverse flow of veterans to Libya has diminished due to the Government of Libya's cooperation with other states...”

This “cooperation with other states” refers to the CEN-SAD (Community of Sahel-Saharan States), an organization launched by Gaddafi in 1998 aiming at free trade, free movement of peoples and regional development between its 23 member states, but with a primary focus on peace and security. As well as countering the influence of Salafist militias, the CEN-SAD had played a key role in mediating conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and within the Mano River region, as well as negotiating a lasting solution to the rebellion in Chad. CEN-SAD was based in Tripoli and Libya was unquestionably the dominant force in the group; indeed CEN-SAD support was primarily behind Gaddafi's election as Chairman of the AU in 2009.

The very effectiveness of this security system, was a double blow for Western hegemony in Africa: not only did it bring Africa closer to peace and prosperity, but simultaneously undercut a key pretext for Western intervention. The US had established its own ‘Trans-

Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership' (TSCTP), but as Muatassim Gaddafi (Libyan National Security Advisor) explained to Hilary Clinton in Washington in 2009, the "Tripoli-based Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) and the North Africa Standby Force obviated TSCTP's mission".

As long as Gaddafi was in power and heading up a powerful and effective regional security system, Salafist militias in North Africa could not be used as a 'threatening menace' justifying Western invasion and occupation to save the helpless natives. By actually achieving what the West claim to want (but everywhere fail to achieve) – the neutralization of 'Islamist terrorism' – Libya had stripped the imperialists of a key pretext for their war against Africa. At the same time, they had prevented the militias from fulfilling their other historical function for the West – as a proxy force to destabilize independent secular states (fully documented in Mark Curtis' excellent *Secret Affairs*). The West had supported Salafi death squads in campaigns to destabilize the USSR and Yugoslavia highly successfully, and would do so again against Libya and Syria.

With NATO's redrawing of Libya as a failed state, this security system has fallen apart. Not only have the Salafi militias been provided with the latest hi-tech military equipment by NATO, they have been given free reign to loot the Libyan government's armouries, and provided with a safe haven from which to organize attacks across the region. Border security has collapsed, with the apparent connivance of the new Libyan government and its NATO sponsors, as this damning report from global intelligence firm Jamestown Foundation notes: "Al-Wigh was an important strategic base for the Qaddafi regime, being located close to the borders with Niger, Chad and Algeria. Since the rebellion, the base has come under the control of Tubu tribal fighters under the nominal command of the Libyan Army and the direct command of Tubu commander Sharafeddine Barka Azaiy, who complains: "During the revolution, controlling this base was of key strategic importance. We liberated it. Now we feel neglected. We do not have sufficient equipment, cars and weapons to protect the border. Even though we are part of national army, we receive no salary". The report concludes that "The Libyan GNC [Governing National Council] and its predecessor, the Transitional National Council (TNC), have failed to secure important military facilities in the south and have allowed border security in large parts of the south to effectively become "privatized" in the hands of tribal groups who are also well-known for their traditional smuggling pursuits. In turn, this has jeopardized the security of Libya's oil infrastructure and the security of its neighbors. As the sale and transport of Libyan arms becomes a mini-industry in the post-Qaddafi era...the vast amounts of cash available to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb are capable of opening many doors in an impoverished and underdeveloped region. If the French-led offensive in northern Mali succeeds in displacing the Islamist militants, there seems to be little at the moment to prevent such groups from establishing new bases in the poorly-controlled desert wilderness of southern Libya. So long as there is an absence of central control of security structures in Libya, that nation's interior will continue to present a security threat to the rest of the nations in the region."

The most obvious victim of this destabilization has been Mali. That the Salafist takeover of Mali is a direct consequence of NATO's actions in Libya is not in doubt by any

serious analysts. One result of the spread of NATO-backed destabilization to Mali is that Algeria – who lost 200,000 citizens in a deadly civil war with Islamists in the 1990s – is now surrounded by heavily armed Salafist militias on both its Eastern (Libya) and Southern (Mali) borders. Following the destruction of Libya and the toppling of Mubarak, Algeria is now the only state in North Africa still governed by the anti-colonial party that won its independence from European tyranny. This independent spirit is still very much in evidence in Algeria's attitude towards Africa and Europe. On the African front, Algeria is a strong supporter of the African Union, contributing 15% of its budget, and has \$16billion committed to the establishment of the African Monetary Fund, making it the Fund's largest contributor by far. In its relations with Europe, however, it has consistently refused to play the subordinate role expected of it. Algeria and Syria were the only countries in the Arab League to vote against NATO bombings of Libya and Syria, and Algeria famously gave refuge to members of Gaddafi's family fleeing NATO's onslaught. But for European strategic planners, perhaps more worrying than all of this is that Algeria – along with Iran and Venezuela – is what they call an OPEC 'hawk', committed to driving a hard bargain for their natural resources. As an exasperated article in the Financial Times recently explained, "resource nationalism" has taken hold, with the result that "Big Oil has soured on Algeria [and] companies complain of crushing bureaucracy, tough fiscal terms and the bullying behavior of Sonatrach, the state-run energy group, which has a stake in most oil and gas ventures". It goes on to note that Algeria implemented a "controversial windfall tax" in 2006, and quotes a western oil executive in Algiers as saying that "[oil] companies...have had it with Algeria". It is instructive to note that the same newspaper had also accused Libya of "resource nationalism" – that most heinous of crimes for readers of the Financial Times, it seems – barely a year before NATO's invasion. Of course, 'resource nationalism' means exactly that – a nation's resources being used primarily for the benefit and development of the nation itself (rather than foreign companies) – and in that sense Algeria is indeed guilty as charged. Algeria's oil exports stand at over \$70bn per year, and much of this income has been used to invest in massive spending on health and housing, along with a recent \$23billion loan and public grants programme to encourage small business. Indeed, high levels of social spending are considered by many to be a key reason why no 'Arab Spring' style uprising has taken off in Algeria in recent years.

This tendency to 'resource nationalism' was also noted in a recent piece by STRATFOR, the global intelligence firm, who wrote that "foreign participation in Algeria has suffered in large part due to protectionist policies enforced by the highly nationalistic military government". This was particularly worrying, they argued, as Europe is about to become a whole lot more dependent on Algerian gas as North Sea reserves run out: "Developing Algeria as a major natural gas exporter is an economic and strategic imperative for EU countries as North Sea production of the commodity enters terminal decline in the next decade. Algeria is already an important energy supplier to the Continent, but Europe will need expanded access to natural gas to offset the decline of its indigenous reserves." British and Dutch North Sea gas reserves are estimated to run out by the end of the decade, and Norway's to go into sharp decline from 2015 onwards. With Europe fearful of overdependence on gas from Russia and Asia, Algeria – with reserves of natural gas estimated at 4.5 trillion cubic metres, alongside shale gas reserves of 17 trillion cubic

meters – will become essential, the piece argues. But the biggest obstacle to European control of these resources remains the Algerian government – with its “protectionist policies” and “resource nationalism”. Without saying it outright, the piece concludes by suggesting that a destabilized ‘failed state’ Algeria would be far preferable to Algeria under a stable independent “protectionist” government, noting that “the existing involvement of EU energy majors in high-risk countries like Nigeria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq indicates a healthy tolerance for instability and security problems.” In other words, in an age of private security, Big Oil no longer requires stability or state protection for its investments; disaster zones can be tolerated; strong, independent states cannot.

It is, therefore, perceived to be in the strategic interests of Western energy security to see Algeria turned into a failed state, just as Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have been. With this in mind, it is clear to see how the apparently contradictory policy of arming the Salafist militias one minute (in Libya) and bombing them the next (in Mali) does in fact make sense. The French bombing mission aims, in its own words, at the “total reconquest” of Mali, which in practice means driving the rebels gradually Northwards through the country – in other words, straight into Algeria.

Thus the wilful destruction of the Libyan-centred Sahel-Sahara security system has had many benefits for those who wish to see Africa remain consigned to its role of underdeveloped provider of cheap raw materials. It has armed, trained, and provided territory to militias bent on the destruction of Algeria, the only major resource-rich North African state committed to genuine African unity and independence. In doing so, it has also persuaded some Africans that – in contrast to their united rejection of AFRICOM not long ago – they do, after all, now need to call on the West for ‘protection’ from these militias. Like a classic mafia protection racket, the West makes its protection ‘necessary’ by unleashing the very forces from which people require protection. Now France is occupying Mali, the US are establishing a new drone base in Niger and David Cameron is talking about his commitment to a new ‘war on terror’ spanning six countries, and likely to last decades.

It is not, however, all good on the imperialist front. Far from it; indeed the West had almost certainly hoped to avoid sending in their own soldiers at all. The initial aim was that Algeria would be sucked in, lured into exactly the same trap that was successfully used against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, an earlier example of Britain and the US sponsoring a violent sectarian insurgency on their enemy’s borders, attempting to drag their target into a destructive war in response. The USSR’s war in Afghanistan ultimately not only failed but destroyed the country’s economy and morale in the process, and was a key factor behind the gratuitous self-destruction of the Soviet state in 1991. Algeria, however, refused to fall into this trap, and Clinton and Hollande’s good cop-bad cop routine – the former’s ‘pressure for action’ in Algiers last October followed by French attempts at sucking up 2 months later – came to nothing. Meanwhile, rather than sticking to the script, the West’s unpredictable Salafi proxies expanded from their base in Northern Mali not North to Algeria as intended, but South to Bamako, threatening to unseat a Western-allied regime that had only just been installed in a coup less than a year earlier. The French were forced to intervene to drive them North and back towards the

state that had been their real target all along. For now, this invasion appears to have a certain level of support amongst those Africans who fear the West's Salafi proxies more than the West's own soldiers. Once the occupation starts to drag on, boosting the credibility and numbers of the guerillas, whilst exposing the brutality of the occupiers and their allies, we will see how long that lasts.