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Unraveling the Mystery of Boko Haram

by ERIC DRAITSER
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The most entertaining mysteries are the ones with compelling protagonists, enigmatic and often surreptitious antagonists, and surprising or shocking conclusions. Indeed, without these essential elements, one is unlikely to read the story at all. However, when it comes to politics and geopolitics, somehow our mass media storytellers – the scores of journalists, military and counter-terrorism ‘experts,’ and establishment mouthpieces – fail to even point us in the right direction. Not only do they not follow the threads of the story, they prefer to pretend they simply aren’t there.

And so it is with the great ‘mystery’ of Boko Haram, a group that in just a few years has become one of the most recognizable terrorist entities in the world. Having carried out heinous massacres of men, women, and children, abducted thousands of innocents, and destroyed whole towns, Boko Haram now symbolizes just that perfect blend of barbarism, religious and ideological fundamentalism, and non-white skin, which come together to cast them, in the eyes of westerners especially, as the manifestation of evil – the devil incarnate that can only be destroyed by the forces of righteousness. You know, the ‘good guys.’

But what happens when there are no ‘good guys’ to be found? What happens when you follow the story only to find the most cynical of intentions from every player involved? Such is the case with this Boko Haram story, and indeed the regional politics and geopolitics of West Africa as a whole.

In trying to unravel the labyrinthine web of political, economic, and strategic threads connecting a number of significant actors, it becomes clear that no analysis of Boko Haram is worth reading unless it approaches the issue from three distinctly different, yet intimately connected, angles.

First, there is Nigeria's domestic politics, and the issue of Boko Haram and the perception of the government and opposition's responsibility for the chaos it has wreaked. With elections scheduled to take place in February, Boko Haram and national security have, quite understandably, become dominant issues in the public mind. The mutual finger-pointing and accusations provide an important backdrop for understanding how Boko Haram fits both into the public discourse, and into the strategies of political networks behind the scenes in Nigeria, and the region more broadly.

Second is the all-important regional political and economic chessboard. In West Africa – an area rich in strategic resources – there are a few interested parties who stand to gain from Boko Haram's ongoing attacks which amount to a destabilization of the entire Nigerian state. Nigeria's neighbor Chad has recently come under heavy scrutiny from Nigeria's military apparatus for its purported role in financing and facilitating Boko Haram's expansion. Chad sees in Nigeria potential oil profits as it expands its own oil extraction capabilities throughout the Chad Basin – a geographical region that includes significant territory in Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Niger. Of course, major oil companies, not to mention powerful western nations such as France, have a vested interest in maintaining their profits from West African oil.

Finally and, perhaps most importantly, is the continental and global perspective. Nigeria, as Africa's most dynamic economy, presents major opportunities and challenges for key global powers. For China, Nigeria represents one of its principal investment footholds in Africa. A key trading partner for Beijing, Nigeria has increasingly been moving out of the direct orbit of the West, transforming it from a reliable, if subservient, Western ally, into an obstacle to be overcome. Coinciding with these developments has been the continually expanding US military presence throughout Africa, one that is increasingly concentrated in West Africa, though without much media fanfare aside from the Ebola story.

The international media has seized on the heart-rending story of the girls of Chibok – the ubiquitous #BringBackOurGirls meme – and for most people that is all they know about Boko Haram. However, such a superficial understanding of one of the most complex international stories in recent years does little to further the discourse, or bring about a resolution. Rather, a more nuanced understanding puts Boko Haram into a larger international context, one which can go a long way to dismantling the organization, and the air of mystery that surrounds it. While many of the details remain murky at best, with powerful players operating behind the scenes, the contours of a regional destabilization and a proxy war become discernible.

The Politics of Boko Haram

With national elections less than a month away, the competing factions of Nigeria's political

establishment are busily trying to scapegoat their opponents, with each side implying that the other is either in league with Boko Haram, or is deliberately trying to capitalize on the situation. The two major parties – the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) led by President Goodluck Jonathan, and the All Progressives Congress (APC) – have made Boko Haram into a political hot potato, passing it back and forth in hopes that voters will associate it with their opponent.

Last September, before Boko Haram once again made international headlines with their most recent offensives, the political mudslinging was already fierce. The Chairman of the People’s Democratic Party Councillors Forum, Collins Onogu stated that:

Most of those who have been rendered homeless in the North Eastern part of the country by Boko Haram are PDP members. What is their offence? The spokesperson of APC...has neglected his duty and he is now making statements on behalf of Boko Haram....APC has been using the media to blackmail President Goodluck Jonathan, their plan is to make the country ungovernable for him, they have plans of diverting the attention of Nigerians but it will not work out.

While Onogu’s characterization of the issue is certainly debatable, it is quite clear the PDP sees the issue of Boko Haram as a major political liability for their party, and for President Jonathan. It is for this reason that Collins and other PDP leaders have repeatedly threatened to “reveal the names of APC members sponsoring Boko Haram.” It’s entirely possible that the PDP might do this purely to sabotage their opponents in the campaign. However, it is equally true that the PDP is desperately trying to deflect the blame for a crisis that has developed while the Government has been under their control. Either way, the PDP is smearing the APC in order to guilt them by association.

Conversely, the APC has not only denied all the charges, they have made their own counter-claims, alleging that former high-ranking PDP officials are intimately involved in financing Boko Haram. John Oyegun, national chairman of the APC said in September 2014:

Dr. Stephen Davis, a man hired by the President Jonathan-led Federal Government to negotiate with Boko Haram for the release of the Chibok girls decided to speak out, believing the best way to tackle the insurgency is to expose the sponsors. And who are they?...he named former Borno Governor Ali Modu Sheriff and a former Army Chief, Gen. Azubuike Ihejirika, as the sponsors of Boko Haram... The sponsors of Boko Haram are within the PDP and the Presidency. They are known friends of President Jonathan. He knows them and they know him.

These revelations, vehemently denied by the PDP and Nigerian President Jonathan’s administration, certainly raise important questions as to the networks supporting and financing Boko Haram, and when, where, and why they were originally organized. According to leaked intelligence information obtained by the Nigerian news outlet Premium Times, the former governor of Borno State, and Goodluck Jonathan ally, Ali Modu Sheriff has been one of the principal financiers and organizers of Boko Haram, basing his operations out of Chad (more on Chad later). The dated communications obtained by

Premium Times “painted a picture of what appears to be a powerful regional support structure involving the Chadian president, Nigerian officials and Niger Republic, and spearheaded by Mr. Sheriff whom the intelligence presents as a powerful figure within this circle.”

Add to this information the findings of a presidential panel commissioned by President Jonathan:

The Report traced the origin of private militias in Borno State in particular, of which Boko Haram is an offshoot, to politicians who set them up in the run-up to the 2003 general elections. The militias were allegedly armed and used extensively as political thugs. After the elections and having achieved their primary purpose, the politicians left the militias to their fate since they could not continue funding and keeping them employed. With no visible means of sustenance, some of the militias gravitated towards religious extremism, the type offered by Mohammed Yusuf.

Certainly there are a lot of questions to answer here. Is Sheriff simply a former ally who has since “gone rogue” and decided to establish his own private army to enrich himself and his foreign patron? Conversely, could it be that Sheriff continues to be connected, if perhaps only indirectly, with the government in Abuja? The communications between Sheriff’s network and Nigerian military officials as far back as 2011 does seem to suggest at least an indirect connection between them. As such, there is obviously a complex web of relations connecting various parties in Nigeria, as well as its neighbors, with Boko Haram.

According to a 2011 intelligence memo from field officers in Chad, “members of Boko Haram sect are sometimes kept in Abeche region in Chad and trained before being dispersed. This happens usually when Mr. Sheriff visits Abeche.” So, even the most conservative analysis would have to admit there is undeniably a connection between the domestic politics of Nigeria, especially within the ruling party, and international actors who have their own agenda. And it is those actors, and their motivations, that deserve careful analysis.

Regional Conflict, Resource War

West Africa’s vast riches have long since been a prize for colonial powers and post-colonial states alike. Nigeria alone has become a global player in terms of oil production – supplying at least 8 percent of US oil imports – though it is debatable whether that has been much of a blessing for the Nigerian people. Throughout the region, economic interests have been central to the policies and agendas of a number of states whose leaders have both dollar signs in their eyes, and hegemony on their minds. This has only accelerated in recent years, especially since the imperialist war that toppled former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, perhaps the single force in Africa providing stability, and keeping peripheral actors such as Chad, Niger, and others more or less in line. Naturally, Gaddafi’s impact was seen a bit differently by those rulers whose ambitions suffered because of it.

Perhaps no leader has been more ambitious in recent years than Chadian President Idriss

Déby who has played a central role in the entire Boko Haram story, from accusations that his government has provided them safe haven, to his possibly genuine, possibly disingenuous attempts to broker a ceasefire between the terror group and the Nigerian government. He has been linked with the aforementioned Ali Modu Sheriff, the alleged mastermind of the Boko Haram network. Intelligence information from a number of sources does seem to point to a direct connection. In addition, a 2009 US diplomatic cable published by Wikileaks revealed that:

A well-trained veteran Chadian extremist, Abu-Mahjin, who has limited ties to al-Qa'ida associates, recently traveled to Nigeria. He may be planning to conduct or facilitate a terrorist operation...recent tearline stated, 'Nigerian-based probable Chadian extremist is keen to obtain more funds...it is not clear when he will receive this additional finance.'

Could it be that Abu-Mahjin acted as a de facto intermediary between certain elements in Nigeria and Chad? It is certainly plausible that, at the very least, the connection between Chad and Boko Haram goes back to the very transformation of that organization into a terrorist entity.

But what can Chad offer? And why would they?

To answer the former question, one must dive into recent history to see how Déby came to power. Curiously enough, his rise to the presidency was directly thanks to Gaddafi who, after years of war with Chad – war in which Déby himself led troops against Libyan forces – backed Déby against the former government of Hissène Habré who had been hosting a number of anti-Gaddafi Libyans with close ties to US intelligence, such as the once again relevant General Hifter. As Time magazine noted in 2001, “While the full scope of Déby’s relationship with Gaddafi remains hazy, it is known that Libya equipped Déby’s army with as many as 200 Toyota land cruisers fitted with 23-mm Soviet-made cannons.” It is quite likely that the military backing for Déby went far deeper than what is being acknowledged here.

In any event, the NATO-led war that toppled Gaddafi in 2011 radically changed the political character of the region. Suddenly, someone like Déby could pursue his own regional ambitions without the ever-watchful eye of Gaddafi who stood against any forces that sought to destabilize West Africa in the service of western corporations. With a long-established network of weapons and fighter smuggling, Chad became a major transit point for many of the weapons (and fighters) streaming out of Libya by the end of 2011. While much of the military hardware went through the Sahel region, likely into the arms of the equally shadowy Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), it is probable that a significant amount of it went to Chad. The long-standing ties with elements of the Libyan military only increase the likelihood that Chad became a refuge and/or conduit for countless weapons and fighters.

So, as Libya collapsed, and weapons and fighters came streaming out, Chad all of a sudden found itself in a position of strength, able to finally pursue an agenda to enrich itself, or at least enrich Déby and the clique around him. But what is it that he wants?

In recent years, oil discoveries throughout the Chad Basin have transformed how the states of West Africa view their economic future. At the heart of the basin is Lake Chad, surrounded by the nations of Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. According to a 2010 assessment from the US Geological Survey (USGS), the Chad Basin has “estimated mean volumes of 2.32 billion barrels of oil, 14.65 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, 391 million barrels of natural gas liquids.” The potential size of these resources certainly has whet a few palettes, both in the region and internationally.

All the countries of the basin have expressed strong desire in recent years to begin exploiting the energy reserves there. However, thus far, Nigeria has been unable to do so due to the Boko Haram insurgency. E&P (Exploration & Production), the publication of Hart Energy, noted in March 2014:

Hopes of stepping up oil exploration in Nigeria’s Lake Chad Basin have been dashed by the brutal attacks of Islamic Boko Haram and the Ansaru sect terrorists in the country’s northeastern region...Between 2011 and 2013 the Nigerian government provided \$240 million to facilitate oil and gas exploration activities in the Lake Chad Basin...Oil prospecting in the Lake Chad Basin was “yielding promising results and may lead to commercial exploration of oil and gas this year,” Nigeria’s Vice President Namadi Sambo said in 2013...But the deadly activities of the Boko Haram insurgents halted plans.

So, while Nigeria is forced to put the brakes on its oil exploration and development in the Chad Basin, its neighbors, most notably Chad, continue theirs. As Dr. Peregrino Brimah explained, “The Boko Haram insurgency has conveniently provided Chad, under the government of Idriss Déby, unfettered access to oil under Nigeria’s soils through 3D oil drilling from within its territorial borders, which the country exports.” So, in true Daniel Plainview “I drink your milkshake” style, Déby has engaged in siphoning off Nigeria’s oil wealth, and exporting it for massive profits for himself and his cronies. But of course, Chad is not alone in this endeavor, as it has company from Cameroon and Niger, both of whom are doing precisely the same thing.

Standing above and behind this practice is the former colonial power France – the one-time colonial master of Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. Today, France’s dominant role continues as its port of Le Havre is the final destination for the unrefined oil extracted from under the feet of West Africans. Needless to say, there are very powerful interests both in Africa and Europe who want to ensure that the flow of their precious oil continues unabated. Moreover, they will do anything to prevent the major oil exporting power of the region, namely Nigeria, from being able to cut in on their action.

And this regional rivalry is, at least in part, the reason why Boko Haram really has the potential to spark international conflict. Last October, after Nigerian military forces launched an offensive against Boko Haram, the ensuing battle spilled across the Nigeria-Cameroon border where, depending on who you believe, either Nigerian forces retreated, or they pursued Boko Haram suspects. In total, 107 Boko Haram militants were killed, along with 8 Cameroonian military officers and dozens of civilians. In this way, the resource war

is transmogrified into a shooting war. The destabilization of the entire region is not far off from that.

It is precisely this danger of a regional destabilization that has so many observers around the world biting their nails. The obvious danger is that West Africa could become, like the Sahel and most of North Africa, a locus of extremism and terror. However, the most pressing question of all is why. In whose interest is it to see the whole region destabilized? What is the global and geopolitical context for understanding these decidedly complex and interconnected issues?

Part 2 of this article will examine the geopolitical and strategic context within which these events should be understood. It will detail how the US and certain European powers are exploiting the situation for their own gain.

The first installment of this article focused on the relationship between Boko Haram and the domestic politics of Nigeria, as well as the regional resource war that has developed around the Lake Chad Basin. It exposed the connections between individuals and networks both in Nigeria and Chad that are actively supporting and/or facilitating Boko Haram, and in doing so, participating in a dangerous game of regional destabilization. Naturally, the question becomes: why? In whose interests is this destabilization being carried out? What is the larger economic and geopolitical calculus at work? It is to these questions that we must now turn.

For at least the last 500 years, Europeans have looked to Africa as a potential source of wealth and power. From the earliest Portuguese expeditions up through the present day, the West has seen in Africa vast, and seemingly unlimited, riches. From gold, diamonds, and other precious materials, to energy and, impossible not to mention, human labor, the Europeans (and in recent times Americans) have swarmed Africa as the locusts of capitalism, stripping it of its wealth and then asking why Africa is so chaotic. Such cynical, and blatantly imperialist, ambitions have always lain at the center of Western strategy on the so-called “Dark Continent.” So too are they at the heart of the current situation in Nigeria, and West Africa generally.

In examining the complex web of relations connecting events in West Africa, a disturbing, though hardly surprising, trend appears: as Western geopolitical and economic interest in the region increases, so too does instability grow. While it may seem counter-intuitive, in fact this trend makes perfect sense. While the US and Europe invoke ad nauseam the term “stability,” the reality is that chaos and instability are perfectly suited for their neocolonial objectives.

France, for centuries a dominant power in Africa, figures prominently in this 21st Century competition to exploit Africa for its own enrichment. In its former colonies in West Africa, France has once again established itself both as a military and, perhaps more importantly, economic power. Using the twin pretexts of terrorism and humanitarianism, France has successfully veiled its true intentions in the region, namely the plunder of mineral and energy resources. Because the naked imperialism of the French Colonial Empire is

politically unacceptable by today's standards, France has had to present itself as the benevolent patron, an altruistic power that simply wants to help its former colonial children get back on their feet. However, when one digs a bit deeper, it becomes clear that the France that once enslaved Haiti, colonized Algeria and much of North Africa, and mercilessly exploited West Africa, is very much alive and well.

But France is certainly not alone in eyeing potential economic benefits in West Africa. Recently, Germany has stepped into the fray, making it clear that it seeks to become more assertive militarily and economically in the region. As the major economic engine of Europe, Germany is in prime position to take full advantage of the insecurity coupled with the tremendous demographic growth of West Africa. In Ghana, Nigeria, and elsewhere, Germany sees untapped potential markets for its exports, as well as a military foothold. In this way, the European Union, more and more seen as the domain of Germany, places itself at the center of a growing competition in the region.

And then of course there is the inescapable, intractable military powerhouse of the United States which has quietly, but very significantly, increased its military capability – “footprint” to use the parlance of AFRICOM and strategic planners – all throughout the continent. This deafeningly quiet military expansion has, at its root, the goal of checking the rise of China's economic influence throughout the continent. With regard to West Africa, the US has established a widely dispersed, though obviously coordinated, network of small military installations which Washington hopes to use to expand its hegemony over the African space without the proverbial “boots on the ground.” Indeed, this is precisely in accordance with the function of AFRICOM since 2007, namely maintaining US military engagement without investing in large-scale deployment.

With this larger objective of blocking Chinese economic penetration in Africa, the US and its European toadies have transformed the continent into a proxy battleground, one which has destabilization as a potent weapon. In the case of West Africa, as in other parts of the continent, it is the people who will pay in blood for the economic and geopolitical ambitions of the Empire.

Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss

The growing instability throughout Francophone West Africa has provided a convenient pretext for France to reassert its hegemony in its former colonies. The 2012 coup in Mali, and the subsequent civil war and rise of terrorism, gave the French military the opening it needed to permanently station military forces throughout the region. However, the real question is not whether or not France is right in “aiding” its former colonies, but rather, what its real agenda truly is.

Despite the rhetoric of democracy, stability, and the rule of law, France has very self-interested motives. With regard to Boko Haram, Nigeria, and the Lake Chad basin, France is the primary beneficiary of the energy extraction taking place there, as its port of Le Havre is the final destination for the unrefined oil. As I noted in Part 1, the Lake Chad Basin has an estimated mean volume of 2.32 billion barrels of oil, 14.65 trillion cubic feet of natural gas,

and 391 million barrels of natural gas liquids. Taken in total, both in terms of actual and potential exports, these energy reserves are worth billions. But France's economic interests certainly do not stop with energy.

France has a keen interest in exploiting lucrative mineral deposits throughout the region. Were one to doubt the sincerity of France's neocolonial intentions as it regards mineral extraction, one need look no further than the fact that the French "socialist" government of Hollande is investing more than half a billion dollars in a new, state-owned mining company. As French industry minister Arnaud Montebourg stated upon the announcement of the new venture, "Francophone African countries, notably, would like to work with us rather than do business with foreign multinationals." Naturally, one should take such a statement with a healthy dose of skepticism as to just how much choice those countries, let alone their citizens, have in the matter. Not only will France be looking to exploit mineral deposits of lithium and germanium, but also the all-important rare earth minerals so lucrative in this age of microprocessors and other technology for which such minerals are a necessity.

Moreover, Montebourg's interesting phrase "foreign multinationals" is quite revealing. On the one hand, it seems that, in the minds of the French political and business elite, they themselves are not "foreign" when operating in Francophone countries. The neocolonialism of such a mentality is impossible to ignore. Secondly, it seems almost self-evident that the "foreign multinationals" to which he is referring are the Chinese companies (private and state-owned) which have made tremendous inroads all throughout the region in terms of mineral extraction and investment. So, France is clearly cognizant of a turf war between themselves and China for these riches in West Africa.

In addition to the rare earth and other minerals, there are the vast deposits of uranium throughout the region that have piqued France's interest. As Think Africa Press reported in 2014:

France currently sources over 75% of its electricity from nuclear energy and is dependent on Niger for much of its immediate and future uranium supply. This dependence could grow even further when production at the recently-discovered Imouraren uranium deposit is up and running in 2015. The mine is set to produce 5,000 tonnes of uranium per year and would help make Niger the second-largest uranium producer in the world. Areva, which is 87% owned by the French state and holds a majority share in three out of the four uranium mining companies operating in Niger, is funding the new mine.

Add to this the fact that the president of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, is a former employee of Areva, the company that, despite the ongoing conflict with the government of Niger over royalty percentages, still maintains a near monopoly over the uranium trade. It should come as no surprise then that the main competition for Areva (and France) for this lucrative trade is China which "already owns 37% stake in Niger's SOMINA mine and has carried out uranium exploration throughout the country."

The battle between France and China for influence and control of strategic minerals and

markets is increasingly becoming central in France's overall policy in the region. France's goal is to reestablish economic hegemony in its Francophone "sphere of influence" as is evidenced by the French government's policy paper entitled A partnership for the future: 15 proposals for a new economic dynamic between Africa and France which could be seen as a blueprint for French policy in the region. Undoubtedly this increased emphasis is due to the fact that "Over the past decade, France's share of African trade plummeted from 10 to 4.7 percent, while China's African market share soared to over 16 percent in 2011." The contours of this proxy war should be becoming more apparent.

The Germans Are Coming

While Germany's engagement in Africa was never as deep or long-standing as that of France, Britain, or other European empires, it's unlikely that anyone would accuse Germany of being a slouch when it comes to aggressive imperialism. Though the 19th Century "Scramble for Africa" is long since in the Germany's well-engineered rear-view mirror, Berlin has recently demonstrated a shift in its commitments on the continent; Germany intends to be a player militarily and, most importantly, economically.

In a recent policy paper entitled Federal Government Policy Guidelines for Africa, the German government notes that "Africa's potential stems from its demographic development and the fact that it is a huge market of the future with strong economic growth, rich natural resources, a great potential for increasing agricultural production and food security by its own efforts...African markets are developing dynamically and – beyond the extractive industries – will be of growing interest to German business" (also noted here).

Essentially then, Germany views Africa generally, and West Africa specifically, as a major emerging market that can be capitalized on by German corporations. Perhaps this is why Chancellor Merkel has reiterated Germany's commitment to provide military aid in the form of financial support, training, logistics, policing, etc. to its longtime partner in Ghana. And it is through the intermediary of Ghana that Germany seeks to expand its military engagement in the region. After a recent meeting in Germany between the leaders of the two countries, it was reported on the German cabinet's official website that, in response to the threat of Boko Haram:

Angela Merkel supported the proposal of the Ghanaian President to found a regional African intervention force...Ghana's President promised that Ghanaian troops would be deployed. The Bundeswehr [Germany military forces] cooperates with the Ghana Armed Forces. In the interests of peace building and crisis prevention Germany is working to put in place and stabilise regional security structures, partly through the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, which was founded ten years ago with German support. Germany also supports Ghana in the establishment of an engineers regiment as part of the planned African Union intervention force.

It is clear that Germany sees in Ghana a viable partner through which it can achieve a military presence in the region. Using Boko Haram as the pretext, it seems that once again

German military force, coupled with financial assistance, will be used to guarantee the all-important market access that Germany desperately desires.

The larger context is clear too. Germany is the world's second leading exporting economy behind China (excluding the EU as a single economy), and as such, sees China as its primary rival for market penetration. It goes without saying that, like France, Germany is concerned that Chinese economic hegemony in West Africa could sideline German business, forcing it to take a back seat to China. And so, like their European cousin France, Germany looks to its military, and the pretext of counter-terrorism, to ensure its own economic position.

The Imperialist Elephant in the Room

While Germany and France have clear economic motivations for expanding their presence in West Africa, the United States' agenda is far less obvious. Although the United States invests heavily in Africa in the aggregate, it is not nearly as dependent on African raw materials or the emerging market as its European allies. Instead, Washington's concern is being outpaced by China on the continent as a whole.

As renowned Professor and China scholar Deborah Brautigam noted in her 2013 report Chinese Investment in Africa, "Chinese imports and exports, outbound investment aid, and export finance are all sharply on the rise. For example, trade between China and Africa rose from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$166.3 billion in 2011... [In 2012] Chinese leaders announced a goal of \$20 billion in finance to African countries by 2015. If carried out, an average of between \$6 and \$7 billion would flow to Africa per year."

Brautigam's numbers illustrate the fact that, while still slightly below yearly US total investment on the continent (\$9 billion), China is rapidly challenging US economic hegemony in Africa. Having invested in a variety of sectors from mining and oil, to telecommunications and banking, China has made itself into a viable alternative to US, World Bank, and IMF investment and aid. Naturally, this has upset the political and corporate establishment in the US who see in China a threat to their power. It is precisely this challenge from China that is the true motivation for the quiet expansion of the US military presence on the continent, especially in West Africa and the Sahel.

The United States has established a vast network of drone bases/facilities throughout the region, though military officials refuse to acknowledge the facilities as anything more than "temporary staging areas" or some other vacuous euphemism. However, a simple look at the map, combined with disparate reports in various media, paints a much more insidious picture of what the US is doing.

Under the auspices of AFRICOM, the United States is in nearly every significant country in the region. In Chad, which figures prominently in the Boko Haram narrative, the US has

indefinitely stationed military personnel ostensibly to search for the missing Chibok girls. However, the White House's own press statement reveals a much more far-reaching objective, namely that "These personnel will support the operation of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft for missions over Northern Nigeria and the surrounding area." Translation: The US has drones and other surveillance covering the entire Lake Chad Basin.

While the US only acknowledged a tiny contingent of soldiers, the reality is that far more US forces are engaging in Chad in one form or another. Perhaps this is best illustrated by the not-so-coincidental fact that Chad has been selected to host AFRICOM's Flintlock 2015 military exercises "which will kick off Feb. 16, 2015 in the capital N'Djamena with outstations in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon and Tunisia, and will run through March 9, 2015." Got that? US military personnel will be leading exercises all throughout the region, with specific attention to the Lake Chad Basin countries. But it certainly doesn't stop there.

The US announced in 2013 that it was constructing a major drone base in Niger. As the Washington Post reported:

The Predator drones in Niger...give the Pentagon a strategic foothold in West Africa... Niger also borders Libya and Nigeria, which are also struggling to contain armed extremist movements... [Nigerien] President Issoufou Mahamadou said his government invited Washington to send surveillance drones because he was worried that the country might not be able to defend its borders from Islamist fighters based in Mali, Libya or Nigeria... "We welcome the drones," Mahamadou said... "Our countries are like the blind leading the blind," he said. "We rely on countries like France and the United States. We need cooperation to ensure our security."

And here the connection between US military engagement and Boko Haram and other terrorist groups becomes painfully clear. The United States cynically exploits the instability in the region – a direct outgrowth of the US-NATO war against Libya – to further entrench its military muscle.

As if one needed further proof of US intentions, the Marine Corps Times reported in September 2014 that, "The Corps has established three new staging outposts in Senegal, Ghana and Gabon that will help Marines respond to crises in Africa more quickly." Of course AFRICOM and the military bureaucracy don't refer to these installations as "bases," but rather as "cooperative security locations." But such a moniker does little to change the fact that these are permanent US military facilities in West Africa.

Seemingly no country in the region is free of US military penetration. The Washington Post reported in 2012 that:

A key hub of the U.S. spying network can be found in Ouagadougou, the...capital of Burkina Faso... Under a classified surveillance program code-named Creek Sand, dozens of U.S. personnel and contractors have come to Ouagadougou in recent years to establish a

small air base on the military side of the international airport. The unarmed U.S. spy planes fly hundreds of miles north to Mali, Mauritania and the Sahara.

Taken in total, it becomes apparent that the US has established a vast military infrastructure throughout West Africa and the Sahel, far larger than anything either publicly acknowledged or even privately recognized. Ostensibly, the US is establishing this network of bases for the purposes of counter-terrorism, in order to meet the security challenges posed by Boko Haram, AQIM, and other groups. However, those of us who are less gullible, and generally skeptical of the intentions of the US and its military, can see clearly what Washington is doing.

The military infrastructure, surveillance, aid to countries in the region, etc. are part of a coordinated attempt by the US to check China's growing influence on the continent. The US is perfectly cognizant of the fact that it is increasingly unable to compete with China in terms of investment and mutually beneficial trade on the continent. And so, the US falls back on its primary lever of hegemony – it's military. Seen in this way, terrorism becomes less of a threat than a window of opportunity to cement Washington's place as the dominant hegemon in Africa.

Perhaps most tragic is that the fate of the Chibok girls, along with the innocents at Baga, and others throughout northern Nigeria and the greater region, has become a mere afterthought in the grand scheme of imperialism in Africa. Their lives have been made into bargaining chips to be played to the advantage of France, Germany, and the US primarily.

But of course, mum's the word when it comes to these uncomfortable truths. "Nothing to see here," our fearless media tells us. Sadly, for the vast majority of people in the West, this is undeniably true; there is simply nothing worth seeing.