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An emerging military power in Central Africa? Chad under Idriss Déby

Roland Marchal

Chad military involvement in Mali and lately in all neighboring states prompts to revisit several episodes of its past history at a time, observers should deal with a growing discrepancy between the unfolding fragility of the regime and its ambition to be a regional military power.

Idriss Déby Itno came to power in December 1990 and promised to bring democracy and freedom after a two-decade civil war. It was difficult for him to keep his words, accept a multi-party system and free and fair elections. Numerous opponents, some of them eager to restart armed struggle, were killed or “disappeared” and state authority was imposed on regions by harsh coercion. After the defeat of armed groups in 2008, contention in Chad has mostly taken the form of demonstrations, riots and social violence. It has been repressed in forceful ways by arresting civil society activists, journalists, opposition MPs and shooting demonstrators.

After tense first years of his regime, the political atmosphere somewhat improved in the late 1990s. Libya was in a supporting mood and Idriss Déby needed Western backing to build a 1070 km pipeline to the Cameroonian port of Kribi to export oil to the international market. The year 2003 should have inaugurated a new page in Chad’s history as oil revenues, for the first time, poured into state coffers. However, old habits die hard: Idriss Déby public commitment to leave power at the end of his second mandate in 2006 was disrespected. Moreover, N’Djamena got involved in the Darfur conflict. The conjunction of these two crises built a system of conflicts that made Darfur conflict intractable and provoked a regime crisis in Chad that allowed the rebels to reach the capital city in April 2006 and February 2008. Idriss Déby survived thanks primarily to French military backing and Libyan support. Idriss Déby decided not to keep oil money in foreign banks but use those funds to buy modern military hardware, expand his military apparatus and pay for mercenaries. The normalization with Khartoum inaugurated in June 2009 meant that Sudanese support to the various Chadian armed opposition groups was stopped meanwhile Idriss Déby cut his aid to Darfur rebellions. A new regional order was emerging without peace for the population and without any vital threat to the regimes in Khartoum and N’Djamena.

Idriss Déby was re-elected President in 2011 and one could have expected that oil revenues would be used for the best of the country, since violent competition was over. Economic and political governances deteriorated. Idriss Déby Itno and his wife, Hinda Mahamat Abderahim Açyl, promoted their relatives and clients in the high-ranking civil service, the cabinet and the business realm. In particular, the military apparatus became ethnically highly polarized and absolutely in the hands of the President closest relatives. Oil revenues were used to build infrastructures but a closer glance proved that most contracts were allocated to first feed the patronage networks of the presidential couple. Until today, most development indexes have kept pessimistic even though Chad economic potential goes much beyond the oil sector. This model of growth over-centered on oil was eventually jeopardized by the fall of oil price in the second semester 2014. Despite his reelection in March 2016, Idriss Déby has been unable to mobilize external support enough to compensate the drastic shortage of internal financial resources. As a consequence, the political opposition and the civil society activists were able to organize popular movements or propose

parliamentary motions that proved that despite its crude repression, the regime was not as powerful as it claimed. Burkina Faso social mobilization against Blaise Compaoré looks the shared reference of all opponents, even though few still dream that politico-military organizations (and remnants of the 2000s armed opposition) might eventually be a triggering factor in reforming or changing the current regime in N'Djamena.

In January 2013, President Idriss Déby Itno sent troops to fight alongside French soldiers in northern Mali, despite the fact that Chad was not an ECOWAS (Economic Community of West Africa States) member. This contrasted with the procrastination of most West African states (at the notable exception of Niger). Over 1,100 Chadian troops are still parts of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) mid-2015. Furthermore, far from adopting the usual peacekeeping indolence, those troops have been in the forefront against Islamic militant networks. Nearly two years after this first projection of forces beyond Chadian borders, just before an AU summit in Addis-Ababa that had to debate Boko Haram threat late January 2015, Idriss Déby launched an offensive alongside Cameroonian and Nigerien forces against Boko Haram.

These political choices have rewarded Idriss Déby with increased Western diplomatic support to negotiate with the International Monetary Fund a reduction of Chad's debt and ease current economic tensions. They also made Idriss Déby re-election in 2016 the likeliest in the presidential contest: none of his Western allies would have been happy with him quitting the job at a time a so-called "Jihadi crisis" is unfolding in the Greater Sahel. Yet, these successes also mean growing pressures on his regime. The population, supportive of his attitude against Islamic militant groups, suffers from his extremely poor governance and the systemic embezzlement of state money. Rivalries and tensions between different segments of the military are likely going to grow with time due to the relatively high number of casualties in the various fronts and also to the reduction of funds to be shared. Last but not least, terror attacks may fragment popular support for this policy.

This paper analyses three major issues. First, it describes the dynamic of events that convinced (at least partially) Idriss Déby Itno to play victoriously the card of the West's main regional ally against terrorism in the Greater Sahel Region. These reasons are rooted in his management of national tensions as well as a certain understanding of regional dynamics. Although he won against his own rebels in 2008, managing his victory became costly. The rentier transformation of the Chadian state helped to reward his supporters though greed dramatically increased. Paradoxically at a time there was more money to sustain patronage networks, the social constituency of the regime was narrowing. The growing marginalization of the bulk population makes more credible the scenario of economic grievances feeding (not even politically motivated) riots against the regime, as witnessed over the last two years.

A second section of the text reviews Chad relationships with its neighbors. Idriss Déby Itno inherited complex and sometimes tumultuous relations with them. Throughout his 25 years in power, he has also contributed to shape those relations. This description also underlines the importance of the 2011 Libyan crisis on the whole region. Data were collected through interviews in the region from April 2015 to summer 2016, though fieldwork in CAR, Cameroon and Chad took place at several moments in that period.¹

The conclusive section proposes a comparative explanation of how and why Chad could pretend to play the role of a regional military power, even though it cannot be a regional hegemon. Chad is not the first to try to haul up to this status. Others did on the continent and a comparison with Uganda would prove very useful to emphasize the strengths and weaknesses of Idriss Déby in that attempt.

¹ Fieldwork was possible thanks to the support of Sciences Po (Paris) and generous research funding by the *Comité Catholique contre la Faim* and the Nordic International Foundation. The author is the sole responsible for this analysis.

GETTING RENTIER: CHAD IN THE 2000S

The Chadian regime in 2016 is very different from what it was in the early 1990s or even in the 2000s. The ruling party, the Salvation Patriotic Movement/*Mouvement patriotique de salut* (MPS), that was built in exile in 1989 after a failed coup against Hissène Habré was a coalition of different armed groups and after 1990 represented a large spectrum of ethnic groups. Beyond his own ethnic group (Bideyat a sub-section of Zaghawa),² he was joined by Gorane, a large section of the Arab community and other groups from the south and center (Sara, Hadjarai, etc.), the three first being over-represented in the security apparatus and being the backbone of his military apparatus. Although there is no ethnic census, a conservative estimate of the demography underlines how socially marginal the Bideyat and the more numerous Gorane are. Maybe because of this sociological feature, the MPS did not genuinely endorse multi-party politics. Elections were most often rigged, even at the parliamentary level; freedom of association and expression was constrained by an omnipotent security apparatus and the rule of law was enforced in a whimsical manner. International pressures at different moments were necessary to obtain slow and fragile improvements in economic and political governance.

This picture changed in the 2000s due to the conjunction of three different dynamics. In order to contain international criticisms and build confidence with donors, the state apparatus improved its behavior and, after the electoral fraud in 2001 appeared too big to be denied, Idriss Déby announced that he would stick to the Constitution and leave the presidency at the end of his second mandate in 2006. Yet, promises only commit those who believe in them.

Darfur was not a quiet region in the 1980s. Idriss Déby in 1989 was indirectly involved in an episode of war in Darfur. New incidents happened there in the 1990s, though they had little impact on Chad (and even on the political situation in Khartoum). But, the conflict in Darfur that started in 2002/2003 was a very different confrontation and its regional implications were deeply felt in Chad.

Last but not least, Chad after a lot of efforts was able to start its oil exploitation in 2003. Although Idriss Déby was prisoner of a number of agreements with the World Bank and oil companies, he quickly contested those deals to have freer hand in managing Chad oil revenues. This was possible thanks to Paris support since Idriss Déby was facing a growing armed opposition backed by Khartoum. Even though that money was first spent on reinforcing the military capabilities of the regime, it also reshaped the working of the state apparatus and the relations between the population and the regime: oil exploitation was transforming Chad into a rentier state.

A decade later, Idriss Déby's regime looks like an old family kingdom as his sons, brothers, and (Hinda) in-laws have been appointed in state positions that give them access to wealth, power and coercion. The three highest positions in the Presidential Guard (called DGSSIE)³ are filled by one of his sons and two nephews. The DGSSIE is nowadays more numerous and better equipped than the Army which is also controlled by close relatives. Recruits belong to ethnic groups that represent a small proportion of the population but identify their interests with Déby's: Zaghawa, Gorane and Arab (the two latter often due to their technical expertise and much less represented than the former though they are more numerous in the whole population) and few individuals from other groups.

² Zaghawa encompasses people from Sudan and Chad (who are called Bideyat). In this piece, "Zaghawa" is often used because many Sudanese Zaghawa settled in Chad after December 1990 and played a role in Idriss Déby regime. Yet, one should not downplay differences between Sudanese Zaghawa and Bideyat. As indicated later on, contradictions among Bideyat played a crucial role in the regime crisis throughout the 2000s. On these important nuances, see the work of Marie-José Tubiana on anthropological aspects.

³ DGSSIE: *Direction générale des services de sécurité des institutions de l'Etat*.

As a result, Chad despite huge amounts of oil revenues is still described as one of the poorest countries of the African continent. Chad sits at 154 out of 174 on Transparency International Corruption Perception Index. Chad also ranks 184 out of 187 countries on the 2014 UN Human Development Index.⁴ Daily life for most Chadians remains extremely difficult as the wealth has been accumulated by a very narrow group of relatives and clients of the presidential couple.

The succession crisis

In 2001, Idriss Déby got re-elected President but the electoral fraud was too visible and France attitude not lenient. He announced⁵ that this mandate would be his last one and he wanted to prepare a smooth transition to a new President. Yet, parliamentary elections in 2002 were not virtuous,⁶ which already was a clear indication that Idriss Déby doubted his own promise. The French Prime Minister (1997-2002), Lionel Jospin, had made any conciliatory move towards Idriss Déby conditional on better policies in Chad. When Prime Minister Jospin lost the first round of the Presidential elections in April 2002, Idriss Déby knew that his relation with Paris would get quickly warmer.

In 2003, several clues showed that Idriss Déby was not anymore willing to keep his words about respecting the Constitution, had he been once sincere about it. He got involved in regime change in CAR in March and he knew that events in Bangui would require him to continue to act decisively in Bangui (which he did until summer 2004).⁷ Oil exploitation that had needed so many compromises with the Bretton Woods institutions in the late 1990s got started and the flow of money after many years of budgetary diet was too rewarding to be left to others. Many among his closest supporters were nervous about keeping their wealth and properties if he gave up power in N'Djamena: Idriss Déby as President was seen as a guarantee of the continued impunity for those barons (at a scale that today appears minor).

Unsurprisingly, at the MPS Congress in autumn 2003, those latter enthusiastically proposed to amend the Constitution to allow Idriss Déby to get an unlimited number of mandates, a proposal he endorsed. This decision was far from consensual among those who had backed Déby for years as illustrated by the resignation of the Chad Ambassador to Washington, Ahmed Hassaballah Soubiane (a MPS heavyweight), and the absence of the two Erdimi brothers at the Congress.⁸ Some among Déby's associates expected to compete for the presidential position. Others, like Tom and Timan Erdimi who eventually led the armed opposition against Déby two years later, were concerned that the opposition would grow to a point that the regime and Bideyat be threatened. The Erdimi brothers were advocating a smooth transition at the cost of losing the presidential position. The political opposition was mobilized against possible constitutional changes as it knew that the MPS without Idriss Déby as President would split in many smaller parties and be easier to defeat. Some – yet weak and not numerous – found that this was the proof nothing would change without violence and used the war situation in Darfur to get sanctuaries.

In 2004, the Constitution was changed through a referendum that was seen by many as a scam. A coup attempt also failed and proved that some in the regime inner circle refused to endorse once more Idriss Déby's taste for power. Late 2005, new armed groups emerged and announced that they intended to overthrow Idris Déby. Many officers in the military or the then Presidential Guard left to

⁴ See for instance p. 4 at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/228170.pdf>

⁵ "Idriss Déby: 'Il me reste à préparer le Tchad à l'alternance'", *Le Monde*, 5 June 2001.

⁶ The ruling party, the MPS, got 113 seats/155, enough to change the Constitution without looking for allies. See http://www.ipu.org/parline-f/reports/arc/1061_02.htm

⁷ Roland Marchal, "Aux marges du monde... en Afrique centrale", *Les Etudes du CERI*, n° 153-154, March 2009, available at http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceri/files/etude153_154.pdf

⁸ Tom and Timan Erdimi were instrumental in building the MPS and appointing key ministers and high-ranking civil servants in the 1990s.

join the opposition: not only hardcore opponents such as Tama or Waddaï people but Zaghawa cadres who sometimes had helped building the regime they suddenly wanted to fight.

This armed opposition was never united, beyond overthrowing Idriss Déby. It was a constellation of groups with different political backgrounds. Some represented an old opposition to the regime based on confrontations that took place in the 1990s. Others joined because they got an opportunity through the Darfur conflict to have sanctuaries and weapons. Those who eventually led this loose federation were from the inner circle of Idriss Déby. These groups were allied as much as competitors and failed to win not only because Idriss Déby got strong French backing but also because in key moments they preferred to lose the battle than to offer the victory to one of them. The N'Djamena battle early February 2008 was the perfect illustration of those divisions: armed groups were able to enter N'Djamena but split there on who should be named Interim President; a support contingent left Darfur with fuel and ammunitions as the battle in N'Djamena was longer than expected but preferred to get lost and keep those goods for the next step.

Second, these armed groups were made up of Chadian people. This may sound obvious but it is not. France pretended that these movements were made up of mostly mercenaries paid for by Khartoum to Islamize and Arabize Chad in order to justify its support to a debatable regime. Khartoum was seen as capable to do that and therefore no one in the international community dared to challenge Paris views. The Sudanese Security Services were split on whom to help more than others and this provoked several artificial crises among the Chadian armed opposition groups. The most striking aspect was that these armed movements never had a significant South Chadian membership not because Southerners were supportive of Déby (some indeed were) but because Christians were seen suspiciously by Khartoum. This lack proved once more how the armed groups represented more a continuing rivalry among “northern” groups to share power than a truly national political coalition to achieve an agenda of democratization.

The civilian opposition tried to not associate itself with these armed groups but also felt that these latter were the only actors able to trigger changes. This ambiguity was genuine and became very costly since the main opposition figure, Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh, was kidnapped by Idriss Déby bodyguards and allegedly killed hours after the defeat of the offensive against N'Djamena early February 2008.⁹ To a large extent, the civilian political organizations were the greatest losers of this period: the kidnapping of some of their leaders, whether they survived or not, meant that Idriss Déby would stay as the undisputed leader able to punish radical opponents. An EU guaranteed political agreement between the opposition political parties and the MPS signed in August 2007 to get free and fair elections in 2011 just proved naïve and a face saving step to Idriss Déby. When elections took place, the most important opposition leaders (all were from the south) were elected but the MPS got seats enough to change the Constitution (117 seats to the MPS and 14 to political allies on a total of 188 seats).¹⁰

But victory could be paradoxical. Today as yesterday, no one is able to say what would happen in Chad if tomorrow Idriss Déby passes away. Whatever the Constitution states, tensions within the security apparatus and the ruling elites would likely be very disruptive, even destructive.

The regional implications of the war in Darfur

Idriss Déby's political longevity has also been linked to his mastering of relations with Khartoum. Throughout the Chadian civil war, Darfur was the primary sanctuary of armed groups willing to overthrow the regime in N'Djamena: the Frolinat was set up in Nyala, Hissène Habré and Idriss Déby made Western Sudan a base to take power in N'Djamena.

⁹ <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/Rapportcommissiondenquete.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.ipu.org/parline-f/reports/1061.htm>

Déby's victory in December 1990 was due to a fragile but enduring *de facto* alliance (or connivance at least) between the new Islamist regime in Khartoum, Qaddafi's Libya and François Mitterrand's France. Members of the ruling military junta in Khartoum were supporting Déby for Zaghawa politics. Khartoum wanted to deprive Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army of facilities in Chad and to cultivate good relations with Paris. Qaddafi was concerned by plans made by the US and Hissène Habré to set up a Libyan guerilla movement led by the nowadays better known General Khalifa Belqassin Haftar.¹¹ François Mitterrand thought that Hissène Habré was becoming a liability because of his record of human rights violations, the growing US influence on him and his resistance to any accommodation with Paris on several important issues (including the status of *Epervier* Operation).

Idriss Déby operated without Sudanese constraints and received huge consignments of weapons and ammunitions from Libya. Moreover, Qaddafi pressured remnants of other Chadian rebel groups to join him against Hissène Habré. Sudanese Zaghawa also joined Idriss Déby and fought against Hissène Habré: beyond ethnic solidarity, they expected to be integrated in the new Chadian army. Their number was such that Paris in the early 1990s pushed hard to send them back to Sudan: too many NCOs and officers were unable to speak or understand French and Paris was concerned that Islamists were also infiltrated among them. Among those who stayed in Chad, many got involved in the Darfur conflict in the 2000s, even though they kept their Chadian uniform.¹²

The Darfur conflict reshaped regional political alliances.¹³ Qaddafi had scores to settle with Khartoum after he had escaped death in an 1996 ambush planned by Libyan Islamists who were refugees in Sudan. Many of his Islamist opponents were indeed hosted by Khartoum by then (and went back to Libya only in 2011). Arming Darfur insurgents through Chad became one way of undermining the Sudanese regime. In Chad, due to the transnational shared identities (especially among Zaghawa) and family connections, particularly between the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) leaders and Idriss Déby extended family, the neutrality claimed by Idriss Déby evaporated as the crisis was unfolding in Darfur.

At first, Idriss Déby was not willing to support the Darfur rebellions because this endangered his good relations with Omar al-Bashir and also because those rebellions somewhat challenged his authority among Zaghawa people. But this stance became impossible at a time his Chad-grounded armed opposition was taking shape. Opportunistic alliances between Darfur and Chad rebels could have been built and would have altered the balance of forces in N'Djamena. Two years after the beginning of the conflict in Darfur, in July 2005, Idriss Déby crossed the red line and changed the *de facto* informal support into a more official endorsement of the Darfur insurgents beyond the diplomatic niceties that were still exchanged between the two capital cities.

Between autumn 2005 and summer 2009, the Darfur conflict and the succession crisis in Chad became deeply connected due to regional alignments and Zaghawa power struggle both in Chad and Sudan. After several years of open confrontation, N'Djamena and Khartoum came to terms that its continuation would have negative effect on the survival of both regimes.¹⁴ It was smarter to de-escalate and define the rules of a new coexistence. This was done in the second semester 2009 and was illustrated by important events on each side. JEM leader was not anymore authorized to stay in Chad and was eventually killed in an air strike while the Sudanese Intelligence Chief, Abdallah Gosh, who had been the strongest supporter of destabilizing Chad, was dismissed.

¹¹ <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20141020171033/>

¹² El-Fasher Airport was taken in April 2003 by a group of Darfur insurgents dressed in Chadian military fatigues. The collusion between Chadian soldiers and Darfur insurgents was so clear that increasingly Khartoum questioned its trust in Idriss Déby.

¹³ Roland Marchal, "Chad/Darfur: How two crises merge", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 33, n° 109, September 2006, pp. 457-482.

¹⁴ Jérôme Tubiana, *Renouncing the Rebels: Local and Regional Implications of the Chad Sudan Rapprochement*, Small Arms Survey, 2011, available at <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP-25-Local-and-Regional-Dimensions-Chad-Sudan-Rapprochement.pdf>

From that period on, both regimes have cooperated to secure their interests in the border area. Chad intervenes inside Darfur against armed groups opposed to Khartoum and tries to split them, if not defeat them. Chad, Sudan and CAR have joined efforts to build a joint military force which mandate is to secure the three border area.

The rentier curse

Oil exploitation drastically changed the demeanor of the Chadian state but this transformation was not immediately visible because, over the first years, oil revenues were mostly allocated to the military budget. Military expenditures of Chad surged by 663 percent, between 2000 and 2009.¹⁵ Only after 2009, oil revenues started being spent on other sectors.

The confrontation with its internal opposition was won by Idriss Déby but the cost of that victory was high. Rebellion is a way of life in Chad¹⁶ and many Déby supporters could not understand why their President was unwilling to accommodate his armed opposition the same way he had done it in the 1990s. Moreover, because the Bideyat are not numerous in Chad (maybe about 2-3% of the population), casualties have always been taken seriously because they could alter the balance of forces not only among Bideyat or Zaghawa sub-clans but also between Bideyat and other groups such as Gorane or Arabs.

As a matter of fact, the fighting throughout 2005 and 2009 took many Zaghawa and Bideyat lives, especially in February 2008 at Massaguet (90 km far from the capital city). In order to repair the damages within his extended family and Zaghawa at large, Idriss Déby after his victory needed to reward or compensate his parents and appointed them in the state apparatus. To a large extent, he won the war making clear that if he were overthrown the Zaghawa would lose power and now that victory was reached his regime had to be their regime.¹⁷

To understand the magnitude of this shift, one should compare this new stance with his own attitude in the early 2000s when he was careful not to give the impression that he was giving free rein to his own family at least as far as the state apparatus was concerned (many of his relatives were already conducting trade and business without caring much about taxation and regulation).

This “family-zation” – to say it this strange way – became particularly manifest in the way recruitment in the security apparatus was carried out. In 2010, to prove Paris his good will, he undertook a further reform of the security sector. He dismissed many old generals and colonels (by then Chad’s military looked Mexican with more than 60 generals) and requested them to quit villas owned by the State. Army units were also rebuilt and gave chance to more national inclusiveness. Yet, a closer glance over a longer period shows that financial rewards to leave the military were very generous, and more problematically many were recruited back after January 2013 when military adventures restarted in Mali and CAR. From 2013 onwards, new recruits became employed in the Presidential Guard or the Army but many (if not most) of those who were Zaghawa and Gorane joined the former while others had more chance to join the latter.

¹⁵ Lena Guesnet, “Oil, conflict and military expenditure: The Chad example”, Stockholm, SIPRI, 2013, available at <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/ICES2013/papers/archive/guesnet-oil-conflict-military-expenditure-chad> and Gilbert Maoudonodji, *Les enjeux géopolitiques de l'exploitation du pétrole au Tchad*, Université catholique de Louvain, Presses de l'Université catholique de Louvain, January 2009.

¹⁶ Marielle Debos, *Le métier des armes au Tchad. Le gouvernement de l'entre-deux guerres*, Paris, Karthala, 2013. See also the updated English translation, *Living by the Gun in Chad. Combatants, Impunity and State Formation*, London, Zed Press, 2016.

¹⁷ In 2006, when defections were multiplying in his entourage, Idriss Déby changed his official name to make it Idriss Déby Itno. Everyone knew that he was indeed the grand-son of Itno but mentioning it again was a way to remind all descendants and relatives of Itno that he was one of them and should benefit from their protection as much as he had to help them.

This patronage policy went beyond the state apparatus.¹⁸ In Chad, the State provides the private sector with generous contracts. Many clients of the regime became richer overnight because they set up paper companies that were given contracts they had no skills to undertake. The options were to either take a generous commission and sub-contract a more capable firm, or grab the whole payment knowing that informal bargaining with people at the presidency could avoid problems with the judicial system. Anyway, being imprisoned for embezzlement of state money has not been a major issue after 2009 since people are released without any further legal actions after a few weeks or months.

Idriss Déby drew lessons from the 2000s crisis and secured his position within his own ethnic group by employing the youth and providing economic opportunities through the State or the private sector to many others. Gorane, who could be the most dangerous contenders, also benefited from the same advantages.¹⁹

Furthermore, the rentier State allowed Idriss Déby to act in a very different field: reshaping Bideyat customary authority. His Kolyala sub-clan, during the colonial period, got once the chieftainship of the Bideyat but lost it. At one point mostly to take revenge from more “aristocratic” sub-clans such as Kobé, he imposed his brother, Timan, as a traditional chief. This “coup de force” was met by sarcasms. This had no much implication until the war started in Darfur. Timan Déby was related to Dr. Khalil Ibrahim, charismatic JEM leader while Daoussa (Idriss elder brother) was also a strong supporter of Zaghawa leaders of the Darfur insurgency. The President had to clarify his stance after reconciling with Khartoum. While Daoussa faced one further (but short) moment of disgrace, it became necessary to remove Timan Déby from that position to curb suspicion among Sudanese securocrats. This decision was also applauded by Bideyat since they were very reluctant to pay Timan Déby customary duties for parochial reasons.

However, Idriss Déby had no other alternative than becoming himself the new traditional chief: again, this move was mocked by many Bideyat for customary or more political reasons. His current policy (that requires money) is to appoint many junior chiefs who basically can only exist if they contest the traditional (older) hierarchy. By doing so, Idriss Déby settles score with more aristocratic families who at one point were inclined to support his opposition and also makes sure that no one would have moral authority strong enough to contest him in the social arena. However, he cannot revenge without any risk: hot-tempered Bideyat feel humiliated and claim that they are going to join opposition parties even if those latter are led by Southerners (but Muslims).²⁰

All those mechanisms to build and sustain patronage networks are eventually based on oil revenues. Despite recurrent arguments with oil companies and a very lax spending of oil revenues, this could have gone ahead for years but the collapse of the international oil price late 2014 meant that Chad ruler would not have the same freedom. Chad budget for 2015 was cut twice because of unrealistic forecasts on oil price and payments of salaries for the civil service were substantially delayed.²¹ The situation deteriorated further: 2016 budget was even worse.

In 2015 and 2016, in several occasions the police decided to shut on demonstrators either to save colleagues or because they could not control the rioting populace. When the sons and daughters of the ruling elite share a cozy life, most children and teenagers of the same age see their existence poisoned by scarcities, bad education and low expectations. What has been very striking in the demonstrations was not police violence but youth who behaved as if they had nothing to lose anymore and were provoking the police

¹⁸ Géraud Magrin, *Voyage en Afrique rentière. Une lecture géographique des trajectoires de développement*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2013.

¹⁹ Roland Marchal, “Le Tchad entre deux guerres ? Remarques sur un présumé complot”, *Politique africaine*, n° 130, June 2013, pp.213-223.

²⁰ This also raises another aspect not discussed here. Over his rule, Idriss Déby never accepted any competition from other Northerners. Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh was a likely powerful competitor and he “disappeared” in February 2008. Southerners can join the opposition because they are not seen as potentially dangerous for his regime.

²¹ See for further details <http://www.gramp-chad.org/index.php/fr/> and also Africa Confidential, “Winning battles, losing wars”, *Africa Confidential*, vol. 56, n° 10, 15 May 2015.

forces. Civil society organizations and political parties in Chad look very carefully at political dynamics in Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi: at least change may happen...

It is in such a context that one should analyze the emergence of Chad as a military power in the Sahel.

CHAD THROUGH ITS FRONTIERS

This section provides an overview of security threats encountered by Chad with its neighbors. The difficulty is often that informal relations are more structural than official ones but are not well-known.²² The nature of the threat also creates additional shortcomings in the sense that few writers deconstruct certain situations. For instance, is Boko Haram in northern Cameroon exactly the same movement as in Borno state inside Nigeria?

The main strength of Chad is that, for the time being Boko Haram and other Jihadi groups are kept at its borders and not really present at the grassroots level, despite several bloody terror attacks in N'Djamena and the Lake region. This is not to say that Chadian society is unscathed from radical tendencies but these latter are not assertive enough to challenge the state. For years, certain ethnic groups that often had had durable business relations with Gulf societies developed forms of Wahhabism and Salafism: among them, Boulala and Kreda are the more numerous.

Outside observers (such as this author) often pay more attention to this form of religious changes because they are boosted by globalization than other forms that are deeply rooted in local histories of parochial conflicts and temporary migrations over the border for education purposes. The Boudouma, today the strongest Chadian supporters of Boko Haram, belong to this latter category. They are not Jihadi *per se* but obediently follow their sheikhs who have increasingly been polarized by events in north-eastern Nigeria. Land issues, ethnic solidarity, religious elites and the lack of any decent state presence, can identify them as potential Boko Haram supporters....

Paradoxically, Chad's military strength may provide an incentive for militant groups to find popular support in Chad. As Somalia case proves, Islamist radical movements try to reinvent themselves as transnational entities that could strike troop-contributing countries. Today, one can see the premises of that situation in Niger and Cameroon. Yet, one cannot conclude directly that this is going to happen soon in Chad, despite bloody attacks in N'Djamena.

N'Djamena may feel safer on its border with Sudan and CAR but the duration of the conflicts in these two countries may produce destabilizing effects in Chad, even though they likely won't take the shape of Islamist armed groups. What is missing is a clear strategy of regional states and the international community to find an acceptable solution for all. States should not be the only ones to be blamed for this bloody stalemate. The Darfur insurgent movements as well as the uncompromising attitude of Khartoum exhausted the good will of many international mediation teams. CAR Seleka and anti-balaka groups have no more any real chain of command and never proved politically accountable.

Currently the international headlines are on Boko Haram though it is increasingly obvious that this problem is not going to be solved soon. However, one should be concerned by events in south and south-west Libya because the crystallizing elements of the next crisis are there. The pending question is whether the two crises may eventually connect with dire consequences for the whole Sahel.

²² Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa*, New York, Princeton University Press, 2005.

A long and unsuccessful intervention in Central African Republic

Chad was instrumental in organizing the coup that overthrew Ange-Felix Patassé in March 2003. It was organized by regional states and endorsed by Paris. Ange-Felix Patassé was a whimsical President who destroyed what was left from the CAR State after three decades of dictatorship. The CAR President also entertained unconventional alliances, especially with Muammar Qaddafi, Chadian rebels and Jean-Pierre Bemba, who were not seen favorably by Paris, to say the least. The new incumbent, General François Bozizé, was not a strong character and Idriss Déby thought he could not only be the kingmaker but also stay as the mentor of the new regime. When François Bozizé questioned this status from 2009 onwards, relations between the two heads of State started deteriorating.

The links between the two countries were not only political: there were significant economic interests in general trade, transportation, livestock and diamond. Chadian military contingents were the backbone of successive regional forces which mandate was to consolidate peace and security in CAR, while helping to demobilize armed groups: FOMUC (2002-2008), MICOPAX (2008-2013), MISCA (2013-2014). As corroborated by the launch of Operation Sangaris on 5th December 2013, all those regional operations failed to deliver.

When the Seleka (a loose coordination of Muslim armed groups) was able to get close to Bangui in December 2012 and obtained a power sharing agreement signed in Libreville with François Bozizé in January 2013, many observers thought that Idriss Déby had made a point since that movement would not have existed without Chadian (unofficial) backing. When the Libreville agreement collapsed and the Seleka took over Bangui late March 2013, experts thought that history was repeating itself and that the new President, Michel Djotodia, would act as a spokesperson of Idriss Déby.

This did not happen. Although apparently united behind Michel Djotodia, Seleka contingents were looting and killing endlessly. While in 2003 and 2004, the Chadian military present in CAR had intervened several times to contain the predation of the “libérateurs” (i.e. the Chadian mercenaries who were the real striking force behind François Bozizé), in 2013 it stayed idle. One likely explanation was that many Seleka mid-level commanders were actually Chadians, either people who had rebelled against Déby in the 2000s and stayed in Darfur where they had been recruited by Seleka leaders or fighters who had reconciled with Idriss Déby's regime and were demobilized in Chad but left out and ready for a new well-paid military adventure (many were promised 15 FCFA millions #25,000 US dollars).²³ Few others had been involved in Khartoum funded militias that first fought the insurgents in Darfur and then became highway bandits and community vigilantes.

The situation in CAR deteriorated quickly without any regional or international reaction. When in June 2013, major international NGOs called for an international action to stop the population predicament, neither Paris, nor Washington, nor New York reacted. Regional capital cities kept silent as well. In summer 2013, a constellation of vigilante groups, the anti-balaka, emerged in the center north of the country and recruited at first among François Bozizé ethnic group (Gbaya) and, later on, among the Christian community that represents about 85% of the population. Although there was not any religious argument *per se*, the population perceived the Seleka as made up of Muslims (mostly Chadians) and this perception contributed to make the conflict communal. The anti-balaka carried out numerous mass killings of Peulh/Fulani/Mbororo pastoralists, small traders, shopkeepers and other Muslims. The spiraling violence orchestrated by the two groups created havoc.

In December 2013, France intervened and immediately got MICOPAX backing. Soon after, Chad contingent was accused to side Muslims and Seleka. In April 2014, after several bloody incidents Chadian soldiers who were attacked by hand grenade responded by shooting civilians in front of UN witnesses. The new Interim President, Catherine Samba-Panza, publicly criticized Chad. Furious, Idriss Déby called back his troops and closed the border...

²³ Interviews with Seleka officers, Bangui, May 2013.

The situation became dysfunctional, if not dangerous. Economically, pastoralists are stuck in Chad Salamat region as the border is officially closed. The support (or laissez-faire) of Idriss Déby to Seleka factions is partly aimed at building protection for the pastoralists to access grazing land in CAR. While the economy should have been a reconciling tool, it is bringing more militarization. Politically, it is unclear what Idriss Déby wants to achieve. Does he pretend to be again a kingmaker in CAR and use the Seleka as a dangerous tool to prove how necessary he is (“Myself or the chaos?”)? Does he want to protect a Muslim community that suffered much because of its perceived association with him? Does he just want to use CAR as a playing ground to confront the remnants of his armed opposition from the 2000s?

The Seleka has split in several contending groups and if there were any chain of command before, it has disappeared. At this stage, it is unable to destabilize southern Chad but many small groups of highway bandits operate nowadays at its periphery. This is why the continuation of the crisis in CAR is dangerous for Chad. Instability (whether purely criminal or politically tinted) can eventually spill over the border.

The anti-balaka/Seleka religious reading can have some echo in South Chad, even though the issue of citizenship that is at the core of the CAR crisis does not make sense in Chad. Relations between Christians and Muslims in Chad are much more different than in CAR because Islam is better represented and is practiced in the north, center and south of the country even though its demographic importance is not the same everywhere.

Dealing with Boko Haram

Chad was not immune from the Boko Haram conflict. Many Nigerians (including members of this Islamist organization) sheltered in Chad. This was a concern for security services even though up to 2014 no terrorist action was undertaken inside Chad. But late 2014, there were signs that a surge of military activities near the Chadian borders would end up inside Chad: weapon consignments were confiscated in Kousseri, a Cameroonian border city; armed incidents happened on Lake Chad’s small islands. Boko Haram had to reinvent itself as in mid-2013 it had decided to reinforce its presence in the countryside since the Nigerian army and police were getting more assertive in cities. The regional intervention became certainly a further incentive for this movement to get regionalized and claim a global Jihadi affiliation (to ISIL).

Maybe more by osmosis than a plan, Boko Haram got supporters in Lake Chad islands. This area is one of the poorest in Chad, certainly one where the state has been mostly absent for decades. The livelihood is rustic, organized through farming and small pilgrimages to local sheikhs’ tombs. As the border between Chad and Nigeria is not demarcated, people move indiscriminately from one side to the other. Support to Boko Haram seems mostly ethnically grounded. Chad also had a tradition to get children sent to Quranic schools in north-eastern Nigeria. Because of the conflict, many were expelled back to Chad but there is no (official) indication that some of these *al-majiri* (Quranic students) are Boko Haram followers.

In October 2014, Idriss Déby tried to facilitate a dialogue between people close to Abukar Shekau, Boko Haram leader, and President Jonathan’s representatives: a new meeting should have been convened in December 2014, had the two sides implemented the confidence measures they had agreed upon. Nothing happened (on both sides) and Idriss Déby was right to believe that time for a greater confrontation had come.²⁴

Goodluck Jonathan underplayed the seriousness of Boko Haram for years. The Nigerian Army’s performance by all accounts had indeed been poor, with reports of mutinies, blatant corruption, and gross underfunding, despite a national security budget in the range of 5-6 billion US dollars. The military and the police often did not respect the population they were supposed to protect from Boko Haram: as

²⁴ Interviews, N’Djamena, April 2015

illustrated in many incidents, they became the best recruiting agent for the militant organization because of immense collateral damages or simply because they fled the places without any fight. This sheds light on why Goodluck Jonathan contracted mercenaries who happened to not have played a purely technical role but were most often on the frontline.²⁵

While observers believe that Chad was rewarded by President Jonathan for its military intervention, Idriss Déby also acted because of proper Chadian concerns: not just for money or because of the security threat in Chad. Chad depends for most of its imports from two important trading roads: one brings goods from Cotonou and Lagos through Maiduguri to N'Djamena; the other one supplies Chad from Douala. In both cases, traffic was hampered by insecurity, largely due to Boko Haram to the extent that transportation prices grew up and commodities in N'Djamena and other Chadian cities became more expensive. Due to the economic difficulties in Chad, the social climate was too tense to take a risk. Chad has also been trading livestock to Borno state and the insecurity froze this activity, in which many high-ranking military officers are involved. Intervening against Boko Haram was not simply decided because of ideological differences...

In Cameroon, Boko Haram had been able to build a constituency. Even if the Sambisa Forest (one of Boko Haram main sanctuaries) is lost by the militant organization, local support won't evaporate. The reasons are based on history and have much communality with what has been described earlier about the Boudouma: the area is very underdeveloped and President Biya never tried to gain the population. This lack of interest is somewhat explained by the 1984 attempt coup organized by officers from that region. Those events had also strong consequences on the working of the Cameroonian military. Although defense is the third most important in the national budget, the army is not operational. High officers are most often prosperous businessmen who own hotels, commercial farms, private security companies and even nightclubs.²⁶ In contrast, the regime created special units. After the "*Commandement opérationnel*" set up in 2000 to fight thug gangs in Douala and, allegedly, responsible for the disappearance and extra-judiciary killing of above 1,500 people, the "*Bataillon d'intervention rapide*" (BIR) was established to fight highway banditry in the north and east of the country. From 2009 onwards, its role evolved and replaced the military to secure the Bakassi Peninsula.²⁷ Incidentally, this border incident explains why relations between Abuja and Yaoundé had been cold up to the visit of the newly elected Nigerian President to Yaoundé in June 2015. Even when fighting Boko Haram, Cameroon BIR was not allowed to cross the border into Nigeria.

In Cameroon, Chad is often perceived as a French stooge and Biya's regime is nearly paranoid when France comes into the picture. France is accused of having supported the 1984 failed coup and promoted from time to time politicians who wanted to replace Paul Biya. France is recurrently accused to support Boko Haram (no less than that) in order to send French troops occupy Cameroon (while the USA would do the same in Nigeria). Chad is seen as part of this new conspiracy. Of course, diplomatically discourses are more politically correct but media close to the regime agitate this mistrustful version of events.

There are less paranoid motivations as well to explain the chilliness between N'Djamena and Yaoundé. The latter is convinced that, over the last two decades, most of the insecurity in the north was linked to "*coupeurs de route*" (highway bandits) who belonged or were connected to Chad military.²⁸ Chad involvement in the CAR crisis and the way François Bozizé lost power also provoked an outrage in Yaoundé. As a consequence, despite French pressures, the defeated CAR President was allowed to stay with his family that enjoyed a near to official status in Yaoundé for months.

²⁵ Ed Croypley and David Lewis, "Nigeria drafts in foreign mercenaries to take on Boko Haram", *Reuters*, 12 March 2015.

²⁶ Fanny Pigeaud, *Au Cameroun de Paul Biya*, Paris, Karthala, 2011.

²⁷ Rich in oil, the Bakassi Peninsula was also claimed by Nigeria that took it over in 1993. Following a decision by the International Justice Court in 2002, the Nigerian army eventually left Bakassi in 2008.

²⁸ Cyril Musila, *Insécurité transfrontalière dans la zone CEMAC-CEEAC. Le bassin du Lac Tchad entre Cameroun-Tchad-Centrafrrique et influences soudano-nigérianes*, Paris, Institut français des relations internationales, November 2011.

The Boko Haram crisis therefore played a positive role to foster relations between the two neighbors. Early March 2015, the Chadian Minister of Communication announced in Yaoundé that 40% of the weapons that were confiscated from Boko Haram were French made: both countries could suddenly share the same antagonism against their former colonizer. France Embassy in Yaoundé made a diplomatic response and only hinted that many French weapons disappeared from Chad barracks and found their way to Borno state. Chadian pundits also eagerly remind that Idriss Déby Itno was in business with Ali Modu Sheriff, once the Maiduguri Governor and today a Senator. This latter in the 2000s supported Mohamed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram...

Chad support to Niger has to be understood in a very different context. Relationships between the two Presidents are amicable, a strong difference with Cameroon, CAR and Nigeria. The two countries share economic interests and also major concerns on the Libyan crisis. In Niger, the situation has reached a level when the sole military intervention is not anymore sufficient to contain Boko Haram. The security deterioration started early 2014 at least and the growth of Boko Haram is not merely based on ethnic solidarities or commonalities: drought, demography, poverty and State's absence (but in a different context than northern Cameroon) offer Boko Haram avenues to recruit young people and impose its understanding of Islam.

The Boko Haram attack on Bosso village near Diffa in June 2016 raised uneasy questions about the behavior of Niger's Army and the role played by Chadian soldiers in last resort. While Niger's military was considered for decades a well-performing army, over the presidency of Mahamadou Issoufou, it seems to have weakened largely for political reasons as the Niger President has been fearing a coup attempt and allowed the embezzlement of military budget to buy high-ranking officers and political figures instead of strengthening the military by buying better equipment.²⁹ The call to Chad to envoy troops is politically very sensitive, even though the Chadian contingent was able to dissipate the threat and restore some security for the local population.

Dealing with many "Libyas"

Chad and Niger shared the same view on the 2011 Western intervention in Libya and its negative effects on the Sahel region.³⁰ In the first months of the insurgency in Libya, Muammar Qaddafi was confident he could trust the Chadian community in his country. Quantities of weapons, military hardware and ammunitions were moved south to Sabha where the Tubu were indeed supportive of Qaddafi and Déby. Late spring 2011, under Paris and Washington pressures, Idriss Déby had to pay lip service to the intervention and keep a lower profile.

Tubu are an ethnic group present in Chad, Libya and Niger. They have been politically associated with Idriss Déby who also entertains warm relations with the customary Tubu Chief, the Derdeï, and a former President of Chad, Goukouny Weddeye.³¹ The Gorane, who live on their southern edge entertain a great cultural proximity with the Tubu, though they adopted a very different attitude throughout the civil war.³²

In Sabha region, three main groups are settled and mixed in the city more than in the countryside: Tuareg, Tubu and Arab. The latter community is the less numerous and powerful. It witnessed the regime

²⁹ Laurent Bigot, "Au Niger, l'armée affaiblie par la paranoïa de son président", *Le Monde*, 10 October 2016.

³⁰ Roland Marchal, *The Reshaping of West Africa after Muammar Qaddafi's Fall*, NOREF, October 2012, available at http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/e77b4e80c8cc5f6a4c4e62a5ab1d658c.pdf

³¹ This support was challenged for years by Yusuf Togoïmi who set up the *Mouvement pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad*. He died in 2002.

³² There are many sources on the connections between Southern Libya and Chad over the last decades. A very recent paper is Judith Scheele, "The Libyan connection: settlement, war and other entanglements in northern Chad", *Journal of African History*, vol. 57, n° 1, 2016, pp. 115-134.

change, tried to get its chance against suddenly “would-be Africans” but was severely beaten. Mid 2015, for what interviews say, Arab groups cannot be considered a strategic stakeholder despite attempts by Khartoum to strengthen them.

The Tuareg are those hosting most of the Islamic militants who have escaped from Mali and settled around Sabha to rest and buy equipment. The system of alliances is based on tribal communalities but also on shared involvement in trafficking or trade (foodstuff, people, military hardware, ammunitions).

For the time being,³³ the Tubu keep aloof up to a certain extent from these settlements and are reluctant to deal with those guests. Idriss Déby mobilized his clients within that tribe to gain better leverage. Sophisticated systems of weapons were bought and brought to Chad to avoid them to get into wrong hands. Money still changes hands to make sure that Tubu figures do not behave too opportunistically in front of militant Islamists. Goukouny Weddeye is travelling often in those areas since he has prestige among his kinsmen. This sheds light on why French military are still committed to Idriss Déby because what he does there is seen as strategic and nobody else could play such a role since Tubu in Niger use to follow their tribe on the Chadian side of the border.

However, this is not a stable situation. Sooner or later, Jihadi fighters are going to develop a constituency among Tubu, even if minimally. The whole regional economy is based on trading activities, whether legal or illegal, with Niger and Mali, and there are economic incentives that may or might be used to push on one side or the other. Furthermore, Sabha is not cut from the region: its inhabitants are following developments in Chad, Niger and Mali and its population may reassess its links with other stakeholders present in northern Libya, in Tripoli, Tobruk or elsewhere. Opportunistic alliances may be formed for the sake of controlling an important trading road and gain some leverage on Mali and Niger economic or political operators. Eventually, trading cities such as Abéché will be affected.

Remnants of the 2005-2009 rebellion are also present in the region and, like elements of the Darfur insurgencies, have tried to benefit from the need of manpower by political factions in Northern Libya. What is left from the Erdimi faction, for instance, is allied with the Islamist militias of Misrata, no less because Timan Erdimi is settled in Doha and Qatar is funding both groups. Mahamat Nouri's remnants split in several factions, one being allied with General Haftar while another one is trying to develop connections with Nigerien dissidents.³⁴

International military intervention in Libya is not yet an option. In the region, neighbors are ambivalent. Algiers that is trying to restore its influence in Sahel against what it sees as Rabat's encroachments is adamantly opposed to it since armed Islamists may try to find refuge in Algeria. At the same time, a number of military newsletters are confirming that US, Canadian and French Special forces carried out covert operations in south and south-west Libya.

To conclude this sketchy description, one should also raise a last point: Sudan's policy towards Libya and Chad.

Sudan: an unlikely ally?

The reconciliation in June 2009 between N'Djamena and Khartoum meant peace at the cost of Darfur and Chad populations. But options were rather limited due to the kind of insurgencies both regimes were facing. Khartoum, at that time, had little expectation on peace in Darfur; one may even say that peace was not on the agenda. It wanted to end a confrontation that was becoming expensive due to Paris lobbying within the European Union and the international community at large. Most of the Doha Darfur Peace

³³ According to interviews in N'Djamena, March 2015.

³⁴ Interviews with Chadian dissidents, Paris, October 2016.

Process was an exercise to split armed groups and emphasize insurgents' over-ambitions. Khartoum's urgency was the elections of 2011 and the consequences of the establishment of South Sudan. The situation in Darfur was no more seen as a painful priority: the "Save Darfur" movement was getting weaker by the day and the multiplication of armed militias in Darfur gave an apolitical view of chaos. Nobody was anymore responsible, especially Khartoum...

Idriss Déby was in a different mood. He wanted to confirm his military victory of February 2008 and make a few points against those in the opposition (what was left of it) and those among his kinsmen who had campaigned for an official endorsement of the Darfur insurgencies. Many Zaghawa in Chad were contributing to those latter and the first point Idriss Déby made was to illustrate that JEM was not interested in governing Darfur but Sudan. Many important contributors (especially from Zaghawa/Kobe) saw this ambition as unrealistic and decided to focus on their own Chadian interests, especially at the time oil revenues were no more spent on Defense only.

Idriss Déby worked hard to play again the role he had had for nearly 15 years as the "patron" of Zaghawa, able to settle disputes and find solutions to internal arguments. As described earlier, this policy was costly for a number of reasons in Chad and also obliged Idriss Déby to send troops beyond the border to restore his authority. Chadian security operatives worked to split groups and, sometimes, to get them into an agreement with Khartoum.

However, this was not exactly the return to the situation that had prevailed before the Darfur war broke out in 2003. The situation in Darfur was not fully in Khartoum's control and many local actors were playing their own game, though claiming allegiance to Khartoum. The marriage of Idriss Déby in January 2012 with the daughter of Musa Hilal illustrated the caution of Déby in front of Khartoum. In Western countries, this latter is seen as the first Janjaweed Paramount Commander who committed mass atrocities in 2003 and 2004.³⁵ This is true but incomplete. After 2006, Musa Hilal played a different role and contributed to cool down tensions between communities and even strike peace deals at the customary level. His attitude is reminiscent of many other Darfuri Arab leaders who fought for Khartoum and eventually felt that they had been used for the best interest of the rulers against their own ambitions in Darfur. By 2015, Musa Hilal is an autonomous player with whom Khartoum has to behave carefully as the situation in Darfur is more violent than over the past years.³⁶

While this agreement between Khartoum and N'Djamena is useful even to secure the three-border area, there are plenty of differences in the way both capital cities assess the situation in Libya. Khartoum has a long time commitment with the Libyan Islamists since it hosted most of them and helped them to overthrow Muammar Qaddafi. Idriss Déby had no real ally until he reconciled with General Haftar in September 2016. He indeed opposed the CIA funded project led by Haftar in 1988 to overthrow the Libyan regime. While both figures are supported by Washington, it is unclear whether the real point of Déby talking to Haftar was Libya or the behavior of the Chadian military opponents there.

According to the military and political dynamics in Libya, Khartoum and N'Djamena may soon find themselves at loggerheads. The security agreement between them may survive this discrepancy but not to the point that the Chad-Libya border area would become insecure.

³⁵ Alex de Waal, "Counter-Insurgency on the cheap", *London Review of Books*, vol. 26, n° 15, 5 August 2004, pp. 25-27.

³⁶ Jérôme Tubiana, "The Chaos in Darfur", ICG Africa Briefing, n° 110, April 2015. And on Musa Hilal current political strategy: <http://www.democracyfirstgroup.org/musa-hilals-awakening-the-government-of-sudans-worst-nightmare/>

AN EMERGING REGIONAL MILITARY POWER?

Chad has proven a reliable counter-terrorism partner for France and USA over the two last years. While ECOWAS member states were procrastinating on building up a military coalition to confront radical Islamist armed groups in northern Mali, Idriss Déby Itno took the unprecedented step to send 2,000 troops to Mali through Niger and fight militants in northern Mali.³⁷ Two years later, the same sense of initiative pushed Idriss Déby to pre-empt the threat of Boko Haram and launch an offensive coordinated with Cameroonian and Nigerien forces against the Jihadi movement.

What are the structural conditions that allowed Chad to appear suddenly as a regional military power? Four conditions are considered here: a regional demand and supply; a financial capability; somewhat ambivalent relations with the international community; an efficient military apparatus because trained through a civil war.

A regional demand and supply situation

One needs a specific situation by which the region calls for one state to act decisively and that state is ready to do so. Idriss Déby did not take those difficult decisions just by himself, without having had discussions with his colleagues from the region and even with other officials outside the continent.

In the early 2010s, Idriss Déby mentioned that he would prefer to be within ECOWAS which was more dynamic and better considered than with the Central African francophone regional organization, CEMAC (*Communauté économique et monétaire d'Afrique centrale*), certainly one of the weakest ones on the continent. He also developed a good working relation with Guinea and Niger heads of State, even though his relations with Paul Biya, François Bozizé and Denis Sassou Nguesso were not as warm. Alpha Condé and Mohamadou Issoufou were advocating in Paris a role for Chad in northern Mali long before Serval operation took off. Paul Biya was reluctant toward Idriss Déby up to the moment he had to acknowledge that his own military would be humiliated by Boko Haram. Nigeria, usually, would not have permitted such a bold move by neighbors' armies but it was not anymore a normal period. Goodluck Jonathan had already recruited Southern African mercenaries to compensate the weakness of his own army and, allegedly, agreed to fund the Chadian offensive that could have saved his re-election.

Idriss Déby was eager to play such a role for internal political reasons and also for strengthening his relations with Paris and Washington. Idriss Déby had tried to mitigate internal tensions among his main social constituency by providing positions within the state apparatus and especially the security and military for the youth of his own Bideyat group. This has been costly and brought also new problems originating in petty rivalries between different contingents and in career management. A way to reduce tensions was to project outside parts of this military apparatus.

Not rich but ready to spend

Claiming to be a regional military power does not amount to behave as if being part of a peacekeeping operation. Initiatives have to be taken without first negotiating with other institutions (AU, UN). Certainly, the best proof of identity is to put troops on the frontline without asking support, funding and others' endorsement.

What Idriss Déby did twice was not to wait for a UNSC resolution or even an AU statement, even though legal dispositions were taken retrospectively. His time for decision did not follow diplomatic timing: it anticipated it.

³⁷ Roland Marchal, "Military (mis)adventures in Mali", *African Affairs*, vol. 112, n° 448, 2013, pp. 486-497.

Of course, he did not care much about international bodies. In January 2010, Chad asked the MINURCAT to leave and all peacekeepers were out the country by end of May 2010. At this occasion, Idriss Déby was absolutely undiplomatic and made a number of allegations against the international body. As a response, the UN never considered seriously to appoint a Chadian general force commander for the MINUSMA, which made Déby's sarcasms against the MINUSMA recurrent.

The ability to move troops does not resort to a sole military capability. Chad was ready to spend a significant amount of money without being sure to be reimbursed but it did so just to make a point. One cannot know or pretend that N'Djamena was confident to get reimbursed up to the last penny. Chad contingent in northern Cameroon allegedly costs FCFA 6 billion by week in spring 2015. It is still unclear who is going to settle the bill. Washington and Paris are clearly relieved by Chad military involvement in Mali, Cameroon and Nigeria. Consequently, they may generously refund its costs or, at the very least, use their influence to ease Chad's financial tensions as illustrated by France support to get access to the Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative (over one billion US dollars in irrevocable debt relief).

An ambivalent relation with the international community

It would be wrong to assume that a would-be regional military power has to be a good student in the class room. Idriss Déby enjoys a mixed record at the regional and international levels. Idriss Déby is often seen as a manipulative operator ready for unholy alliances (notably with Muammar Qaddafi and nowadays Omar al-Bashir). Idriss Déby's best friends at the international level are not blind on his major weaknesses: embezzlement of public funding, disappearance of too challenging opponents, rigging of elections, narrow family networks controlling all state assets, and so on and so forth.

These criticisms are rarely expressed loudly and publicly but they explain why some window dressing decisions are often taken just before a trip to Paris.³⁸ The endorsement of Idriss Déby is often the outcome of a hyper-realistic (and very tactical) assessment of the regional situation. This ambivalence actually is not negative in consolidating Chad status as an emergent military power. It proves that Chad's ruler follows his own views and is not a client state that would simply obey instructions given by other more powerful patrons in the continent or elsewhere. This kind of autonomy is rare in Africa, one should admit and this makes it one important parameter of power.

A civil war military apparatus

Last but not least, the troops have to prove efficient. Losses are everywhere an issue and the official acknowledgement of casualties is met by mixed reactions from the public. French military officers use to say that Chadian military are more warriors than soldiers in the sense that they courageously follow their leaders without using much what they might have learned in war colleges. They obey their leaders, not always their officers. This deserves a few remarks.

One can often hear that Zaghawa and Gorane are "warrior ethnic groups", which explains why, despite their demographic minority, they make up the backbone of the Chadian ruling elite. This is debatable in many ways. One can admit that feuds and wars are normal facts of life in those communities, which certainly provides sources for a warrior repertory. Yet, France was liberated in the Second World War by Chadian "*tirailleurs sénégalais*" who happened to be recruited mostly from southern Chad, CAR and Cameroon.³⁹ At that time, the "warrior ethnic group" was Sara, not Zaghawa. If those latter dominate today, one may have to look for better reasons than primordial identities.

³⁸ In May 2015, Chadian police officers who shot children two months before were rearrested after having been released.

³⁹ One should refer here to the work of Eric Jennings, *La France libre fut africaine*, Paris, Editions Perrin, 2014.

Chad military apparatus is mainly made up of people who fought in the different episodes of the civil war from 1960s up to Hissène Habré and/or were recruited in the 2000s while the succession crisis translated in a series of military confrontations. It is an army of civil war that got its experience fighting its own population. It is not an army trained in military colleges, which explains also why the chain of command is often far from what is taught or written in the books. What also make the difference (or at least part of it) are equipment and salary. The DGSSIE is much stronger than the ordinary military, not especially because it recruits in a tiny section of the population but because all sophisticated military hardware and chief of staff capabilities are controlled by the former, not the latter. Moreover, salaries in Chad are not only defined by the rank and the seniority: other more informal factors impact on the earning of those “*corps habillés*”.⁴⁰

Although Chad may appear as a strong military partner of Western states in a troubled region, one should be aware of its internal vulnerabilities and that giving Chad a strategic role in counter-terrorism could become quickly counterproductive not only if the country goes into a political turmoil since the current status quo is creating the conditions for a major crisis. More attention should be given to alternative thinking, which is today neither the case in Paris nor in Washington.⁴¹

Chad Western allies may need to answer a very simple question. If as often implicitly said in public discourses, they defend global values against terrorist groups, why are there so many allies who do not share those values, win all elections, and allow their army to shoot their own population? By only stressing the military dimension in countering Islamist armed groups, Western countries support allies who rule countries that need drastic political changes not to become hotbed for Jihadi groups and make those political changes more unlikely.

⁴⁰ Marielle Debos, op. cit. See also the issue of *Politique africaine*: “Corps habillés. Politique des métiers de l’ordre”, n° 128, April 2012.

⁴¹ Margot Shorey and Benjamin Nickels, “Chad: a precarious counterterrorism partner”, *Counter Terrorism Center Sentinel*, vol. 8, n° 4, April 2015, available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CTCSentinel-Vol8Issue44.pdf>.

■ Une puissance militaire émergente en Afrique centrale ? Le Tchad d'Idriss Déby

Résumé

L'engagement du Tchad au Mali en janvier 2013, et dans tous les Etats voisins les années suivantes, donne une image de force à un régime qui est également vu comme de plus en plus fragile. Cette contradiction peut être comprise si l'on analyse la dynamique des événements qui ont décidé, lors des deux dernières décennies, le président Idriss Déby Itno à jouer avec succès la carte du principal allié régional de l'Occident contre le terrorisme dans la région du Sahel. Les raisons de ce succès sont enracinées dans sa gestion des tensions internes comme dans sa capacité à se positionner de façon astucieuse dans des polarisations régionales. Ces politiques ont permis le développement d'un appareil militaire impressionnant. Les revenus du pétrole ont été cruciaux dans l'acquisition de ce pouvoir, mais l'économie rentière a eu des effets à long terme négatifs en accroissant l'avidité de l'élite dirigeante et des proches du président, et en affaiblissant la légitimité du régime parmi les populations marginalisées. La capacité de projeter des troupes au-delà des frontières du pays apparaît ambiguë, notamment après la chute des cours du pétrole, en 2014. Elle a exacerbé les contradictions internes au régime autant qu'elle a construit de nouvelles alliances régionales et internationales pour trouver des ressources financières et politiques alternatives, de façon à conserver une machine militaire

■ An emerging military power in Central Africa? Chad under Idriss Déby

Abstract

Chad involvement in Mali in January 2013 and in all neighboring states throughout the following years gives an image of strength to a regime that is also seen as increasingly fragile. This discrepancy can be understood by analyzing the dynamic of events over the last two decades, which convinced President Idriss Déby Itno to play successfully the card of the West's main regional ally against terrorism in the Sahel region. Reasons are rooted in his management of internal tensions as well as in a shrewd stance in regional polarizations in the 2000s. An outcome of these policies was the development of an impressive military apparatus. Oil revenues were key to acquire this power but the rentier economy had long-term negative effects in increasing greed among the ruling elite and president relatives, and weakening the regime legitimacy among the marginalized population. The ability to project troops over Chad borders appears ambiguous, especially after international oil price collapsed in 2014. It exorcises internal contradictions within the regime as much as it builds new regional and international alliances to get alternative financial and political resources to keep a military machine that, besides popular protests, has become a source of potential destabilization.

■ Mots clés

Boko Haram ; Idriss Déby Itno ; Mali ; Niger ; pouvoir militaire ; Seleka ; Soudan ; Tchad ; terrorisme.

■ Keywords

Boko Haram; Chad; Idriss Déby Itno; Mali; military power; Niger; Seleka; Sudan; terrorism.