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## The Franco-American rivalry in the African Sahel

### التنافس الفرنسي-الأمريكي في الساحل الإفريقي

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## Abstract:

This article examines the different aspects of the international competition in the Sahel region since the events of September 11, 2001. It seeks to highlight the economic, geopolitical and strategic importance of the region that makes it a target of various great powers' agendas. France, the former colonizing power, considers this area as a sphere of influence due to different historical, geographical and cultural factors, especially when other major powers began looking for a foothold in the region, especially the United States .

Abundance of proven and potential natural resources alongside the spread of various security threats have drawn these two countries into the affairs of the region. A fact that has enflamed the competition between these global powers and it is likely to have negative implications for the stability and prosperity of the Sahel.

**Keywords:**Sahel, France, USA, Competition.

## ملخص:

يناقش هذا المقال التنافس الفرنسي-الأمريكي في منطقة الساحل الأفريقي خاصة بعد أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر 2001، وذلك من خلال إبراز الأهمية الجيوسياسية والاقتصادية التي تتمتع بها المنطقة والتي جعلتها محل أطماع القوى الكبرى بعد ما كانت مهمشة لفترة طويلة وكانت معظم دولها مستعمرة من قبل قوى دولية كفرنسا والتي استمرت علاقاتها بها حتى بعد الاستقلال، وتعززت خاصة في ظل ظهور منافسين لها كالولايات المتحدة الأمريكية.

أصبحت منطقة الساحل تحظى باهتمام أمريكي كبير نظرا لما تمتلكه من موارد حيوية خاصة النفط الذي يعتبر العنصر المحرك للسياسة الأمريكية في المنطقة وهذا ما أصبح يهدد المصالح الفرنسية فيها، ويزيد من حدة هذا التنافس الذي يؤثر بدوره على الاستقرار في منطقة الساحل الأفريقي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الساحل الأفريقي، التنافس الدولي، الدور الفرنسي، التواجد الأمريكي.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The African Sahel has become one of the most important geopolitical spaces that receive great international attention, especially after the Cold War, due to its geopolitical and economic importance given its geographical location and the large quantities of natural resources, which are not completely exploited yet. Therefore, the

Sahel is an area for international competition between major powers, particularly between France and the United States of America. And the miserable internal conditions that the Sahel countries are plagued by, including political upheavals, economic crises, ethnic conflicts, state dysfunction as well as new cross-border security threats such as terrorism, organized crime, and illegal migration,

present a good reason for external military presence in the region.

This article attempts to answer the following question: To what extent has the Franco-American rivalry affected stability in the Sahel region?

In order to answer the aforementioned question, this article will first highlight the importance of this region and the most important factors that made it a target of the two major powers. Then, the mechanisms and strategies embraced by each power to achieve their geopolitical and strategic interests in the region will be examined and discussed.

## 2. The importance of the African Sahel:

Given the diversity of the Sahel's definitions, it is unanimously agreed that the Sahel is the region lying between 12°N and 20°N longitude, covering the semi-arid and arid climate zones. It covers all or parts of twelve countries from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, including Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti.<sup>1</sup> It is the largest region in the African continent. The following map shows the geographical location of the African Sahel and its constituent states.

Map (1): The geographical location of the Sahel region



Source: Sahel Regional Strategy 2013, United Nations, December 2012, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SahelStrategy2013\\_Dec2012.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SahelStrategy2013_Dec2012.pdf) (consulted on 12/12/2020)

The African Sahel region occupies an important strategic position for several reasons, including its vast geographical location linking Northern and Central Africa, and the Red Sea in the east and the coast of the Atlantic Ocean in the west, with an estimated length of 5000 km.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Sahel contains huge quantities of natural resources, which can be outlined as follows:

-Oil and gas: the African continent contains around 10% of the global oil reserves, and most of it is concentrated at 60% in the Sahel region, specifically in Nigeria, Algeria, and Libya. On the other hand, gas reserves in the continent constitute 8% of the global reserve, and more than 50% are buried in two main countries, Nigeria and Algeria. The extraction's relative easiness of the African oil and gas is a further advantage for its reserve in addition to its oil reserve on the coastal area or in the territorial waters of their countries.<sup>3</sup>

-Mineral resources: In addition to oil and gas, the Sahel region is rich in many other raw materials such as gold, phosphates,

diamonds, iron, copper, carbon, zinc, uranium, silver, nickel, bauxite, cobalt, plutonium, mineral salts, chromium ...<sup>4</sup> which varies from one state to another.

Furthermore, despite its arid climate, the Sahel has tremendous water resources, as it contains the largest rivers in the African continent, such as those in Congo, Niger, and Senegal;<sup>5</sup> as well as groundwater, that increases the likelihood for the Sahel region to be the subject of conflict and competition between major powers. As many expectations confirm that the water scarcity will be among the main causes of wars in the future, the Sahel is likely to witness such type of armed hostilities over water resources, particularly due to the absence of a regional agreement or arrangements regulating the use of those resources.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Sahel region is of a great geopolitical and economic significance, it is considered as one of the poorest regions in the world.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Sahel countries are deemed to be failing or even failed states due to the numerous political, economic, social, security, and environmental crises that they are going through.<sup>8</sup> A precarious situation that constitutes a safe haven for new cross-border security threats such as terrorism, organized crime, and illegal immigration to thrive. And the transnational dimension of these threats prompts a direct and durable external military presence in the region.

### **3. The French role in the Sahel region:**

In light of the international competition in the African continent in general and the African Sahel region in particular, the major countries, especially France, have sought to rebuild their

relationship with local states to preserve their position and influence in their former colonies by relying on new mechanisms embodied in their rhetoric support of the economic development in the region as a potential way to resolve the intractable crises and achieving permanent peace in the region.

#### **3.1. French goals and interests in Africa and the Sahel:**

The French policy towards Africa has remained persistent since the colonial era, based on protecting its interests, strengthening its influence and isolating its rivals.

-Economically, France seeks to secure its economic interests in the countries of the Sahel and Sahara, such as Chad, Niger, Mali, Libya and Algeria, where France has the lion's share of commercial exchanges with these countries and dominates its natural resources, such as uranium in Niger and gold in Mali, along with its huge investments in the oil and gas sectors in Algeria. In addition, the French foreign policy makers seek to undermine the Chinese economic and commercial expansion in North Africa, and the Sahel, mainly in the construction sector, cheap exports, infrastructure and oil...etc.

- From a military and security perspective, France seeks to secure its military bases in the Sahel and the Sahara region<sup>9</sup> and establish a protective belt along the coast of the Sahara Desert, in order to prevent the rival Islamist factions from penetrating the south, through its permanent presence in many African countries, especially in West and Central Africa.<sup>10</sup>

- Politically, France works to maintain good

relations with the ruling elites of the Sahel countries, although they are authoritarian and corrupt elites, and protect them from military coups, as they best serve its interests and influence in the region.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, France is working to play a leading role in the European foreign policy based on its colonial experience in North Africa and Sahel, and exporting its internal crises; especially in recent years, where the president Emmanuel Macron has been facing many challenges and criticisms for his internal policy. Therefore, Macron seeks to devolve the attention of many French citizens out of the internal challenges, by escalating tensions abroad, with Turkey on the Libyan territory for example.<sup>12</sup>

Overall, it can be said that the current French policy, both in its political and economic dimension, stems from the project prepared by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1997, known as the "Africa Project", whose most important elements is outlined as follow:

-Supporting the establishment of new political systems in African countries in accordance with the principles of French democracy.

-Supporting all kinds of relations with civilian governments, and working to reduce the role of military institutions in Africa.

-Preparing a conscious political elite of young people, and educating and training them politically and partisanly, so that the ruling political leaderships in the future would be subordinate to Paris.

-Supporting economic development and reform programs, with a focus on countries that have infrastructure.

-Reorganizing the French military presence in Africa, to include more experts and advisors than operating units.<sup>13</sup>

### **3.2. Mechanisms for implementing the French policy in the Sahel:**

France has relied, in implementing its policy, on a number of multifaceted partnership agreements with many African countries, especially those of the Sahel, as represented in the following:

-Economic mechanisms: France counts on developing commercial ties with almost every country in Africa and increasing the volume of French investments out there.<sup>14</sup> Following the independence of many African states, a decree was issued to establish a common currency legislation to preserve the franc zone, so France signed bilateral monetary cooperation agreements with its former colonies. The CFA includes two currency groups:

- The Economic and Monetary Union of West Africa (UEMOA): which was established on January 10, 1994 by the treaty that was signed in Senegal.

- Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC): Founded on March 16, 1994 in Chad, and entered into force in June 1999, this group was established to replace the Customs and Economic Union of Central Africa.<sup>15</sup>

Here economists disagree about France's goal of these policies. Some say that France has granted the CFA franc a strategic advantage over other African countries, which is a complete freedom to convert the African franc to the French franc, and then to other global currencies. It also, as it appears, guarantees the free movement of capital from African countries to France, the

creation of commercial markets on the continent and the increase in trade exchange. Others argue that, through this policy, France requires the countries of the region to deposit 50% of their transfer reserves in the French treasury, and has been able to control the monetary system of their former colonies and create instability in the region of the CFA franc.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the major French companies in the African Sahel, where most of the operational companies are of French origin, and they work across various fields, including hydrocarbons (ELF that merged with Total in 1999), raw materials: (Areva, Iramite), communications: (Orange), Infrastructure: (Bollori, Puig).<sup>17</sup>

-Military and security mechanisms: France has continued to exercise influence and guardianship over many of its former colonies after independence since the 1960s, by creating alternative frameworks for traditional colonialism to establish their footholds in the Sahel. Thus, it frequently intervenes and it is militarily present in ten countries in the Sahel (Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Central Africa, Gabon, and Djibouti). Indeed, France stands out as the country that intervened militarily in Africa more than any other external power.<sup>18</sup>

The forms of the French military intervention in the African Sahel are as follows:

- Military bases: France has pre-positioned forces in Djibouti and in four other countries in Africa. Its base in Djibouti, with a permanent force of 1450 troops, is its largest overseas military base and the biggest permanent foreign establishment in Africa. It is also one of France's two forward operating bases (BOA, Bases

Opérationnelles).<sup>19</sup> and in Cote d'Ivoire (600 soldiers). The bases in Senegal and Gabon have been reduced to several hundred soldiers. Add to that some external operations (Opex) that are in principle temporary, but in reality they guarantee a permanent presence for French forces in the area, as is the case with Operation Corymbe Naval in the Gulf of Guinea, or Operation Serval in July 2013 to combat terrorism that it was replaced by Operation Barkhane in Mali and Epervier in Chad (The latter has been going on since 1986). Moreover, Niger hosts a base dedicated to air intelligence, in particular French drones operating in the region.

- Military cooperation and defense agreements: which reached 8 agreements with Cameroon, Central Africa, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal and Togo. Under those agreements of technical assistance and military cooperation, France has trained many armies of the countries of the Sahel and equipped them with weapons and military equipment.<sup>20</sup>

-Cultural and psychological mechanisms: based on the superiority of the European man and considering France as a basis for enlightenment and civilization, through cultural institutions that support imperialism such as the International Organization of "la Francophonie" and other formations such as "France-Afrique", this aspect based on several elements such as the common language, French educational institutions, and French cultural centers<sup>21</sup>

As a traditional colonial power on the African Sahel, France was able to develop a strategy of influence towards the countries of the region based on a combination of hard and soft power.

France's soft power is embodied in its relations with the Sahel countries, which depend on several elements, the most important of which are: its formation of the ruling elites, investments and development projects, a common language, French educational institutions and cultural centers, as well as the Francophone organization that France seeks to transform from a cultural gathering to a political movement with a political voice. It is being taken to the international scene. As for France's solid power in the Sahel region, it is represented in security and defense agreements, and its military deployment in the region.

#### **4. The American presence and major security projects in the Sahel:**

The events of September 11, 2001 had an important role in shifting American attention towards this region, given the political, economic and military mechanisms the United States embraced to implement its policy in the region and promote its strategic interests, which have become threatening the interests and influence of the traditional colonial actor in the region, France.

##### **4.1. The objectives and determinants of the US strategy in the African Sahel:**

The Sahel region and Africa in general occupies an important position in the American strategy, and the main motivation for this interest is primarily the vital resources that the region possesses, especially oil, which is the engine component of the global economy. The United States of America is trying hard to exclude its competitors from the areas that produce oil and gas or to absorb them within their plans.

The strategic determinants of the US foreign

policy in the Sahel region can be outlined in the following three elements:

- Securing energy sources: due to the advantages of the African oil in relation to the United States of America (the cost of extracting is lower, its proximity to the US territory), its high quality, and the low sulfur content, which reduces the cost of the refining process)<sup>22</sup>.

- Combating terrorism in the African Sahel: This comes at a time when extremist groups carry out increasingly fatal attacks in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and expand their presence to the south. Here it becomes clear to us that the war on terror announced by the United States in the African Sahel, and the issue of securing Oil supplies are two related issues. Security concerns are what made the US administration to integrate the Sahel region into the global war on terror<sup>23</sup>.

- Encircling the international presence, especially in light of the growing rise of China in the continent: the latter represents an economic and strategic challenge to the US and its superiority over the world. A fact that was confirmed by a report issued in November 2008 by the American Information Council on the major global trends by 2025, which stated that the American power will not be the only superpower, with a possible decline by the year 2040.<sup>24</sup>

##### **4.2. Security and military initiatives of the United States of America in the Sahel:**

In embodying its strategy and achieving its goals within the framework of international competition in the Sahel region, the United States of America relied primarily on security mechanisms, which are outlined as follows:

•The Pan-Sahel Initiative(IPS):This initiative, which began in 2002, is a partnership between the United States of America and some countries of the Sahel, represented by Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania. The program of this initiative is to allow these countries to strengthen border controls through the logistical support of the US military forces present there, in order to combat security threats in the Sahel.<sup>25</sup>

• Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP): This initiative is considered an extension of the Pan Sahel initiative, as it was presented in 2005. In addition to the four countries included in the first initiative, this partnership extended to further include Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Senegal. It is a more comprehensive initiative that includes all of the Sahel, Maghreb, and West Africa.

In addition to training and equipping security forces to more effectively combat terrorist groups. TSCTP targets armed groups operating in isolated or neglected regions that are most vulnerable to extremist ideologies, by supporting youth employment, strengthening local governance capacity to provide development infrastructure, and improving health and educational services.<sup>26</sup>

Given its security needs in Africa, the United States has established a continent-specific command known as the African Command or AFRICOM, which aims to eliminate Al-Qaeda and its associated networks, ensure the presence of peace operations forces to respond to crises in the region, and cooperate with certain African countries to prevent the spread of weapons of Mass destruction, increase comprehensive military support, and protection of individuals from infectious diseases and

epidemics.<sup>27</sup>

AFRICOM deals with the Sahel countries such as Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad. The USA has paid a great deal of attention to Niger, regardless of the situation of internal governance and development issues in Niger. The presence of Boko Haram, ISIS in West Africa, and other affiliated extremist groups are the driving forces behind regional instability. The Department of Defense recently increased the scope and support of Title 10 of the United States Code, which defines the role of the armed forces. It is left open with unspecified statistics, and still limited knowledge about the scope of the US intervention in Niger. There are an estimated 800 soldiers on the ground in Niger. However, "General Waldhauser" (then AFRICOM commander) claimed that "the US military does not have a direct combat mission in Niger." However, a research center affiliated with the Ministry of Defense indicated that "it is difficult to say that it is not a combat mission when there is a possibility of conflict and fighting while accompanying these African forces." This fact is most evident in the killing of four US soldiers in Niger in October 2017. Otherwise, AFRICOM has "provided training and equipment" to the Nigerian Armed Forces and "advises and assists" its fight across the Sahara. Finally, AFRICOM is currently transferring its unmanned aircraft base from Niamey to Agadez, Niger. This is a pivotal development, as the central Agadez site provides for surveillance over a larger area.

Mali, which borders Niger to the west, is characterized by similar Nigerian conflicts. Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Greater Sahara are the two most active terrorist organizations



operating in Mali. AFRICOM's role is limited to its commitment to "assisting the French-led operations."

Likewise, the US military is training and equipping the army of Burkina Faso for counterterrorism operations and logistics. The country also borders Mali in the southwest.

Finally, Chad is another important country in Central Africa for the US because of its geographic location, participation in regional conflicts, and accessibility to U.S. military forces. In October 2017, the US military issued a statement that it was "strengthening its security efforts" in the region to help the fight against extremist groups such as Boko Haram and ISIS in West Africa. It did not mention any clear number of forces, nor the extent of military activity. General Waldhauser AFRICOM's Commander issued similar statement, stating that the United States is focusing on "logistics, support, and maintenance with the Special Chadian Counter-Terrorism Group (SATG)". The US Army also provides intelligence capabilities, border control, combating improvised explosive devices, training soldiers, and equipping the national army with 60 light armoured vehicles.<sup>28</sup>

- American military presence in Sahel: Since it established its African Command (AFRICOM) in 2007, the U.S. military presence in the continent has slowly expanded from around 2000 troops based mainly in Djibouti, to roughly 6000 military personnel by the end of 2017, and approximately 7200 personnel by the end of 2018. In April 2018, the then-Defense Secretary "Jim Mattis" estimated that in Nigeria, Niger and Mali alone, the U.S. had upwards of 1000 military personnel.<sup>29</sup>

Currently, the US has 7000 military personnel on rotational deployment in Africa. These troops carry out joint operations with African forces against extremists or jihadists. They are hosted in military outposts across the continent, including Uganda, South Sudan, Senegal, Niger, Gabon, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In addition, 2000 American soldiers are involved in training missions in 40 African countries. American Special Forces operate across East Africa in the so-called forward operation locations in Kenya and Somalia.<sup>30</sup>

Faced with the growing importance of the African Sahel, the United States of America is seeking by all means and mechanisms to be present in the region (politically, economically, and more significantly militarily), to protect its interests out there. This raises the fear of other countries competing in the Sahel, mainly France.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

From the above, it is concluded that the two powers (France and the United States of America) are stationed and active in almost the same areas in the African continent in general and in the Sahel in particular, given the importance that the region has, especially after the Cold War.

The US' interest in the Sahel, after the end of the Cold War and the shift in the direction of international interactions from East-West to North-South, has been increased as it seeks to enhance the expansion of its influence to obtain new strategic areas, especially in light of its war on terror after the events of September 11, 2001. But it clashed with the reality and nature of the French role in the Francophone African

countries in particular, as France tries through it to regain its international position by expanding the circle of its political and economic relations with the countries of the region. Moreover, France has emerged as one of the European powers trying to compete with the American insurgency in many regions of the continent, especially the Sahel region, and this competition is clearly visible in the military and security fields.

The rivalry between France and the United States intensified, as each of them relied on specific policies and mechanisms especially in the security field to maintain their presence in the region and protect their interests and areas of influence.

Although France is trying to reduce its physical presence in the Sahel by closing two military bases, this did not prevent it from playing a role in the crises that occurred in the African continent, especially in the Sahel region. This is what prompted President Emmanuel Macron to undertake several initiatives to double security partnerships in Europe and abroad to share the burden, while ensuring that France maintains the political leadership in it.

While the policy of the US tries to adopt an approach that achieves the greatest interests at the lowest material and human cost, by focusing on some regions around the world, including the African Sahel, intensifying relations with some countries and powers within those regions, and paying attention to issues of trade and investment, terrorism, and supporting security and stability; through both influencing the military doctrines of these countries and establishing unified leaderships for the world's regions, to secure investment opportunities in these regions. Furthermore, by implementing a new principle in the US foreign policy of

"trade instead of aid," it secures them the largest share of African oil and wealth.

Under the pretext of counter-terrorism, and thanks to the American military cooperation and influence on the military doctrine of the armies of the Sahel countries, the United States of America was able to expand its leverage in the countries that France considers its sphere of influence, such as Chad, Mali, and Niger...

Among the manifestations of the competition between France and the United States of America in the Sahel region is the stationing of regular armed forces and military bases in a number of similar countries and regions: in Chad, for example, which has an important strategic position due to its important location bordering six African countries surrounding it from all sides. Given the fact that Chad does not have coastal areas and the tension in the French-Chadian relations in 2000, the United States of America rushed to consolidate its relations with Chad and was able to open the door to American companies and oil investments in it. A move that raised France's fear and drove it to re-consolidate its relations with Chad once again and worked to station its forces in the north of the country.

France and the United States are also competing through their influence in Djibouti, as France has the largest military base in Africa, and US military forces are stationed in Niger, which has a special place in the French National Security Strategy and provides 35 percent of its nuclear materials. Even politically, for example, the French competition with the United States of America broke out in Sudan through its support for the "Bashir" regime, which was a US' enemy in the region.

However, this does not preclude the existence of cooperation between the two powers to achieve a common security in the Sahel, such as the participation of the United States in Operation Barkhane led by France. Nevertheless, the United States of America has other goals, as it works to gain access to local French expertise in the region, in addition to that, Barkhane is an ideal observation platform for southern Libya, which is of great American interest.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study tried to shed light on the competition between France and the United States of America in the Sahel region, as both are attempting to enhance their influence and boost their interests in it by all possible means at all levels, by exploiting the precarious conditions of the Sahel countries represented in fragile political systems, weak economies, internal conflicts and Cross-border security threats as an pretext for their military interventions.

The increasing intensity of international competition in the Sahel reflects the growing international interest in the region and its geopolitical importance, which is drawn from its geographical location, its vast area, as well as the natural resources it possesses.

The intensity of this competition between France and the United States of America affects the political and economic stability as well as the security of every state in the region, and the region as whole, despite the fact that this competition may potentially bring some economic benefits for the Sahel countries in form of economic aid and direct investments and development projects. A fact that may push forward the development and construction of infrastructures as well as

confronting the terrorist networks and organized crime. Nonetheless, the region is not immune from the negative repercussions of such competition, including for instance depleting the region's wealth, supporting authoritarian regimes, fueling internal conflicts, and establishing a permanent external military presence, that all imply security threats and challenges.

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