The impact of security force assistance in Niger: meddling with borders

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Externally driven security force assistance (SFA), peace operations and counter-terrorism operations have all characterized the security environment of the Sahel region in the past decade.[1] Mali has been the epicentre of these developments, following the insurgency of 2012 by Tuareg separatist militants and jihadists, leading to a *coup d'état* later the same year.[2] Yet while Mali has been the scene of most external attempts to control the situation, the relatively stable neighbouring state of Niger has also attracted foreign interventions. Many were set up with the aim of professionalizing and improving the operational capacity of Nigerien security actors through a variety of different capacity-building initiatives,[3] here defined collectively as SFA.[4] Considerable SFA efforts by a multitude of different actors are already under way in Niger;[5] however, following France's withdrawal of troops from Mali in 2022, this presence is likely to increase further, making the impact of SFA in Niger a timely and important topic for examination.

This article is driven by the overarching research question: What impact is SFA having on, and beyond, Niger's security sector? To answer this question, I draw on extensive fieldwork in Niger, and identify and analyse two processes under way in Niger's security sector: the development of a Special Forces Command

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and the proliferation of mobile hybrid units. I build upon existing studies on the politicization and securitization of borders in the Sahel, and on research related to global (in)security trends on the blurring of borders between security forces,[6] and examine the case of Niger in light of these trends.

The aim is twofold: first, to unpack the efforts and effects of SFA through a focus on both geopolitical borders in Niger, and borders between and within units in the security sector; and second, to contextualize and compare the developments in Niger's security sector with broader, global trends related to security forces and (in)security.[7] I thereby contribute to the emerging field of SFA studies,[8] and specifically to research on security issues and borders in the Sahel region,[9] as well as to the literature on global security developments and security forces more broadly.[10] Empirically, the article provides an in-depth case-study of a country whose security situation has drawn attention and involvement from states across the world, but which to date has remained relatively under-studied in academic circles.[11]

In terms of method and material, the article draws on 66 semi-structured interviews and in-depth discussions with both Nigerien civilian and military actors, and foreign actors present in Niger, including embassy staff from different states, officials from EU agencies, representatives from national and international NGOs, security sector personnel and military troops. The interviews took place during five fieldwork trips to Niger of approximately two weeks each between March 2019 and May 2022. Most of the interviews took place in the interviewees' offices, but some were conducted in public spaces, such as a café or restaurant in Niamey. For two of these trips, I was 'embedded' with the Belgian special forces, who trained a range of Nigerien security actors in military tactics, including the mobile

6 Didier Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects of security', *European Security* 15: 4, 2006, pp. 385–404; Donald J. Campbell and Kathleen M. Campbell, 'Soldiers as police officers/police officers as soldiers: role evolution and revolution in the United States', *Armed Forces and Society* 36: 2, 2010, pp. 327–50; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, 'Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism', *International Affairs* 96: 4, 2020, pp. 885–74; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, 'Borderwork in the grey zone: everyday resistance within European border control initiatives in Mali', *Geopolitics*, publ. online May 2021, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14650045.2021.1919 627; Philippe M. Frowd, 'Borderwork creep in West Africa's Sahel', *Geopolitics*, publ. online March 2021, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2021.1901082; Philippe M. Frowd, 'Producing the "transit" migration state: international security intervention in Niger', *Third World Quarterly* 41: 2, 2020, pp. 340–58; Derek Lutterbeck, 'Between police and military: the new security agenda and the rise of the gendarmeries', *Cooperation and Conflict* 39: 1, 2004, pp. 45–68; Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, '(B)ordering hybrid security? EU stabilisation practices in the Sahara-Sahel region', *Ethnopolitics* 18: 5, 2019, pp. 544–59; Nina Wilén and Lisa Strömbom, 'A versatile organisation: mapping the military's core roles in a changing security environment', *European Journal of International Security* 7: 1, 2022, pp. 18–37.
7 See Rosa Brooks, *How everything became war and the military became everything: tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Wilén and Strömbom, 'A versatile organisation'.
8 See Rolandsen et al. 'Security force assistance'; Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's army'; Wilén, 'Analysing (in)formal relations'; Rogers and Goxho, 'Light footprint'.
9 See Cold-Ravnkilde, 'Borderwork in the grey zone'; Frowd, 'Borderwork creep'; Raineri and Strazzari, '(B)ordering hybrid security'.
10 Wilén and Strömbom, 'A versatile organisation'.
11 Lisa Mueller, 'Niger: precarious stability', in Leonardo A. Villalón, ed., *The Oxford handbook of the African Sahel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); exceptions include Olayinka Ajala, 'US drone base in Agadez: a security threat to Niger?', *RUSI Journal* 163: 5, 2018, pp. 20–7; Laura Berlingozzi and Ed Stoddard, 'Assessing misaligned counterinsurgency practice in Niger and Nigeria', *The International Spectator* 55: 4, 2020, pp. 37–53; Sebastian Elischer and Lisa Mueller, 'Niger falls back off track', *African Affairs* 118: 471, 2019, pp. 392–406.

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border control companies or *compagnies mobiles de contrôle de frontières* (CMCF). During these periods, I used a participant observation method, observing the training, the personal interactions entailed, and the set-up of the training. This method also allowed for informal discussions with both Nigerien and Belgian security actors, during breaks in training, or before or after it had started. My positionality as an international 'expert' on security issues in Africa, and in the Sahel in particular, most certainly helped me to get access to, and interact with, high-level national and international officials and military officers, at times giving the interviews the character more of discussions rather than one-sided interviews.

The article begins with a theoretical discussion of the literature on borders and security interventions in the Sahel, coupled with broader trends in the global security sphere related to the borders between internal and external security actors and the division of tasks and roles among them. A second part briefly introduces Niger as a case-study, before zooming in on current and continuing transformations in the security sector: specifically, the buildout of a Special Forces Command and the development of hybrid mobile border forces, which I examine within the analytical context discussed in the first section. In the conclusion, I highlight the specific insights drawn from the case of Niger, while also reflecting on how this case fits into a broader global development on how security forces are structured and given purpose in a mutually constitutive 'meddling with borders' within and beyond security sectors.

Meddling with borders

Defining the geographical area of the Sahel region has become deeply intertwined with political agendas over recent decades.[12] Most definitions of the Sahel have included Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania—also grouped together as the regional G5 Sahel—and at times also Senegal.[13] Borders defining the contours of the Sahel region, as well as borders in between states in the region, have become a focus for policy-making, political and military interventions, and also for numerous academic studies, including among others those that problematize border work, borderwork creep, grey zones and border management.[14] In part, the focus on the borders can be explained by the overlapping crises that the region—however it is defined—has been experiencing over recent decades, the security crisis having dominated since the beginning of the current century.[15] These crises have both been constituted by, and fed into, an era of securitization where the borders of the Sahel have continuously been redefined and sometimes expanded as intervention practices unfold.[16] The focus on borders is in part the

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[12] Leonardo A. Villalón, 'Framing the Sahel: spaces, challenges, encounters', in Villalón, ed., *The Oxford handbook of the African Sahel*, pp. 1–13.

[13] Villalón, 'Framing the Sahel', p. 2.

[14] Villalón, 'Framing the Sahel'; Frowd, 'Borderwork creep'; Cold-Ravnkilde, 'Borderwork in the grey zone'; Raineri and Strazzari, '(B)ordering hybrid security?'.

[15] Villalón, 'Framing the Sahel', p. 2.

[16] Luca Raineri, 'Human smuggling across Niger: state-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56: 1, 2018, pp. 63–86; Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen, 'Disentan-

result of the emerging narrative of migration as a problem, especially following the declared European 'refugee crisis' of 2015, and the EU's efforts to enact border control at a distance.[17]

Niger, which is seen both as an 'island of stability' in the region and as a 'transit country',[18] has become a focus for national and international efforts to stem (illegal) migration and mobility across borders.[19] At the same time, over the past decade Niger has witnessed a marked increase in attacks against both its security forces and civilians from violent extremist organizations, local rebel groups and criminal networks, which have expanded across borders from neighbouring states toward Niger, making 2021 the deadliest year for civilian fatalities since the beginning of coverage by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).[20] Two of the deadliest incidents to date took place in early 2021: in January, twin attacks in western Niger killed more than 100 civilians,[21] while in March 137 Nigerien civilians were killed in an attack on several localities in Tillia, near the Malian border.[22] Liptako-Gourma, the so-called 'three-borders' region, has also become a hotspot for an unprecedented range of security threats, including banditry and organized crime as well as violent community conflicts. To the south, Niger's border with Nigeria, almost 1,500 kilometres long, exposes the country to the spread of Boko Haram activities as well as a steady influx of refugees, while the north-eastern border with Libya has seen illegal trafficking of weapons and goods.

Niger's borders and the deteriorating security environment have thus become central to both national and international actors' efforts in the country, both of whom routinely blur (transit) migration with transnational threats such as criminal networks, trafficking and the 'war on terror'.[23] Practices of border control and migration management are therefore predominant in current efforts to stem mobility in the border lands. While the politicization of mobility is a relatively recent phenomenon,[24] the focus on expanding state control to cover remote areas builds on earlier national attempts to 'move the state closer to the citizens'.[25] This latter idea has nevertheless been given a significant push through EU-sponsored

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gling the security traffic jam', p. 857.

[17] Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Christine Nissen, 'Schizophrenic agendas in the EU's external actions in Mali', *International Affairs* 96: 4, 2020, p. 936; Luca Raineri, 'The bioeconomy of Sahel borders: informal practices of revenue and data extraction', *Geopolitics*, publ. online April 2021, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2020.1868439.

[18] Daniel Mahanty and William Meeker, *Niger: a bulwark against further instability in west Africa*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019; Frowd, 'Producing the "transit" migration state'.

[19] Johannes Claes and Anna Schmauder, *When the dust settles: economic and governance repercussions of migration policies in Niger's north*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/when-the-dust-settles/.

[20] Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), *The Sahel: persistent, expanding, and escalating instability*, https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/.

[21] UNHCR, 'UNHCR outraged at killing of 100 civilians in Niger attacks, hundreds flee on foot', press release, 4 Jan. 2021, https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/1/5ff2e9ff4/unchr-outraged-killing-100-civilians-niger-attacks-hundreds-flee-foot.html.

[22] France 24, 'Scores killed in raids on Niger villages near Mali border', 22 March 2021, available at: https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210322-scores-killed-in-raids-on-niger-villages-near-mali-border, accessed 6 June 2022.

[23] Cold-Ravnkilde, 'Borderwork in the grey zone', p. 13; Frowd, 'Producing the "transit" migration state"', p. 341.

[24] Claes and Schmauder, *When the dust settles*.

[25] Interview with Nigerien police officer A, Niamey, 24 June 2021.

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projects related to increasing the security forces' capacities and capabilities to control border lands,[26] as well as bilateral SFA more broadly. Recent research has shown paradoxical developments related to how these various border management initiatives move borders both inwards—by means of enacting borders 'before the line'—and outwards, by the focus on creating region-wide bordered spaces, such as the G5 Sahel.[27] In addition, the expansion and (mis)use of technical capabilities, coupled with local everyday resistance, at times appear to undermine rather than reinforce control and management of borders.[28]

The focus on borders is also, and somewhat ironically, related to a global emphasis since the events of 9/11 on 'borderless' threats such as terrorism, climate change and trafficking. This development has driven international collaboration between security forces in different states, at the same time blurring borders between internal and external security forces.[29] The military has become closer to traditional internal security issues,[30] whereas the police have experienced an evolving militarization evidenced in a rapid proliferation of police paramilitary units, with heavier weapons and aggressive patrol work.[31] Whether this development has been driven primarily by the existence of 'borderless' threats, or rather by 'institutional games' between semi-autonomous security forces, remains a topic for debate;[32] even so, the evolving relationship between the two kinds of forces is clear. In a related development, a revival and/or creation of 'intermediary agencies'[33] such as gendarmeries, to grapple with threats falling outside the traditional internal and external security forces' scope, has also occurred.[34] These developments have been accompanied by the expressed need for small, expeditionary and multitasking units within the military, resulting in a rapid proliferation in special forces units.[35]

The *rapprochement* between internal and external security forces, the revival of intermediary agencies and the proliferation of special forces units are developments that have been reproduced globally as SFA providers have replicated domestic force structures in other states.[36] Mirroring their own military restructuring priorities, western states have, for example, often focused on building expeditionary capacities in host states through SFA, resulting in an emphasis on creating small and professional units which can deploy rapidly.[37] Similarly, the export of 'intermediary' or hybrid units is exemplified in regional gendarmerie projects supported

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[26] Raineri and Strazzari, '(B)ordering hybrid security?'.

[27] Frowd, 'Borderwork creep', pp. 6–8.

[28] Cold-Ravnkilde, 'Borderwork in the grey zone', p. 5.

[29] See Risa A. Brooks, 'The military and homeland security', *Policy and Management Review* 2: 2, 2002, pp. 1–18; Timothy Edmunds, 'What are armed forces for? The changing nature of military roles in Europe', *International Affairs* 82: 6, 2006, pp. 1059–75; Campbell and Campbell, 'Soldiers as police officers'.

[30] Edmunds, 'What are armed forces for?', p. 1071.

[31] Campbell and Campbell, 'Soldiers as police officers', p. 329; Lutterbeck, 'Between police and military'.

[32] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects'.

[33] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects', p. 391.

[34] Lutterbeck, 'Between police and military'.

[35] Russell A. Burgos, 'Pushing the easy button: special operations forces, international security, and the use of force', *Special Operations Journal* 4: 2, 2018, pp. 109–28; Christopher Marsh, 'Introduction: the world's elite warriors', in Rusian Pukhov and Christopher Marsh, eds, *Elite warriors: special operations forces from around the world* (Minneapolis, MN: East View, 2017).

[36] Edmunds, 'What are armed forces for?', p. 1071.

[37] Edmunds, 'What are armed forces for?', p. 1067.

by the EU, such as GAR-SI Sahel, which will be examined below. While western actors stand at the forefront of many of these security developments as providers of SFA, local actors are co-producing the SFA initiatives and adapting them to their own needs.[38]

The politicization of geographical borders in the Sahel on the one hand, and the global meddling with borders and roles between security forces on the other, constitute the analytical context within which the recent SFA initiatives in Niger's security sector are examined in the following section.

Analysing SFA projects in Niger's security sector

The buildout of a new Special Operations Command and the development of new, mobile hybrid units in Niger are two recent SFA projects. They are both contributing to and exemplifying the global (in)security trends examined above: the meddling with geographical borders and borders between security forces, as well as the proliferation of special forces. From an analytical perspective they can therefore be seen as empirical illustrations of these global trends. However, the aim of this section is to go one step further and examine how these SFA processes produce effects within, between and beyond different security corps in Niger's security sector, through an analysis of interviews with key actors involved in, or observing, the projects.

The first subsection, on the development of the Special Operations Command, starts with an outline of the basics of the process and the main actors involved. A second subsection then identifies the challenges arising, including jealousy and tensions between units within the Command and beyond, regarding training and equipment, and the related pressure to perform. Further subsections then look at the proliferation of hybrid mobile units in different security corps, closely related to border management, and expose inter- and intra-agency rivalry, hybridity, and the confusion regarding the division of tasks among them.

Developing the Special Operations Command

Established by presidential decree in April 2006, Niger's Special Operations Command (COS) was on hold until 2016, due to structural stalemates,[39] yet in February 2018 a new presidential order required an expansion of COS to establish a command of twelve special intervention battalions (BSIs) of 550 troops each over the next five years. The order came in the context of a rapidly deteriorating security situation, with increasing threat levels on all the country's borders. Various bilateral partners had over the years provided training, equipment and assistance to different units and in different settings, yet while several Special Operations Forces (SOF) companies and battalions had been trained through

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[38] See Cold-Ravnkilde, 'Borderwork in the grey zone'; Frowd, 'Producing the "transit" migration state''.
[39] Internal Nigerien document.

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exercises such as Flintlock[40], the new force generation project became a coordinated structure and an objective for various SFA efforts. The director of the Nigerien COS explained: 'The idea was to go from four to twelve BSIs before 2022, so I called our partners to help and assist us.'[41] The four special intervention battalions in existence before the presidential order were grouped under the title BICOS (Bataillons d'Intervention et de Commande des Opérations Spéciales); established in 2016, they were trained by the United States, Algeria and Canada, among others. The new force generation project, however, implied the creation of a comprehensive, structured COS.

The development of this command has implied substantial involvement from different partner nations, each partner being assigned one or several battalions to train and equip in one of Niger's eight regions. The main external actors in this force generation project have been the United States, Germany, Canada, Italy, France and Belgium, each of which has contributed training and equipment to 'their' battalions over the past few years.[42] Linked to the creation of the COS, a new special forces training centre has been built and financed by Germany in the region of Tillia; this will host technical and tactical qualification courses, as well as certification for SOF units. The establishment of the academy is key to the force generation project; the aim is that Niger will be able to run the academy after three years of partner assistance in training and doctrine writing.[43]

While considerable efforts have been made to coordinate and standardize the training, there are still variations in the provision of equipment. So far as training is concerned, the Belgian special forces have been the driving force, together with their Nigerien counterparts, in developing a common programme of instruction (POI). The POI comprises over 18 modules that constitute the technical phase of an initial qualification course for BSI soldiers and cadres, including subjects such as marksmanship, navigation, countering improvised explosive devices, small unit tactics and combat first aid, and five specialized courses covering skills such as driving, or handling specific weapons.[44] The development of a new and standardized curriculum of courses is now the baseline for all partner nations' training; yet when it comes to equipment every state has different agreements in place, at times leading to tensions between units within the command and beyond.

Equipment, training and performance: internal competition

The United States, Germany and France are known to provide significant amounts of military equipment, both lethal and non-lethal, to the battalions that they train, including vehicles, personal equipment, weapons and ammunition. Belgium, however, has so far not contributed any equipment, apart from locally made

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[40] The US Africa Command's annual West Africa special operations exercise, which gathers over 2,000 personnel from approximately 34 states on an annual basis for two weeks.
[41] Interview with director of COS, Niamey, March 2019; Wilén and Strömbom, 'A versatile organisation'.
[42] Wilén, 'Analysing (in)formal relations'.
[43] Interviews with external military officer and Nigerien military officer, March 2019.
[44] Pierre Dehaene, 'The localization strategy: strategic sense for special operations forces in Niger', *Combating Terrorism Exchange (CTX)* 9: 1, 2019, pp. 29–38.

first-aid kits, which have been developed in close collaboration with the Belgian troop contingent.[45] The fact that partners provide different amounts of equipment sometimes leads to competition between companies, forcing the Nigerien counterpart to rebalance the distribution of equipment:

Yes, there is competition between the different battalions when it comes to partners that come with a lot of resources, but we come with suggestions to try to balance the means. For example, we just got several new vehicles, and they won't be given to those that already have received a lot.[46]

Yet there is a clear demand from the Nigerien military that partners equip the forces that they train, given the lack of resources in Niger:

We also ask our partner nations to make an effort: you train them, but you are not going to let them fight with sticks afterwards. I know that in certain states, there are policies that prevent them from providing lethal equipment, but they could at least give uniforms, and other non-lethal equipment.[47]

This disgruntlement with the lack of resources echoes similar situations in other states that are receiving foreign assistance for their security sectors, such as Mali. In the latter case, Denis Tull has pointed to the gap between foreigners' insistence on training and education, and local officers' expectations for combat support and lethal equipment.[48] Efforts have, however, been made to provide the Nigerien forces with interoperable equipment to avoid mismatches:

Since the beginning, we have tried to make sure that the equipment that we have bought is aligned with existing or incoming equipment … But what mostly happened is that the Americans had equipment that they were already giving, so when the Germans came in, they tried to buy similar equipment … at least things that mattered.[49]

It is nevertheless still the supply side that prevails, and given the lack of resources on the Nigerien side, the latter often accepts donated equipment that is not necessarily complementary to that already in place, or even relevant for their capabilities and missions: 'The Nigerien authorities should resist [offers], but that is at the political level, not on a technical level. But it is also about investment conditions: if we say no, we risk not getting anything.'[50]

While the development, and the actual training, of the different SOF battalions is perceived as a successful SFA project by both national and international partners,[51] the differences in capabilities and policies between the partner states appear to unintentionally create competition and jealousy between companies within the command itself, which have to be handled and resolved by local officers,

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[45] Interviews with western militaries, Niamey, March, Oct. 2019; Nina Wilén, *Belgian special forces in the Sahel: a minimal footprint with maximal output?*, Egmont Africa policy brief no. 26, May 2019, available at: https://www.egmontinstitute.be/belgian-special-forces-in-the-sahel-a-minimal-footprint-with-maximal-output/.
[46] Interview with Nigerien officer, Niamey, March 2019.
[47] Interview with Nigerien officer, Niamey, Oct. 2019.
[48] Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's army'.
[49] Phone interview with member of foreign national military, 27 April 2021.
[50] Interview with Nigerien police officer A, Niamey, 24 June 2021.
[51] Interviews with Nigerien and international military officers and political representatives, May 2022.

thus adapting and shaping the SFA to fit the circumstances. The heavy investment in terms of training and equipment by the foreign partners has also resulted in inter-agency rivalry from units outside the command, and more expectations and demands for the deployment of the newly trained companies.

Initially envisioned as a complement to the conventional army units, with one battalion in each region, except for the riskier border regions, where two battalions would be placed, the command now faces increasing demands to deploy:

We have a problem that they will use us too much, we have a tendency to overexploit them, to send them left and right, and that will break them and their morale … COS can't do everything, they are developed to do interventions.[52]

Research has pointed to the risk of special forces becoming the 'easy button to push', given their nature as 'highly lethal, deniable, deployable and as a result, seemingly cost effective'.[53] The high demand on the newly developed special forces has also led to jealousy from units in the conventional army:

Well, it is clear that they say that we get more training and equipment and that it can annoy the others, but you also have to take into account that it is the same people, the others are our selection reserve, so they just have to get selected to form part of COS.[54]

Despite denials that COS soldiers receive higher salaries or other benefits, this internal competition thus results in more pressure to perform, especially given the deteriorating security situation, which has forced the Nigerien military to deploy approximately 70 per cent of its forces on a permanent basis to fight armed groups and protect the highly politicized borders.[55] Protecting borders is also one of the main tasks of the new, hybrid mobile security force units, which represent another SFA project in Niger's security sector.

Creating hybrid mobile units

Niger's status as a transit country,[56] and the emergence of 'borderless' threats and 'institutional games',[57] have driven a proliferation of mobile, hybrid forces in the country.[58] The creation of at least three different types of mobile security forces has been supported by external actors in Niger in recent years. The United States and, later, European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel), have been training and equipping companies to form the mobile border control companies or CMCF, which come under the authority of the police force, while a group of EU member states has been training and equipping mobile gendarmerie

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[52] Interview with Nigerien officer, Niamey, 23 Oct. 2019.

[53] Burgos, 'Pushing the easy button'.

[54] Interview with external military officer and Nigerien military officer, March 2019.

[55] Nina Wilén and Pierre Dehaene, 'Défis de l'assistance aux forces de sécurité: comprendre le context local et harmoniser les intérêts', *GRIP*, Observatoire Boutros Ghali, 30 July 2020, https://grip. org/defis-assistance-forces-securite/.

[56] Frowd, 'Producing the "transit" migration state"'.

[57] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects'.

[58] Audit Chamber III, External Actions/Security and Justice, *Strengthening the capacity of the internal security forces in Niger and Mali: only limited and slow progress*, European Court of Auditors, 15 June 2018.

companies in the project GAR-SI Sahel (Groupe d'action rapides—surveillance et intervention au Sahel). Recently, the National Guard (GN) has also developed its own mobile units, entitled *Escadrons Polyvalentes de la Garde Nationale de Niger* (EP-GNN). The latter two projects are being financed by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF).[59]

All the three types of forces examined here share common objectives: they are supposed to extend state control and protection of civilians to distant zones and (trans)border regions by being both *preventive*, in the sense that they can patrol and supervise areas, and *reactive*, with sufficient equipment and training to execute rapid interventions when necessary.[60] The focus is on controlling borders, and fighting illicit trafficking and terrorism, thus reflecting the broader trend of creating expeditionary units. They can also be considered as examples of 'intermediary agencies',[61] situated at the interface of the police and the army, thereby meddling with the borders between traditional security forces.

Hybridity, mobility, 'borderless' threats and cooperation

The mobile gendarmerie units created under the GAR-SI project are being developed in each of the G5 Sahel countries, and also in Senegal. The objective has been to establish flexible, mobile and multi-tasking law enforcement units, of approximately 120 persons each, which are interoperable, to enhance regional cooperation across borders.[62] Led by, and modelled on, Spain's Guardia Civil, the project has been driven by the French National Gendarmerie, the Italian *carabinieri* and the National Guard of Portugal, which have provided both training and equipment to the forces in the six Sahelian states since 2017, thus exporting their own hybrid security forces abroad.[63]

The GAR-SI companies, each one consisting of three platoons of about 40 individuals, are under the authority of both the ministry of defence and the interior ministry; this makes them, along with most gendarmerie forces, double-hatted and locates them between internal and external security forces. Tasked with intelligence-gathering, investigation and evidence collection, they are supposed to make links between crimes committed in the field, the suspects arrested, and the legal authorities charged with following up the judiciary process.[64] According to one GAR-SI official: 'It is a force of military character. A pivotal force between

[59] EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *Soutien à la création d'un escadron polyvalent de la Garde Nationale du Niger (EP-GNN)*, 9 Oct. 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/niger/soutien-la-creation-dun-escadron-polyvalent-de-la-garde-nationale-du_en; Frowd, 'Producing the "transit" migration state"', p. 345.

[60] EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *GAR-SI Sahel (Groupes d'Action Rapides—Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel)*, 1 Jan. 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/regional/gar-si-sahel-groupes-daction-rapides-surveillance-et_en; EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *Soutien à la création d'un escadron polyvalent de la Garde Nationale du Niger (EP-GNN)*.

[61] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects'.

[62] EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *GAR-SI Sahel*.

[63] 'The civil guard leads the GAR-SI Sahel project to guarantee stability and the fight against terrorism and organised crime in Sahel', *Spain Journal*, 28 June 2021, https://thespainjournal.com/the-civil-guard-leads-the-gar-si-sahel-project-to-guarantee-stability-and-the-fight-against-terrorism-and-organized-crime-in-sahel/.

[64] Interview with GAR-SI official B, Niamey, 30 March 2019.

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defence and internal security. The defence is usually not concerned with justice, but here we do both, we fight the terrorists, and we do justice afterwards'.[65]

This reflects Bigo's observation that the Italian *carabinieri* and the French gendarmerie define themselves as 'soldiers of the law', whose use of military means combined with the knowledge to deploy them in a civilian context makes them well adapted to 'policing abroad'.[66]

Instructors from the four EU member states identified above exemplify the 'policing abroad' idea by training the recruits in Spain in tactics, criminal investigation, combat search and rescue, and special interventions, among other things, for two months; this period is followed by one month in Niger adapting the training to the specific conditions in the field.[67] By June 2021, the project had trained close to 1,800 gendarmes across the six countries. Different interpretations of borders are central to the existence and functioning of GAR-SI. The gendarmerie forces are trained to extend state control to borders, thereby enforcing the idea of sovereign states, while fighting 'borderless' threats. These 'borderless' threats are fought by international collaboration between security agencies,[68] who in so doing, somewhat paradoxically, both enforce and undermine the importance of geopolitical borders.

EUCAP Sahel in Niger has also been involved in the development of mobile border control units in the police force since 2018. The CMCF project, initially developed by the Nigerien authorities in 2016, is supposed to extend state authority to remote areas and control borders—in the same way as GAR-SI. The first company of approximately 250 persons was supported and trained by the United States in Maradi, a town close to the border with Nigeria, in line with its main purpose of protecting borders. EUCAP became involved in 2018, with Germany and the Netherlands financing the training and equipment of a second CMCF unit, as well as the construction of barracks in Birni N'Konni—also on the border with Nigeria.[69]

The six-month training period involves three phases: first, military tactical training, including courses such as small unit tactics, asymmetric warfare and navigation and orientation; second, general training, with courses on human rights, deontology, and intelligence, among others; the third phase is focused on border management, and contains courses on trafficking of smuggled goods, weapons, drugs and people, false documents, profiling and cultural sensitization.[70]

As the name suggests, the main objective of the CMCF project was initially to protect populations, control borders, and fight trafficking and smuggling; but over recent years, owing to the deteriorating security conditions, it has developed into more of a counterterrorism/organized crime unit.[71]

[65] Interview with GAR-SI official A, Niamey, 30 March 2019.
[66] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects', p. 400.
[67] Interview with GAR-SI officials A and B, Niamey, 30 March 2019.
[68] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects', p. 399.
[69] EUCAP Sahel, *Compagnie Mobile de Contrôle des Frontières (CMCF)*, Oct. 2020, https://eucap-sahel.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/EUCAP-Sahel-Niger_CMCF-Factsheet-FR.pdf.
[70] Email information from EUCAP officer, 14 Sept. 2021.
[71] Interview with EUCAP Officer A, Niamey, 16 June 2021; interview with Nigerien police officer A, Niamey,

However, the CMCF were not the first hybrid mobile units to be developed in the Nigerien police force. As early as 2010, after the fourth *coup d'état* in Niger since independence, a new security plan was developed which included efforts to 'bring the state closer to the population' in remote zones. One interviewee explained:

I was one of the designers of the new security … the concept was called 'mixed security patrols' and they were mobile units, composed by elements from Garde Nationale, the police, the customs, and forest and wildlife units, and their aim was firstly security, but also to really help the population: they took care of everything![72]

At the time, the security situation was not the same as the current situation and the units—composed of 30–50 persons in each team—were not heavily armed but became sources for intelligence in the distant zones of Niger. The units lasted for approximately two years, when the command of the units was decentralized and multiplied, and in the absence of national coordination, the initial plan for the project seems to have disappeared among a raft of other changes in the security sector.[73] These hybrid units were thus already examples of 'intermediary agencies', developed as expeditionary, flexible forces between traditional internal and external security forces, similar to the new CMCF units, which are nevertheless trained in military tactics and equipped with heavy weapons.

The militarization of the CMCF is explained by both external and internal observers with reference to the rapidly deteriorating security context:

You are forced to do this in view of the security context. The situation evolves very quickly, the criminality evolves very quickly towards something more robust, rougher, something more terrorist. I don't think we have the choice, we can't present an easy prey, we need to train and equip them.[74]

The need to adapt the forces to the threats is also part of the explanation for the development of the units: 'The mobility aspect is introduced by the *modus operandi* of banditry,'[75] who often use motorcycles to move quickly between areas. However, the investment in and the militarization of the CMCF is also subject to criticism:

I think the initial CMCF concept was good, but now, no. It is too militarized; it has become a counter-terrorist unit … they have become the best units and that creates conflicts within the corps.[76]

This quote illustrates the ambiguity of the CMCF's position between police and military, and its supposedly superior training and equipment, as a problem of inter-agency rivalry.[77] As with the uneven provision of equipment for the special forces noted in the previous section, this appears to produce jealousy and exacerbate 'institutional games' between units.

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24 June 2021; discussion with EUCAP officer B, Niamey, 11 June 2021.

[72] Interview with Nigerien police officer A, Niamey, 24 June 2021.
[73] Interview with Nigerien police officer B, Niamey, 26 June 2021.
[74] Interview with EUCAP officer A, Niamey, 16 June 2021.
[75] Interview with Nigerien police officer A, Niamey, 24 June 2021.
[76] Interview with Nigerien police officer A, Niamey, 24 June 2021.
[77] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects', p. 394.

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In 2021, after a somewhat complicated pursuit of new donors as the Netherlands pulled out, the development started of a third CMCF unit, based in Téra.[78] While the Czech Republic replaced the Netherlands with a considerably smaller contribution, Germany maintained its role as the main donor for the project, provoking some irritation from France, the former colonial power in the country. While not wanting to contribute to this particular project, France felt sidelined in what it considered its own domain, demonstrating that SFA can provoke disputes about status and identity both between the units being trained and between the partners training them.[79]

Institutional games and labour division

As the security context has worsened and 'borderless' threats have multiplied, institutional games seem to have deepened inter-agency rivalry and added confusion in respect of the division of labour between the various forces. Since October 2020, the EUTF has supported the development of new mobile units in the National Guard, involving approximately 200 persons. These units share the same objectives as the other mobile forces,[80] and their development is explained quite explicitly as the result of inter-agency rivalry by an EU official:

Everybody wanted their mobile units: the National Guard wanted the *escadrons polyvalentes* (multipurpose squads). The impression is that this was a political demand: the National Guard did not have their mobile unit. But it is clear that we need more mobile forces—the borders are gigantic![81]

Apart from illustrating inter-agency rivalry, this quote reflects security forces' semi-independence, in the sense that they cannot be understood exclusively in terms of a reaction to a certain stimulus; rather, they define and reframe threats to justify internal changes and reforms.[82] Also, it demonstrates that geopolitical borders are frequently understood as something requiring control and management; and furthermore, it reproduces the rather common observation that the Sahel is a region with enough crises to accommodate all types of actors—meaning that there is no need to compete over who does what, as there is a problem for everyone to tackle.[83]

This observation notwithstanding, the multiplication of different forces with the same mandates appears to produce confusion in practice related to the division of labour among them. Increasingly lethal attacks by armed non-state groups,

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[78] Niamey et les Deux Jours, 'La 3e Compagnie Mobile de Contrôle des Frontières sera installé à Téra', https://www.niameyetles2jours.com/l-uemoa/gouvernance/0505-6762-la-3e-compagnie-mobile-de-controle-des-frontieres-sera-installee-a-tera.

[79] Interview with anonymous foreign officer in Niamey, Nov. 2020. See also Guichaoua, 'The bitter harvest', p. 904.

[80] EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *Soutien à la création d'un escadron polyvalent de la Garde Nationale du Niger (EP-GNN)*.

[81] Interview with EUCAP officer A, Niamey, 16 June 2021.

[82] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects', p. 391.

[83] Interview with foreign security representative, Niamey, 17 June 2021; for similar reflections, see Gregory Mann, *From empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 4.

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institutional games and the politicization of borders all contribute to this:

> In principle, the police should stay in the urban zones, the gendarmerie in the rural zones and the National Guard should protect structures and instances that represent the state, like the ministry of justice, the parliament etc. But in practice, they all do the same thing: there is confusion.[84]

A law on internal security which is supposed to frame and define the tasks of the different forces has been written; yet 'the law is finalized but the legal frameworks are not yet implemented, there is a technical problem of follow-up'.[85] Whether this is an example of what Cold-Ravnkilde has termed intentional 'foot-dragging',[86] or simply a lack of resources, is difficult to evaluate; however, it appears clear that local actors can, and do, influence when and how SFA projects are implemented.

The confusion regarding which force should deploy where and with what mandate is also linked to the blurred borders between the different forces and their rivalry: 'The gendarmerie has the impression that we are moving into their territory, and me too, I have that impression. So, now they are moving into ours!'[87]

Lightly equipped units which are traditionally deployed in urban areas are at an increased risk of attack in more rural zones and lack the capabilities to respond to armed groups. This in turn drives the request for more robust equipment. These trends are reinforced by the Nigerien authorities' desire for more equipment and assistance, especially combat-related support or equipment, which can be used to fight insurgents and extremist groups. In addition, jealousy between and within units regarding new, donor-supplied equipment is promoting a certain militarization of internal security forces. The mobile hybrid companies, for example, have become 'elite' units within their own corps, provoking jealousy from other units who covet their more robust (and modern) equipment and training, similar to that provided to the units discussed above.

Yet, as Frowd and Sandor point out, external actors in the Sahel seek to avoid the very appearance of militarization, often attempting to constrain it by accompanying assistance leaning towards martial training with managerial practices which emphasize the legitimacy of civilian and bureaucratic control.[88] In Niger, as in other states in the region, the training of these new mobile border units has, for example, been accompanied by a heavy focus on courses of judiciarisation, understood as training the security forces in the law of conflict, in battlefield evidence, and in how to correctly conduct arrests and fill out documents so that the legal system can take over the process. This is considered crucial to improve the rule of law in the country: interviewees explained that, before these courses were introduced, security forces did not document what happened in the field, they just caught the perpetrators—or at worst killed them—without collecting

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[84] Interview with foreign security representative, Niamey, 17 June 2021.
[85] Interview with foreign NGO officer, Niamey, 15 June 2021.
[86] Cold-Ravnkilde, 'Borderwork in the grey zone', p. 3.
[87] Interview with Nigerien police officer B, June 2021.
[88] Philippe Frowd and Adam Sandor, 'Militarism and its limits: Sociological insights on security assemblages in the Sahel', *Security Dialogue* 49: 1–2, pp. 70–82.

any evidence for the justice system to take over.[89] Different roles and relations, in combination with human rights abuses, also contribute to inter-agency tensions: 'the gendarmerie should normally control the army when they are deployed together, but since the army commit human rights abuses, they [the gendarmerie] are not welcome'.[90]

While the judiciarisation courses are examples of efforts to control and prevent human rights abuses, the actual effect of these courses is difficult to measure and as yet it is too early to assess their effectiveness. On the one hand, critics may point to the risk of these courses ending up producing what Ursula Schroeder and colleagues have called 'normative shells', where domestic actors nominally institutionalize specific rules, but fail to implement appropriate organizational structures and capacities to translate these rules into substantive change in security governance, reflecting the weaknesses in Niger's legal sector.[91] On the other hand, there is the possibility that these courses may, over time, give rise to a change of behaviour in certain units, producing effects beyond the security sector by reinforcing the rule of law.

Analysis of the three types of hybrid mobile units in different security corps in Niger has exposed how SFA interacts with, and contributes to, institutional games between security forces. It has also shown how the responses to 'borderless' threats contributes to emphasizing the importance of securing borders and decreasing mobility, while at the same time pushing for increased transnational collaboration between security forces. Somewhat paradoxically then, the existence of 'borderless' threats both enhance and diminish the importance of the geographical border, while also contributing to the blurring of borders between and within security forces.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the impact of SFA on Niger's security sector and beyond, focusing on the politicization of borders—both geopolitical borders determining where states' territories begin and end, and borders, between and within security forces. It has done so by examining two current SFA projects in Niger's security sector which exemplify and contribute to recent developments in global (in)security: the proliferation of special forces units and the propagation of mobile, hybrid security units, situated ambiguously in relation to the traditional distinction between internal and external security forces.

The first SFA project examined here—the development of new special forces battalions by a number of external partners in a Special Operations Command structure—has had several consequences for Niger's security sector. Two are discussed here. First, it has clearly increased the status of the newly trained special forces units and expectations of them on the part of other actors within the

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[89] Interviews with EUCAP Officer C and with foreign trainer to CMCF, Niamey, Nov. 2020.
[90] Interview with foreign NGO officer, June 2021.
[91] Ursula C. Schroeder, Fairlie Chappuis and Deniz Kocak, 'Security sector reform and the emergence of hybrid security governance', *International Peacekeeping* 21: 2, 2014, p. 216.

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security sector, resulting in inter-agency rivalry and, according to some interviewees, an over-employment of the units, not only in terms of how often and for how long they are deployed, but also in terms of the types of operations they are mandated to perform. Everyday practice, and the rumours (of their being superior to other forces) thus have constitutive effects,[92] pushing the boundaries for their use outwards, expanding their roles and tasks,[93] and in a certain way also replicating the global tendency to use special forces as an 'easy button to push'.[94]

Second, while the standardization of the training manuals appears to have created more coherence among the different external partners, the unequal provision of equipment has resulted in rivalry between units within the COS. Battalions want to be trained by the state providing the most materiel, whereas local commanders try to even out the distribution of equipment and materiel to avoid tensions. This development is the result of the 'multi-bilateral' agreements that serve as a basis for the project, where each partner provides what it can and what it wants to, without any overarching coordination between them, and Nigeriens' preference for maintaining separate bilateral accords, which offer the possibility of acquiring more training and equipment from individual partners.

The second SFA project, the multiplication of hybrid mobile forces, has had several similar effects in the security sector, including intra-agency rivalry related to training and equipment perceived as superior by other units, and inter-agency rivalry connected to perceived 'turfs', or areas of intervention. The tensions seem to be at their worst between gendarmerie and police corps, the division of labour between which is clear on paper, but is blurred in practice by the hybridity of the new units and the similar mandates of the different forces.

The proliferation of these mobile units also reveals a certain semi-autonomy of the security forces,[95] whereby it seems as if the creation of new units is impelled not only by the existence of particular threats but by inter-agency rivalry in combination with external actors' will to provide finance and equipment. These hybrid units are thus able to take advantage of their intermediate positions to improve their status and power, seeing themselves as central participants whose large spectrum of interventions allows them to be present where the police do not dare, or are not allowed, to go, and where the military do not want to go.[96] They hence exemplify the shifting power balance as the borders between traditional security forces become increasingly blurred.

On a more overarching level, the two trends of politicizing geopolitical borders in the Sahel region and borders between security forces are mutually constitutive and related to who decides which developments should be considered threats and how they should be addressed. As previous research has shown, borders in the Sahel region have taken on an importance of their own, linked to migration and 'borderless' threats, relating not only to unwanted mobility towards Europe,

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[92] Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen, 'Disentangling the security traffic jam', p. 873.
[93] On roles and tasks for the military, see Wilén and Strömbom, 'A versatile organisation'.
[94] Burgos, 'Pushing the easy button'.
[95] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects'.
[96] Bigo, 'Internal and external aspects', p. 398.

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but also to questions about state control and sovereignty.[97] While the 'borderless' threats have led to the creation of regional coalitions such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, practice has shown that states have been reluctant to let neighbouring coalition partners cross national borders. The focus on securing borders is thus not a one-sided imposition by external actors, such as the EU, but co-constituted by national and local actors who see opportunities to extend or reinforce control and power, and at times also financial opportunities related to smuggling and black markets.[98]

The creation of hybrid mobile security forces is also a co-constituted development between SFA providers replicating domestic force structures and local security actors' continuous demands for training and equipment. The focus on geopolitical borders drives the creation of hybrid, intermediary agencies that gain increasing power in relation to the traditional security forces. Both external and local actors share a common motivation to fight 'borderless' threats, and their incentives to do so relate both to global (in)security and institutional games. Niger's status as a transit country, the deteriorating security environment, France's withdrawal from Mali and the 2022 vote in the Nigerien parliament approving a bill that allows the hosting of more European special forces,[99] all make it likely that Niger will stand host for more SFA projects in the near future. Understanding the effects of meddling with geopolitical borders, as well as the role played by institutional games and by borders between security forces, will thus remain important to decipher the distribution and balance of power between different actors, within and beyond the security sector.

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[97] Raineri, 'The bioeconomy of Sahel borders'.
[98] Raineri, 'Human smuggling across Niger'.
[99] 'Niger approves hosting more European forces amid Mali withdrawal', Al Jazeera, 22 April 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/22/niger-debates-hosting-more-european-forces-withdrawing-from-mali.