

The Dollarization and Militarization of Africa

By [Allan Swenson](#)

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The desert town of Agadez in Niger is currently best known as a stop on the people-smuggling route between West Africa and Europe, but it is about to take its place in the geopolitical stage as the American military has announced it will build a [drone base on its outskirts](#). Reportedly costing U.S. taxpayers as much of \$100 million, the base is just the latest American play for military supremacy in Africa — Niger is the only country in that volatile region of the continent prepared to risk allowing Washington a base for its MQ-9 Reapers, the even more lethal successor to the notorious Predator drone.

While the U.S. is strengthening its military capabilities in the region, it is also forging deeper ties with Niger's repressive government. President Mahamadou Issoufou was re-elected in March with a laughably high 92% of the vote. Suspicions about the legitimacy of the landslide win are warranted, considering the run-up the election was marred by the jailing of a pro-opposition pop singer, the barring of [nearly a quarter](#) of voters from the race, and the fact that the opposition coalition withdrew its candidate, Hama Amadou, from the contest. The opposition cited [unfair treatment](#) between the two candidates, not least because Amadou was put in jail on spurious charges of "baby trafficking" and forced to campaign from behind bars. Issoufou's American partners, however, promptly issued a laughable press release congratulating Issoufou on his win and reaffirming the US's commitment to its "[partnership with Niger](#) on security, development, and democratic governance."

The people of Niger have less to be pleased about. While President Issoufou and his military enjoy the lucrative revenue that comes with inviting the American military to pursue the endless War on Terror on Nigerien soil, everyday Nigerians continue to suffer. As the United Nations Human Development Index makes clear, Niger is one of the [poorest and least developed](#) countries in the world. Issoufou, for his part, seems to forget who he is meant to be representing, especially as he continues to grant French energy company Areva tax breaks as it [mines uranium in the north of the country](#). No matter that the local population is affected by radiation without benefiting from the extraction taking place in their midst.

Far from being the exception, Niger is simply the latest in a long line of countries happy to take greenbacks in exchange for allowing the U.S. to pursue its hegemonic designs for Africa. Across the continent in Djibouti, to take just one example, Ismail Omar Guelleh has turned his tiny country – barely bigger than the state of New Jersey – into a massive multi-nation military base, with U.S. and Chinese warships [nestled alongside](#) each other. It is, according to American ambassador Thomas Kelly, a modern day equivalent of Casablanca in the 1940s. Specifically, he cites "all the different nationalities elbowing each other" and "[all the intrigue](#)".

Like Niger, Djibouti exploits the “island of stability” narrative to make itself indispensable to international partners. Sadly, the money earned from all the [military bases](#) in the country do not trickle down to the population. 42% of Djiboutians live in [extreme poverty](#), and another 48% are unemployed. Meanwhile, the U.S. [turns a blind eye](#) to “[electoral hold-ups](#)” like Guelleh’s re-election earlier this year. Washington said little in 2010, when President Guelleh amended the constitution to permit himself to seek his third and now fourth term in office. In the U.S. foreign policy calculus, it seems allegiance to autocrats will always trump the democratic commitment to human rights and popular sovereignty from the moment fuzzy words like “terrorism” or “security” come into play.

Sadly, this pattern that goes back decades in Africa. The Reagan administration helped Chad’s former dictator Hissène Habré – [dubbed ‘Africa’s Pinochet’](#) – into power and helped keep him there with millions of dollars in military aid and training for his bloodthirsty secret police. Habré, of course, was [put on trial](#) in Senegal in 2015 for crimes against humanity, torture and war crimes, and his historic conviction this year marked one of the rare instances when an African dictator has truly faced justice for their actions. In 2011, Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak enjoyed \$1.3 billion in aid from American partners and was seen as “an ideal partner for the United States, as long as Washington [focused on stability](#) in the present without much thought about long term implications.”

The “long term implications” are where Washington’s one-track mindset ends up burning American policymakers time and time again. Instead of helping to reinforce stability in any part of the world, be it West Africa, Central America, or the Middle East, US-backed dictators eventually fall. Their abuses, combined with the collateral damage wrought by U.S. actions ([especially drone strikes](#)), help stoke and perpetuate the [grievances](#) that allow the very terrorist groups Washington is targeting to thrive. As American aid and support goes to leaders that crush dissent and subvert the democratic order, as Issoufou is doing in Niger, the invariable result is widespread [resentment against the U.S.](#) and the West more generally.

Blaise Compaoré, the former president of Burkina Faso – a “[key hub](#) of the U.S. spying network” – is only one of the most recent to fall. Despite the fact that Compaoré’s early years in power [were marked](#) by a cozy relationship with Muammar Gaddafi and accusations that he sent mercenaries to fight United Nations peacekeepers in Sierra Leone, the U.S. security community embraced him as a partner. After a popular uprising in the streets of Ouagadougou blocked Compaoré’s attempt to extend his 27 years in power, the onetime army officer [fled to Ivory Coast](#), leaving behind him not only a [tumultuous political legacy](#) but also an impoverished country not altogether from [terrorist attacks](#) like those conducted by al-Qaeda in January.

By getting into bed with African dictators, the U.S. simply sets up future problems for itself while ensuring life gets no better for the continent’s most vulnerable populations.

Allan Swenson is a Paris-based international development practitioner and social entrepreneur with a focus on African life and society. [Read other articles by Allan.](#)

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