



# U.S. Kills Tuareg Civilians in Libyan Airstrike

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Cover photograph, taken by the Author, shows mountain scarps around Ghat region, which impedes vehicle escape.

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## U.S. Kills Tuareg Civilians in Libyan Airstrike



Source: Google Maps

# Introduction

On Thursday, 29 November 2018 a U.S. airstrike in southwest Libya killed 11 innocent Tuareg civilians and off-duty soldiers. The following day, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) issued a press release entitled: U.S. Conducts Precision Airstrike in Libya.<sup>1</sup> The full statement read:

*In coordination with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), U.S. Africa Command conducted a precision airstrike near Al Uwaynat, Libya, November 29, 2018, killing eleven (11) al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) terrorists and destroying three (3) vehicles.*

*At this time, we assess no civilians were injured or killed in this strike.*

*“AFRICOM will use precision strikes to deny terrorists safe haven in Libya. We will keep pressure on their network, and they remain vulnerable wherever they are,” said U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Gregg P. Olson, director of operations, U.S. Africa Command.*

*This is the third U.S. strike against AQIM in Libya. The last strike against AQIM occurred on June 13, 2018, resulting in the death of one (1) terrorist.<sup>2</sup>*

*The United States will not relent in its mission to degrade, disrupt, and destroy terrorist organizations and bring stability to the region. We are committed to maintaining pressure on the terror network and preventing terrorists from establishing safe haven.*

## U.S. Kills Tuareg Civilians in Libyan Airstrike

The airstrike took place near Al-Awaynat (Al-Uwaynat)<sup>3</sup>, a small town on the main tarmac road that connects Ubari, a key town in Libya's south-western Fezzan region, and the ancient caravan-trading town of Ghat, close to the Algerian border in the extreme southwest corner of Libya. Al-Awaynat is 262 km west-south-west of Ubari, 100 km north of Ghat and approximately 80 km from the Algerian border.



Driving through Al-Awaynat

Later that day, the 29 November, members of the Tuareg community in Ubari, gathered to condemn the U.S. airstrike.<sup>4</sup> They protested that the 11 people killed were not al-Qaeda militants, as AFRICOM claimed, but innocent Tuareg civilians and off-duty soldiers who had been killed under the pretext of terrorism without any evidence to substantiate their guilt. Banners, written in Arabic, accused AFRICOM of killing innocent civilians.<sup>5</sup>



Tuareg community protest

The protesters demanded that AFRICOM and the GNA, which was involved in coordinating the airstrike, provide compensation to the families of the dead and injured, and demanded that AFRICOM apologise for the raid.

The protesters also called on the Attorney General, the Interior Ministry, the Presidential Council, the House of Representatives and the High Council of State of Libya's GNA to open an impartial international and local investigation to determine the facts and circumstances of what they called the "Awaynat massacre". They threatened to step up their protest if their demands for the investigation were not met within 48 hours and also called on local and international human rights organisations to put pressure on the GNA to hold an investigation.

The initial Ubari protests claimed that the victims of the attack included both civilians and military personnel and that the four-vehicle motorcade was bombed while on its way to rescue a group of Tuareg, near the Algerian border, who had encountered a gang of smugglers attempting to smuggle heavy earth-moving and digging machinery to Algeria.

Significantly, the usually reliable SITE Intelligence Group published on 5 December that AQIM had denied the claim by AFRICOM that 11 of its members had been killed in an airstrike in southwest Libya and that the people killed were Tuareg who had no 'organisational link' to AQIM.<sup>6</sup>

The incident, according to Airwars, a UK-based monitor that tracks what it calls 'air campaigns', including drone attacks and manned airstrikes, marks the biggest loss of civilian life from a U.S. action in Libya since 2011; some of those killed were militiamen aligned with a U.S.-supported group, the Al Bayan Al-Massous, which helped to oust the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from Sirte earlier in the year.<sup>7</sup>

Official documents sent to the author by the local authorities in Ubari list seven of the deceased as soldiers, what Airwars calls 'militiamen', and four as civilians. The seven soldiers were serving in infantry and border guard battalions belonging to the GNA.<sup>8</sup> As Airwars claimed, several of these units had supported the U.S. in ousting ISIS from Sirte.

Shortly after these initial protests, AFRICOM reportedly issued a second statement saying: "At this time, we still assess that no civilians were injured or killed."<sup>9</sup>

Five weeks later, and in spite of all the evidence set out below, AFRICOM was still maintaining that "we [AFRICOM] still assess no civilians were injured or killed in this strike".<sup>10</sup> This is clearly a false statement, as the same documentation listing the occupational status of the deceased that was sent to the author is available to AFRICOM.

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## Al-Awaynat has all the appearances of being a 'signature strike'

It might seem from the AFRICOM statement and the media reports summarised above that one of two things happened at Al-Awaynat. Either, the American airstrike hit a wrongly identified target and innocent Tuareg civilians and off-duty soldiers were killed, or the target was correctly identified as AQIM militants, as AFRICOM claims, and local people organised immediate, large-scale protests in an attempt to cast aspersions on the American claim.



Tuareg community protest

Prior to any investigation of the incident, the latter would have seemed unlikely for at least two reasons. Firstly, most Tuareg, especially those in Libya,<sup>11</sup> are strongly opposed to AQIM, ISIS and terrorism in general, with many of the Tuareg in Ubari, including some of those killed in the airstrike, having fought in militia allied to the Americans in the fight against ISIS at Sirte and elsewhere in Libya. Secondly, it would have been difficult for AQIM or AQIM sympathisers to have planned and organised such a widespread protest so quickly and especially in a town whose residents are mostly fundamentally opposed to AQIM and other terrorist groups.

After the author's investigation, undertaken over a period of three months and conducted through local informants in Ubari, Ghat and Tripoli personally known to him, all the evidence points to the U.S. having attacked a wrongly identified target. The apparent reasons for this

error raise serious questions about the nature of the relationships between U.S. Forces and the governments, and intelligence services of the countries in North Africa and the Sahel<sup>12</sup> as well as the far too casual rules of engagement of U.S. forces, especially in both manned and unmanned air strikes. These pave the way for the controversial tactic known as 'signature strikes', which allows for the assumption of guilt when the target looks or sounds suspicious.

These apparent reasons, which are discussed in more depth further on, explain the growing concern of most communities in the Sahara-Sahel about the high risk of collateral damage from U.S. airstrikes, especially from armed drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as they are known technically.

In the case of the Al-Awaynat airstrike, AFRICOM has so far given no indication of how it identified any of the people killed as being members of AQIM. Indeed, as the evidence put forward below suggests, the attack had all the appearances of being a 'signature strike'.

## Evidence from local people of what happened at Al-Awaynat

What happened at Awaynat, as described by local informants, started out in almost comical manner, but finished in tragedy.

Research by the author over the three months following the airstrike has pieced together a narrative, which starts with what local people have called a 'bulldozer', but which was technically a Hyundai 210 LC-7 crawler-excavator weighing 21.7 tons.<sup>13</sup>



Excavator at Tanout Mallt

The events that led up to the Al-Awaynat airstrike centred very much on who actually owned, or thought they owned, the excavator, which is not as straightforward as it might sound. That is due to the fact that one of the biggest businesses in Libya since the fall of Gadhafi in 2011 has been the looting, theft and trafficking of not just Gadhafi's armouries, but also much of the country's heavy and light machinery, such as oil drill rigs, tractors, trucks, loaders, bulldozers, excavators, and so forth, with the oilfields especially being looted of much of their equipment. Much of this machinery has subsequently found its way across Libya's borders for sale in neighbouring countries, particularly Algeria.

This chaotic situation has been facilitated by the fact that Libya, since Gadhafi's overthrow, has not had a central government authority, but at least two centres of power: one centred on Tripoli in the west; the other centred on Benghazi in the east. This near-anarchic situation has led to the emergence of many security authorities, which are little more than local militias of various tribal affiliations who, only once their salaries are paid, claim some degree of legitimacy through affiliation to one or other of the power centres: the Tripoli-based GNA and the Benghazi-based government in the east and Marshal Khalifa Haftar's forces. The latter control most of the east and centre of the country and increasingly much of the south. The two militias involved at Al-Awaynat, one from Ghat and the other from Ubari, both claimed affiliation to the GNA.

The question of the excavator's ownership was not so clear, not least because the two groups of Tuareg involved – one from Ubari and the other from Ghat – seem to have had different understandings of who owned the machine.

Through this reconstruction of events, it has now emerged that there may have been at least two people claiming ownership of the excavator. The Ghat group of Tuareg believed the excavator was owned by Ahmed Mohamed Moullai, who lived at Tahala, a small village between Ghat and Al-Awaynat.

The Ubari group of Tuareg seem to have been under the impression that the excavator was owned by an Arab of the Qadhadhfa (Gdadfa) tribe who lived in Sebha, the main city of southern Libya some 190 km east of Ubari. However, none of the Ubari Tuareg or the author's informants in Ubari seemed to know the Sebha owner's name.

Whether the excavator set out for Algeria from Sebha or Tahala, the latter appears more likely, its route would have taken it on the tarmac road to Al-Awaynat. What is certain is that the excavator was on its way to Illizi in Algeria, where Ahmed Mohamed Moullai was planning to sell it. From there, the excavator, being transported on a low-loader truck, would have left the tarmac road and headed west across the open desert to the Algerian border and ultimately the town of Illizi, the regional capital of Algeria's southeast Wilaya (province) of the same name, Illizi.

However, the low-loader and excavator never made it to Algeria. During the course of trying to piece together the story, it became increasingly apparent that those involved in the events at Al-Awaynat were reluctant to talk about what happened, possibly because of the clandestine nature of their operation and, in the wake of the airstrike, possibly for fear of being charged by the GNA authorities for theft, or worse. Consequently, the information given by the families of the deceased and others associated with the incident still has a number of unanswered questions, which seem to relate to the two groups' different understandings of who actually owned the excavator.

Most versions of the narrative agree that the excavator, on its low loader, became trapped in sand at a place called Tanout Mallt, between Al-Awaynat and the Algerian border.



The main road between Ubari and Al-Awaynat. Messak Settafet in background to the south of the road.

The group of Ghat Tuareg who were taking the excavator across the Algerian border were working for the Tahala owner. They claimed to have had an agreed sale for the excavator in Illizi. That does not seem to be in doubt. Indeed, the end of story, at least as far as the excavator is concerned, is that it did finally arrive in Illizi where it was sold.

The involvement of the Ubari Tuareg at Tanout Mallt is a little less clear. The first versions of the narrative that the author received suggested that the excavator was trapped in the sand and that the two groups of Tuareg – one from Ghat and the other from Ubari – were racing to Tanout Mallt to try to recover it. The impression being given was of a maritime salvage: whoever arrived there first acquired possession.

However, the Ubari Tuareg who went to retrieve the excavator, when questioned by the authorities in the wake of the U.S. airstrike, said that they had been given an advance payment by the unnamed Sebha owner to bring the excavator back to Sebha where it was to be sold. The Ubari Tuareg claimed they had spent the money on batteries, tyres and fuel.

However, a variation on this version of events, based mostly on speculation by local informants, is that the Sebha owner had negotiated a deal with Ahmed Mohamed Moulai (the Tahala owner), who took possession of the machine to sell, but who then refused to

pay the agreed price. From this speculation, it seemed to some of the author's informants, that Moullai was unable to pay the Sebha owner the agreed price until he had sold it in Illizi. In other words, Moullai would have paid the Sebha owner out of the proceeds of the sale. This version of events, suggests that the excavator may not necessarily have been trapped in the sand, but was being reclaimed by the Sebha owner on the grounds that Moullai had reneged on the agreed price. With neither of the two owners (assuming the Sebha owner exists) saying anything about the operation, and with both groups of Tuareg trying to caste themselves as innocents in what may have been a clandestine operation of one sort or another, in which neither party knew the full facts of the situation, we may never know which of these versions is correct.

However, what is certain is that when the Ubari Tuareg arrived at the trapped excavator, they found themselves surrounded and seemingly outnumbered by Tuareg from Ghat. Whether the Ghat Tuareg were all members of the original group responsible for driving the excavator to Algeria, or whether the original driving party had heard about the plans of the Ubari Tuareg and had called Ghat for reinforcements is also not clear. Most versions given by local informants suggest that the drivers of the transporter knew that the Ubari Tuareg were on their way to retrieve the excavator, or stop its onwards journey to Algeria, and therefore called Ghat for reinforcements.<sup>14</sup>



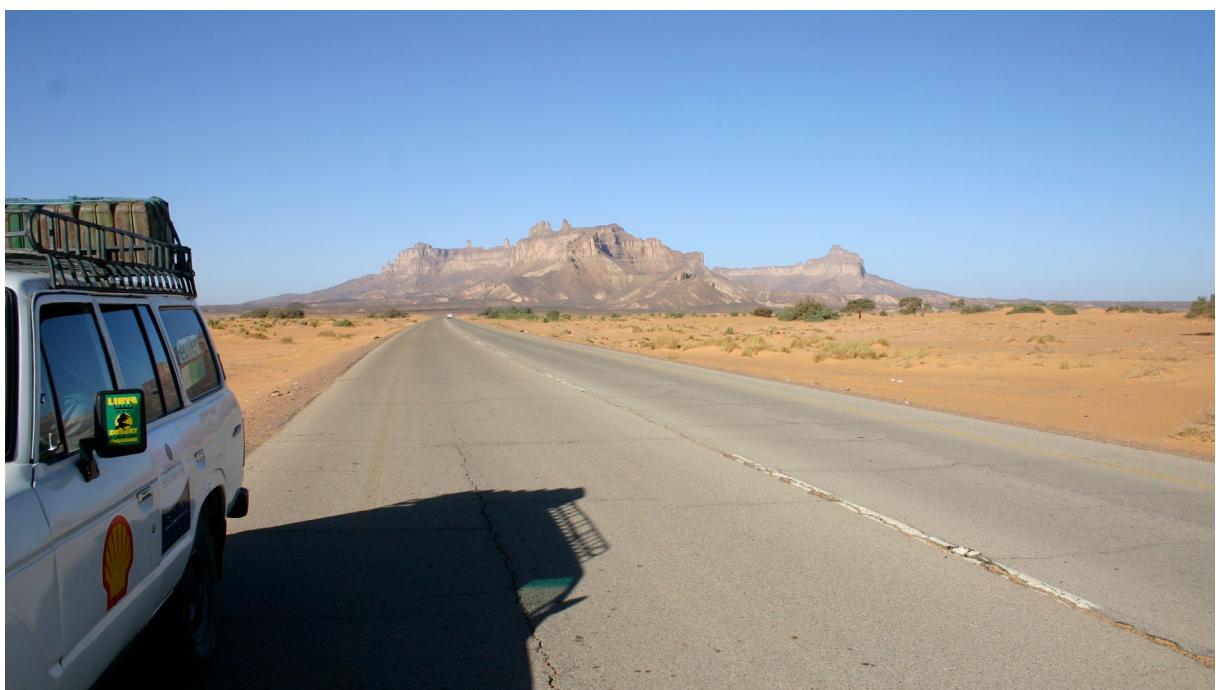
Ubari Tuareg

The two groups appear to have made some sort of attempt at negotiating a deal. However, this clearly failed and the Ghat group, exercising whatever authority they thought they may have had through their connections to the security services in Ghat, tried to arrest the Ubari group – presumably on grounds of attempted theft of the excavator.

At this point, it seems that fighting was about to break out. However, the Ubari group, being outnumbered, was not ready to fight. Six of them therefore surrendered to the Ghat group<sup>15</sup>, but only after one of them had managed to escape in one of their vehicles to rally help from their friends in Ubari.<sup>16</sup> One of the six being held captive by the Ghat group, Ali Mustafa Bilal, somehow managed to escape on foot into the surrounding desert.

In the meantime, the Ghat group at Tanout Mallt, realising that reinforcements from Ubari were on the way, sought assistance for themselves. They did so by what can now be seen as a very foolish and possibly 'criminal' hoax.

There are two, not entirely dissimilar, versions of the message that was sent by the Ghat group to the Security Directorate in Ghat. In fact, the two versions appear more likely to be two strands of the same message. It is also not entirely clear whether the message, which was transmitted by cell phone, was sent directly from the Ghat Tuareg at Tanout Mallt to the Security Directorate in Ghat, or whether the Tuareg first contacted Moullai, who, as the 'owner' of the excavator, passed the call for help on to his friends in the Ghat Security Directorate. The author's first investigations indicated that the Tuareg had contacted the Security Directorate directly. However, later interviews suggested that Moullai had played a key part in activating the Security Directorate. It is quite likely that the Security Directorate may have received messages from both the Tuareg at Tanout Mallt as well as from Moullai. However, as explained further on, the Security Directorate at Ghat does not appear to have kept any written record or log of these messages.



The road heading north out of Ghat to Al-Awaynat.

It should be noted that the Security Directorate in Ghat, headed by Colonel Ali Ramadan and his assistant Colonel Mohammed Al-Amari, covered a number of branches, notably the Criminal Investigation branch, the Tourist Police and the Intelligence Service, as well as Brigade 25, which is part of the Petroleum Guard Facility. This body comprised a number of militia groups formed from the Tuareg, Zintan and other tribes of Libya's Fezzan region that were used to protect the region's oil fields and facilities. It is believed that some or all of the Ghat group that had gone to retrieve the excavator had at one time belonged to one of the Petroleum Guard brigades, which would have given them access to the Ghat Security Directorate. The Directorate and these various branches were all ultimately accountable to the GNA, the Minister of the Interior and the General Intelligence Service in Tripoli.

As for the two messages, or the two strands of the same message that was sent to the Security Directorate, one said that a certain 'Alla Mousa', the brother of a 'terrorist' who had been killed by AFRICOM in Ubari a short while earlier,<sup>17</sup> was amongst the rescuers coming from Ubari. The other message from the Ghat group, which was possibly all part of the one single message, was that the Ghat group had captured a very dangerous group of terrorists at Tanout Mallt from different countries and was holding them captive.

On receiving this message, the Ghat Security Directorate contacted the Attorney General in Tripoli, who in turn passed the information about the supposed 'terrorist(s)' to the GNA's intelligence directorate, which worked closely with U.S. AFRICOM.

As a group of Tuareg in Ubari prepared four vehicles to rescue their friends at Tanout Mallt, AFRICOM, acting on nothing more than the unverified 'hoax' information provided by the GNA's intelligence service, was preparing an airstrike against the supposed 'terrorists'.

The four rescue vehicles left Ubari for Tanout Mallt, stopping only at Al-Awaynat to refuel. For reasons that are not yet clear, one of the vehicles, driven by Mohamed Mustafa Bilal, the brother of Ali Mustafa Bilal, who had earlier escaped from his Ghat captors, left Al-Awaynat some 20 minutes ahead of the three other vehicles. When the three rear vehicles, driving together in convoy, reached a place between the two small settlements of Filallen and Tin Ghydan, about 20 km from Al-Awaynat, they were bombed by the airstrike.

Everyone in the three vehicles was killed.<sup>18</sup> Subsequent talk in Ubari and Tripoli was that F-16s were involved. However, neither the number of planes nor their type has been confirmed. When the author put this question to AFRICOM, its press officer replied: "Due to operational security, I cannot get into platform specifics, but I will say we have a range of capabilities at various locations in the region that will allow us to carry out these airstrikes."<sup>19</sup>



Tripoli - Roman Arch

The fourth car driven by Mohamed Mustafa Bilal was so far ahead of the other three that it escaped the bombing. However, Mohamed made a U-turn to see what had happened to the rest of the group, when he received a phone call from his brother, Ali Mustafa Bilal, who had earlier escaped into the desert on foot. Mohamed went to collect him and the two men then drove back to the site of the attack, where they found the badly burnt and fragmented remains of their friends, along with many of their personal belongings such as ID cards, cell phones and their weapons scattered around the wrecked vehicles. These were later reported to have been stolen from the scene.

In the meantime, the Attorney General in Tripoli sent a plane, with Abderrauf Kara, head of the GNA's Special Deterrence Force, to Ghat to collect the arrested 'terrorists'. However, no sooner had Kara begun his investigation than he realised that far from facing AQIM terrorists, he was confronted by a group of poor and bedraggled Libyan Tuareg, most of whom had apparently signed up at one time or another as soldiers into the GNA's various militia. He took them to Tripoli, where they were handed over to the Tripoli police and arrested provisionally for attempted robbery.

The Supreme Social Council of Tuareg of Libya<sup>20</sup> issued a communiqué urging the GNA's Presidential Council (PC) to investigate the incident and to ask AFRICOM for an apology and compensation.<sup>21</sup>

Although the senior officer of the GNA's armed forces in the Fezzan met with the families of the victims of the airstrike and offered them condolences, U.S. AFRICOM, as at end-February, had offered no apology to the families of those killed, nor any compensation.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, as at 5 March 2019, more than three months after the airstrike, AFRICOM's original statement of 29 November, which we now know to be false, had not been corrected or removed from AFRICOM's website.

As for an official investigation, relatives of the victims confirmed that they had met with Mr. Fayed Sarraj, President of the PC, on 20 December, during his visit to the nearby Sharara oil field and that he had promised them that he would be "following up with the investigation".

The immediate concern of the local and national authorities was to prevent the very real threat of conflict breaking out between the Tuareg communities of Ghat and Ubari. So far, that seems to have been achieved.

However, according to the author's informants in Tripoli during the immediate few weeks after the airstrike, the whole incident was so embarrassing to both the GNA and AFRICOM that both parties were trying to avoid an investigation and brush the issue under the carpet. During the course of December, informants in Tripoli held out little hope that any investigation would take place.

Further investigations by the committee of the victims' families

During February (2019), the author was able to resume research into what had happened in the region since the immediate aftermath of the airstrike. By this time, the families of the victims had formed a committee and had undertaken their own investigations.



The actions of this committee were both impressive and revealing. They had undertaken an inspection tour of the Tanout Mallt site, where the excavator had been trapped, but which by now had finished its journey to Illizi where it had been sold, as well as the location of the airstrike.

The committee had also visited the Ghat Security Directorate and arranged a meeting with Colonels Ali Ramadan and Mohammed Al-Amari, along with the heads of the Security Forces in Ghat area, namely Criminal Investigation, the Tourist Police and the Intelligence Service.

The committee questioned the Directorate on the facts of the case, including the cause of the clashes between the Ghat and Ubari groups. They also requested a copy of the letter and accompanying documentation and file or files relating to the events and the detainees (the survivors of both the Ghat and Ubari groups) that had been sent to Tripoli.

This latter request was rejected on the pretext of confidentiality. However, the committee and the author's local sources who have been in close contact with both the committee and the authorities in Tripoli, believe that no such letter or other written records exist. The entire involvement of the Ghat Security Directorate, including the incoming 'phony' message about the 'terrorists', the transmission of that message to Tripoli and hence onwards to US AFRICOM, along with the referral to Tripoli of those taken into custody at Tanout Mallt, seems to have been based on nothing more than verbal - mostly phoned - messages, instructions and hearsay. Three months after the airstrike, there still appears to be no sign of any written log of the events or of any written report having been made by the authorities in Ghat, who appear to have sheltered behind the pretext of 'confidentiality' to cover up their highly unprofessional handling of the situation.

At the meeting with the committee, Colonel Al-Amari, the second-in-command at the Ghat Security Directorate, admitted that he had received a report, which the committee understood to have been verbal, over the phone, and not in writing, on clashes near the excavator in the Tanout Mallt area and had dispatched members of the Ghat security forces to the area. It is not at all clear if they actually arrived in Tanout Mallt or were perhaps overtaken by events, as appears to have been the case, although the commander of Brigade 25 did say that one vehicle was arrested at the eastern entrance to Al-Awaynat with three people on board, and that they were sent to the Security Directorate of Ghat.



Meeting between the Tuareg Council and the GNA.

One reason for this very vague account of events by the Ghat Security Directorate and its apparent lack of any written record may have been because the Attorney General, on hearing from Abderrauf Kara, (head of the GNA's Special Deterrence Force) that no terrorism was involved, had ordered the suspension of the investigation in Ghat and the immediate transfer of all the parties concerned to his office in Tripoli.

It was particularly significant that during the committee's meeting with the Ghat Security Directorate no one raised the subject of terrorism or terrorists. The reason for this, according to informants in contact with the committee, is because both the committee and the Ghat Security Directorate, despite all the U.S. propaganda about AQIM terrorists, soon realised that no terrorists were involved. The committee wanted information on what the parties were doing in the area and the reasons why they were charged and sent to Tripoli. As the whole issue was a squabble over the excavator and nothing to do with terrorism, it is hardly surprising that the subject of terrorism was never raised.

Significantly, when the committee requested that a delegation from the Security Directorate inspect the Tanout Mallt clash site in order to prove that the whole issue was about the excavator, the Security Directorate refused. One can only imagine that this was because the Americans and the GNA were by this time trying to cover up for their failure to verify the source and nature of the intelligence on which they launched such a criminally irresponsible signature strike and did not want any concrete evidence or report countering AFRICOM's original explanation for the airstrike.

Later developments, as at the end of February, were:

- The owner of the excavator, Ahmed Mohamed Moullai, as mentioned above, had finally been able take the excavator to Algeria and sell it there.
- Most of those involved in the incident are either still being held in custody in Tripoli, have disappeared or kept their heads down and are reluctant to talk about the incident, which is not surprising in the light of what their actions led to and that charges of one sort or another may still be pending.
- Fayed Sarraj, President of the PC, asked the committee to prepare a complete file on the subject and has promised to refer it to the Attorney-General. At the beginning of March, the victims' families were still keeping a vigil outside Sarraj's office, waiting for him to fulfill his promise. They believe that he will keep his promise. However; the author's informants in Tripoli, who have better working knowledge of the GNA do not share that belief. They believe that Sarraj is playing for time, banking on the families becoming tired of waiting.
- US AFRICOM has not taken up the opportunity to comment on this report and has failed to modify its initial claim that it attacked AQIM terrorists. It has also made no apology to the victims' families or been in contact with them.

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## Allocating blame for the killing of ‘innocents’

All the evidence from local people and the local Libyan authorities is that the American airstrike hit innocent victims and not AQIM ‘terrorists’ – militants – as AFRICOM claims.

From the evidence provided by these informants, from Ghat, Al-Awaynat, Ubari and Tripoli, the allocation of blame for what was clearly a wrongly targeted, or ‘signature’, airstrike would appear to be both complex and multiple.

It seems clear that either the Ghat group or Ahmed Mohamed Moullai, perhaps both, trading on their connections and friendships with members of the Ghat Security Directorate, were guilty of sending false information to the Directorate.

The Security Directorate in Ghat, which must have known about the attempts to ‘salvage’ the excavator, as well as the character and intentions of the individuals comprising the ‘Ghat group’, must share some of the blame for forwarding such information to Tripoli without any apparent warning reservations or attempts at verification.

On the question of verification, questions must be asked as to why the Ghat Security Directorate did not immediately send an officer and men to Al-Awaynat to verify what was going on. If they did, how far did they travel? Did they perhaps go only as far as Al-Awaynat? Why did they not go the extra distance to Tanout Mallt where the incident was occurring? The Directorate appears to have been unable or unwilling to give the families’ committee any answers to such questions.

The journey from Ghat to Al-Awaynat could have been achieved in under an hour, with another 20-30 minutes to Tanout Mallt. In other words, the Ghat Security Directorate could have had an armed response at Tanout Mallt within about 90 minutes or less of receiving the message that dangerous terrorists were being held captive there.



Panorama of Ghat town.  
Note sand sea and mountain scarp in background, which impedes vehicular 'escape'.

We do not know how quickly the Ghat Security Directorate took to relay the message to the GNA's Security Directorate in Tripoli or how long it took for the latter to relay the message to its intelligence services and then on to AFRICOM. If we assume that these were all executed more or less instantaneously, which is unlikely, we could assume that AFRICOM was in possession of the phoney information within perhaps 15 minutes of it being sent from Tanout Mallt.

An F-16, which is believed to have undertaken the strike (although this has not been confirmed by AFRICOM), has a maximum flight speed of approximately 1,350 mph. If the plane took off from Tripoli, which has also not been confirmed by AFRICOM, it could have covered the 550 miles from Tripoli to Tanout Mallt in 25 minutes, with an extra 5-10 added on for preparation and take-off. In other words, assuming maximum efficiency, it is conceivable that the airstrike could have been executed in less than an hour from the time the message was sent from Tanout Mallt to Ghat. That means that the strike could have been executed before the Ghat Security Directorate could have undertaken any reconnaissance of the situation.

With no information being provided by either AFRICOM or the GNA, these times can only be assumed. However, given the disorganisation of the Libyan governmental system, it is unlikely that the airstrike would have been executed so quickly. Moreover, we should assume that some time was taken by the GNA's intelligence service and AFRICOM to assess the information and perhaps even attempt verification, although there appears to have been no attempt at the latter.

In other words, it is well within the bounds of possibility for the Ghat Security Directorate to have sent an armed response unit to Tanout Mallt to assess the truth of what was happening on the ground before the airstrike was executed. If such action had been taken it is reasonable to assume that there would have been time to alert Tripoli and abort, or delay the airstrike if there was any doubt over the identity of the alleged 'terrorists'.

If a proper investigation had been carried out, all these questions would have been answered. However, it appears that it was in neither the GNA's nor AFRICOM's interest for such an investigation to be undertaken. If such an investigation had been undertaken, it would almost certainly have confirmed that no attempt was made to verify the veracity of what was little more than third-hand 'hearsay', possibly even a 'hoax', passed up from a remote security station in the depths of the Sahara.



Ubari sand sea, just to the north of Ubari town.

The GNA's intelligence services in Tripoli must share an even larger share of the blame than the Ghat Security Directorate. There is no evidence that the GNA's intelligence services in Tripoli made any attempt to try and verify the veracity of the message it received from the Ghat Security Directorate. Given Tripoli's awareness of the limited professionalism of the Ghat Security Directorate, the level of insecurity in the region and the nature of inter-community and inter-tribal rivalries and disputes in the region, it was tantamount to criminal negligence for the GNA's intelligence services in Tripoli not to have warned AFRICOM of the questionable sources of the information that it had received from Ghat and the fact that no attempt was made to authenticate its veracity. Again, a full investigation would clarify whether the GNA's intelligence service did pass on such a warning to AFRICOM. The fact that no investigation has been held, or looks like being held, suggests that the GNA's intelligence services in Tripoli are party to such a cover-up and guilty of such negligence.

As for AFRICOM, which must bear the ultimate culpability for this tragedy, the nature of the interchange between the GNA, its intelligence service and AFRICOM is not known and likely to remain 'classified'. We can therefore only presume that AFRICOM, which would presumably have asked for and been given the source of the information, would have realised that it was third-hand hearsay without any corroboration or verification.

Given the lack of verification of both the message from the Ghat Tuareg at Tanout Mallt and/or from Moullai, as well as the message from the Ghat Security Directorate to the intelligence desk in Tripoli, it must be asked why AFRICOM and the GNA did not order the Ghat security forces to undertake an immediate ground investigation of the situation, even if that meant keeping the plane(s) used in the airstrike on the ground or in a holding pattern while awaiting confirmation of the identities of the target. Indeed, considering that the flying time of an F-16 prepared for take-off in Tripoli to Tanout Mallt is 25 minutes, there would have been plenty of time for the GNA's security forces in the Ghat region to conduct an assessment of the situation at Tanout Mallt and of whatever supposed 'terrorist' traffic was heading down the main road from Ubari to Al-Awaynat.

The response of both AFRICOM and the GNA to these allegations of negligence might be to say that it was too risky to delay the airstrike. They might argue that an extra half hour or so delay in the airstrike would have given whatever terrorists there were in the area time to escape.

However, such an argument would have no validity. If there had been any uncertainty over the precise identity of the target, both AFRICOM and the GNA would have known that the target was effectively 'boxed in' geographically to that corner of Libya and could not escape easily. Vehicular access to Algeria from that sector of the Fezzan is made almost impossible by the precipitous nature of the Tassili escarpments, while the few possible border crossing points are well defended by Algerian forces, which would presumably have been alerted by AFRICOM, as the USA and Algeria are close allies in the so-called war on terror.

Similarly, the route from the Ghat region into Niger is also restricted by both mountainous and sandy terrain, making vehicular access to Niger extremely slow and difficult. Moreover, any attempt to retreat or escape eastwards would have been blocked by the Ubari sand sea to the north of the tarmac road and by the massive escarpments of the Messak Settafet and Messak Mellet to the south and south-east, and beyond those the almost impenetrable Murzuq sand sea.



The mountain of In Itinen guards the entrance to Ghat from the north.

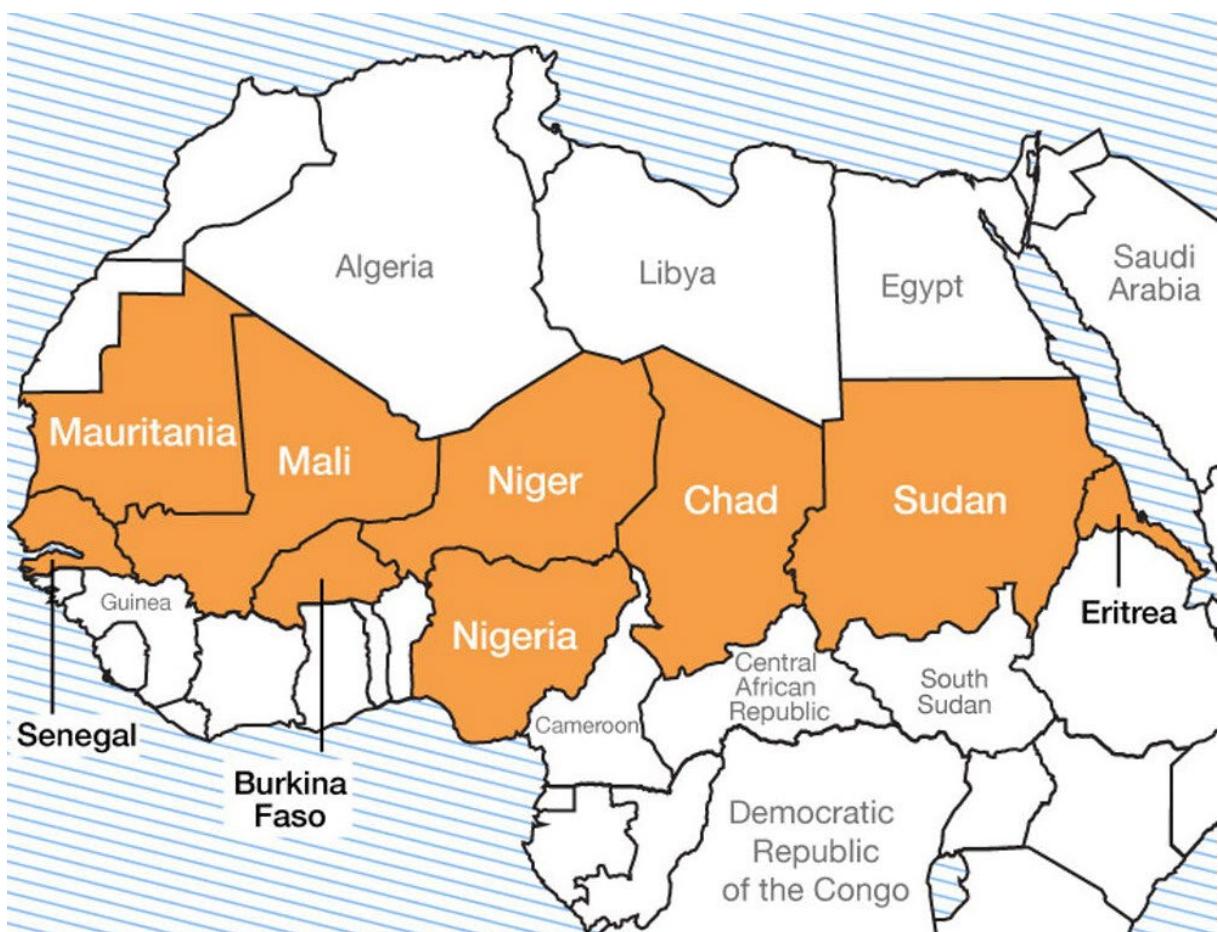
Moreover, once identified, any vehicles trying to make the journey from the Ghat region to Niger could have been monitored and/or attacked by U.S. drones operating out of Niamey or Dirkou in Niger, or by manned aircraft based at the 'lily-pad' airbase at Al Wigh close to the Niger border, some 100 km SSE of Al Katrun.

In short, no evidence has been produced by AFRICOM as to why such a lethal airstrike, based on 'third hand', unverified information in the form of a phone call that may have been little more than a 'bad joke' by the 'Ghat group', needed to be undertaken so quickly. As outlined above, there were many obvious options that could and should have preceded such a lethal airstrike.

AFRICOM has not only failed to answer key questions put to it about the strike, but has also preferred not to take up the offer of a 'right of reply' to explain its actions and to comment on an earlier draft of this report. Therefore, as things stand, and until AFRICOM and the GNA can provide verifiable evidence to the contrary, the Al-Awaynat airstrike, which killed 11 innocent victims, including civilians, must be regarded as another 'signature strike', for which U.S. forces around the world have acquired an unenviable record in recent years.<sup>23</sup>

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# Implications of the Al-Awaynat airstrike for the Sahel



'Sahel' is an Arabic word which means 'shore', as in the southern 'shore of the Sahara'. It has now become politicised to refer to the zone of conflict stretching through Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan.

Given the insecurity and chaotic governance in much of Libya, the Al-Awaynat airstrike is unlikely to have serious long-term implications for the U.S. presence in the country. However, that is certainly not the case in the Sahel, where the Al-Awaynat tragedy comes at a particularly sensitive time.

Since the death of four U.S. Special Forces in Niger in October 2017 and the subsequently announced reduction of U.S. troops in Africa, the U.S. is turning more towards reliance on drone warfare in the Sahel than 'boots on the ground'.

Local people, especially in Niger fear they will become part of the 'collateral damage' that has characterised the U.S.' increasing reliance on drone warfare elsewhere in the world.

The citizens of Agades, a city of some 100,000 inhabitants in northern Niger, and the surrounding Agades region are especially anxious about the building of a massive U.S. drone base just outside the city.

The Agades drone base, known officially as Air Base 201, or AB 201, was previously a US\$50 million base dedicated to surveillance drones, and was due to be completed in 2016. It has now been retasked into a base for MQ-9 Reaper armed drones and is scheduled to become operational sometime this year (2019). Richard Komurek, spokesman for the U.S. Air Force in Europe and Africa, was quoted as saying that AB 201's total estimated construction cost, including FY19, will be US\$98.5 million, making it the largest base-building effort undertaken by troops in the history of the U.S. Air Force.<sup>24</sup>

According to new U.S. Air Force projections, the base's initial cost of c. US\$100 million will soon be overshadowed by the cost of running the facility, about US\$30 million a year. By 2024, when the 10-year agreement for the use of the Agades base will come to an end, its construction and operation costs will have reached about US\$280 million.<sup>25</sup>

According to the same U.S. military sources,<sup>26</sup> about 650 U.S. military personnel will be deployed at the base once it is operational, with an undetermined number of military drones, including MQ-9s, which currently operate from the capital, Niamey, being transferred there.

The construction of such a huge base suggests that it will provide the U.S. with surveillance and armed drone strike power over not just Niger, but also Libya, Algeria, Mali and Chad, as well as northern Nigeria and Cameroon if required.

The Niger government, which does not have the blessing of the country's entire population on this issue, sees the Agades base as a necessity to address the growing menace of terrorism that poses a threat to the security of Niger and the region.



Desert just outside Al-Awaynat.

While AB 201 awaits operational completion, the New York Times (NYT) revealed on 9 September<sup>27</sup> that the U.S. has in the meantime – since around the beginning of 2018 – been making use of the hitherto little-used airstrip at Dirkou in Niger's Kaour region, 650 km east-northeast of Agades across the Ténéré desert, to launch drone attacks into Libya.

Even by Saharan standards, Dirkou is about as isolated and as far away as it is possible to be. The renovation of the Dirkou airstrip and its use as a drone base has been a well-guarded secret until NYT staff visited the base. Their report was seemingly confirmed by anonymous U.S. military officers and subsequently by military officials in at least two West African countries.

Two West African military sources and the Paris-based Institute of Intelligence and Study of International and Strategic Relations (IVERIS), despite denials from U.S. military personnel, claim that at least five armed drone attacks have been launched this year from Dirkou into Libya.<sup>28</sup> This contradicts AFRICOM's statement of 30 November that Al-Awaynat was the third U.S. strike against AQIM in Libya.

The NYT report quoted a Nigerien security official as saying that he had concluded that the C.I.A. launched an armed drone from the Dirkou base to strike a target in Ubari on 25 July (2018). This could be the strike on Ubari mentioned earlier that killed the brother of 'Alla Mousa' a few weeks or months before the 29 November strike near Al-Awaynat. The fact that Major Karl Wiest, a spokesman for AFRICOM, said the military did not carry out the Ubari strike could be taken as confirmation of the Nigerien security official's assessment that the attack was undertaken by the C.I.A.<sup>29</sup>

Leslie Varenne, Director of IVERIS, said that the installation of a drone base at Dirkou is "not good news for the people of the Sahel". She is concerned that the Sahel could experience the same misfortune as the Afghans and Pakistanis regarding collateral damage, describing Dirkou's remoteness, beyond the eyes of the world as well as those of the armed forces of other Western nations in the Sahel, as making it the "perfect shooting ground".<sup>30</sup> The "shooting ground" extends from Libya, to southern Algeria, Chad, Mali, northern Burkina Faso, Nigeria and beyond.

Varenne believes that the fact that the C.I.A. appears to be running such secret and possibly illegal operations from Dirkou is one reason why the U.S. administration has categorically and systematically opposed the Sahel countries' G5S military force being placed under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. The lack of a UN Chapter VII mandate enables the U.S. to wage an unofficial war without having to worry about international law.<sup>31</sup>

More disconcerting is that these same West African military sources, according to Varenne, suspect the C.I.A. is using Dirkou as a "secret prison", a "second Guantanamo". One unnamed army officer was quoted as saying that the Dirkou base was "irregular and illegal" and that the C.I.A. "can do absolutely anything it wants there."<sup>32</sup>

Irrespective of the U.S.' strategic motive for having such a military capability as AB 201 in the Sahel, which some analysts believe may be as much about long term commercial interests<sup>33</sup> as counter-terrorism, the U.S. believes that drones offer a more efficient use of strike power against specific targets than Special Operations, as reflected in the deaths of four U.S. Special Forces in October 2017.

It is this increasing reliance on drone warfare that worries local people. As far as they are concerned, the presence of AB 201 is not likely to be measured in terms of the number of successful drones strikes into Libya or elsewhere, but on whether the jihadist presence in and around Agades and the neighbouring Aïr Mountains escalates and how many civilians are killed as a result of wrongly identified targets and 'signature strikes'.

Some analysts, including U.S. military officials, seem to think that locating AB 201 in such an isolated part of the Sahara will avoid triggering local opposition. However, this perception of the Sahara as an 'empty space' is misconceived. The city of Agades already has a population of some 100,000, while another 400,000 live in the wider Agades region, especially in the Aïr Mountains. The Sahara is not as empty as many Westerners suppose.

There is a growing anxiety amongst the local people that ISIS terrorists in Libya have their eyes on the Aïr Mountains as their next base in the Sahara-Sahel region. Indeed, as attacks on ISIS terrorists in Libya increase, there is an increasing possibility that ISIS groups will try to move south into the Aïr Mountains.

There are already signs that this may be happening. The Algerian government's closure of its border with Niger after 2012-13, on the pretext that it was defending Algeria from 'terrorism', resulted in many of the young Tuareg men of Aïr, who had previously sought employment in Tamanrasset (Algeria), going instead to Libya. They found little employment in post-Gadhafi Libya, but fell under the influence of ISIS, and on their return to Niger began pushing ISIS doctrines into the towns, villages and encampments of Aïr. Local villagers are becoming increasingly worried that these young returnees from Libya may be laying the basis for an ISIS insurgency in the region.<sup>34</sup>

Reports from Aïr over the last few months have spoken increasingly about 'unidentified foreigners' travelling into and through the region, with an associated increase in livestock theft and banditry. One such group, believed to have entered the region from southern Libya a few months ago, numbered several dozen armed men in a convoy of some 20 vehicles.

The fear of local people in the Agades region is that if ISIS does establish itself in the Aïr Mountains, the presence of AB 201 will have two potentially disastrous implications for the region. One is that it will act as a magnet to ISIS jihadists wishing to attack Americans. The other is that the Aïr Mountains will become the site for drone attacks against the ISIS terrorists, with inevitable collateral damage. Local people are already talking of the

Aïr Mountains becoming “another Afghanistan”. Moreover, the argument that Americans will be safe from ISIS attack because of the high level of security around the base is no comfort to local people, as they strongly suspect that the jihadists will direct their anger instead against the local Niger authorities for allowing the U.S. to build such a massive base in the region.

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# Conclusion

News travels fast in the Sahara, and people in Agades are already talking about the Al-Awaynat strike, saying, in effect: “we told you so”. Irrespective of whether the Al-Awaynat strike was undertaken by a drone or a manned aircraft, and the latter seems to have been the case, it has both justified and increased their fears of becoming victims of such ‘signature attacks’, with the same tragic outcome as befell the 11 innocent Tuareg from Ubari on 29 November. It will therefore not be surprising if local and perhaps even national opposition to the Agades base increases over the next year or so.

## **NOTE 1**

Apart from such ‘signature attacks’ and wrongly identified targets, local people are also concerned about drone ‘pilot error’. In the last few months, two U.S.-operated Reaper drones, both reportedly on surveillance operations, have crashed at Niamey, where both the U.S. and France currently operate drones.

On 20 October 2018, an unarmed U.S. Reaper drone crashed on landing at Niamey’s Diori Hamani International Airport, damaging the runway, but causing no injuries. The private Anfani radio station said the crash, which was confirmed by a U.S. Air Force official, occurred between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m.<sup>35</sup>

Less than a month later, on 17 November (2018), another Reaper, belonging to the French Air Force, crashed near Niamey on returning from a mission in Mali. The drone crashed in the desert near the Niamey air base runway without harming anyone. On 28 November, Intelligence Online revealed that the French drone was actually piloted by a private contractor under the supervision of the U.S. General Atomics (GA) company, which makes the Reaper.<sup>36/37</sup>

## **NOTE 2**

A draft copy of this article was sent to U.S. AFRICOM on 9 January, with the invitation to make comments and add clarifications. AFRICOM replied the following day, saying: “Thanks for your draft. We appreciate the opportunity to review, and we will get back with you in the [next] few days.” At the time of publication, AFRICOM had still not responded.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.africom.mil/media-room/pressrelease/31409/u-s-conducts-precision-airstrike-in-libya>
- <sup>2</sup> This statement is misleading. According to the New York Times (NYT) (9 September 2018): "Africa Command has carried out five drone attacks against Qaeda and Islamic State militants in Libya this year [Ed. 2018], including one two weeks ago [Ed. i.e. late August]. The military launches its MQ-9 reaper drones from bases in Sicily and in Niamey, Niger's capital."

The same article quoted a Nigerien security official as saying that he had concluded that the C.I.A. launched an armed drone from the Dirkou base in Niger to strike a target in Ubari on 25 July (2018).

The NYT article, authored by Joe Penney, Eric Schmitt, Rukmini Callimachi and Christoph Koettler, entitled "C.I.A. Drone Mission, Curtailed by Obama, is Expanded in Africa Under Trump". Accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/09/world/africa/cia-drones-africa-military.html>

- <sup>3</sup> Al-Awaynat, meaning 'small springs', is the Arabised name for the Tuareg village of Serdeles.
- <sup>4</sup> Reports on the protest were carried in several local newspapers such as The Libya Observer. See. For example: Safa Alharathy, "Tuareg tribesmen denounce AFRICOM airstrike in southwestern Libya, confirm victims were civilians." The Libya Observer. 4 December 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/tuareg-tribesmen-denounce-africom-airstrike-southwestern-libya-confirmed-victims-were-civilians>. See also: "US accused of 11 civilian deaths in southern Libya." The National. 6 December 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-accused-of-11-civilian-deaths-in-southern-libya-1.799820>
- <sup>5</sup> Banners said: "Africom is killing our sons"; "Tuareg are against and always have been against terrorism" and "We denounce the Africom massacre in Uwaynat."
- <sup>6</sup> AQIM Denies Killing of Its Members in U.S. Airstrike in Libya' 05 December 2018. Accessed at: <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/aqim-denies-killing-of-its-members-in-u-s-airstrike-in-libya.html>
- <sup>7</sup> The National, "US accused of 11 civilian deaths in southern Libya". 06 December 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-accused-of-11-civilian-deaths-in-southern-libya-1.799820>

<sup>8</sup> The seven soldiers belonged to the following military units: Battalions 314, 315 (2) and 470 of the Border Guards; Infantry battalions 134 and 189 of the Sebha military area and the Wadi Aljanoub Unit. The four civilians had all previously served in militia units belonging to Libya's security system.

<sup>9</sup> The National, op. cit. (note 7)

<sup>10</sup> Written communication from Rebecca Farmer, Media Relations Officer, U.S. Africa Command, Stuttgart, Germany, in response to a question from the author. 04. January 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Tuareg in other countries, notably Algeria, Niger and Mali, have also been strongly opposed to AQIM and other terrorist groups such as ISIS and have offered their services on several occasions to help the U.S. and local authorities fight terrorism in the region.

<sup>12</sup> The U.S. has little human intelligence (Humint) in North Africa. It relies, as in many other countries, on its relations with the local intelligence and security services. This dangerous reliance on such 'proxy' intelligence services has been most apparent in Algeria, where the US has had a particularly close relationship with the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS), (until its restructuring and name change in 2015). Details of this relationship and the complicity of the US with the DRS in state terrorism have been documented in Keenan J., *The Dark Sahara: America's War on Terror in Africa*. London, Pluto (2009); *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa*. London, Pluto (2013); and Report on In Amenas: inquest cover-up and Western involvement in Algerian state crimes. International State Crime Initiative (ISCI), Queen Mary University of London, School of Law. p. 283, October 2016. Accessed at: <http://statecrime.org/data/2016/11/KEENAN-IN-AMENAS-REPORT-FINAL-November-2016.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> A Google search suggests that the value of a used Hyundai 201 LC-7 ranges from around £20,000 to £58,000 depending on condition and hours of usage.

<sup>14</sup> The version of events described here has been constructed from interviews with respected and impartial (to either Tuareg group) Tuareg informants, known to the author, in the Ubari and Ghat regions.

<sup>15</sup> The six were: Oumar Mohamed Idrees, Bay Endow Akhreeb, Isaa Mohamed Beega, Abdalla Ahmed Mohamed, Ousman Nouh Moussa and Ali Mustafa Bilal (spelling as given by the Ubari authorities).

<sup>16</sup> This vehicle was later arrested on the eastern side of Al-Awaynat with three men on board. It is not clear whether all three had escaped from Tanout Mallt, or whether one had escaped from Tanout Mallt and perhaps picked up two compatriots while passing through Al-Awaynat on his way back to Ubari. All three were arrested and sent to Tripoli.

<sup>17</sup> As there is no admission of this attack on AFRICOM's website, it is presumed that it refers to another attack possibly carried out by Libyan and not AFRICOM forces, or that it may have been a drone attack launched from Niger (Dirkou), or possibly an attack launched from the little-known US air base at Al Wigh, close to the Niger border, some 100 kms SSE of Al Katrun.

<sup>18</sup> One (Ibrahim) died later in hospital at Ubari.

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit. (note 10)

<sup>20</sup> Also known as, The High Social Council of Libyan Tuareg,

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication from member of Council.

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit. (note 10)

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance: Spencer Ackerman, "US to continue 'signature strikes' on people suspected of terrorist links." The Guardian, 1 July 2016. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/01/obama-continue-signature-strikes-drones-civilian-deaths>

<sup>24</sup> Nick Turse, "The U.S. is building a drone base in Niger that will cost more than \$280 million by 2024." The Intercept, 21 August 2018. Accessed at: <https://theintercept.com/2018/08/21/us-drone-base-niger-africa/>; See also Ibrahim Ahmed, "U.S. Stepping up Armed Drone Efforts in Niger." Voice of America, 26 August 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-stepping-up-armed-drone-efforts-in-niger-/4545073.html>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Joe Penney et al, op cit.

<sup>28</sup> Leslie Varenne, "Le Sahel est-il une zone de non-droit?" IVERIS, Paris, 6 October 2018. Accessed at: [https://www.iveris.eu/list/notes\\_danalyse/371-le\\_sahel\\_est-il\\_une\\_zone\\_de\\_nondroit\\_\\_](https://www.iveris.eu/list/notes_danalyse/371-le_sahel_est-il_une_zone_de_nondroit__); See also: Radio Algérienne (Algerian Press Service), "Région du Sahel : la CIA 'a posé ses valises' selon une chercheuse en relations internationales." Accessed at: <http://www.radioalgerie.dz/news/fr/article/20181010/152149.html>

<sup>29</sup> Joe Penney et al, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Leslie Varenne, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Especially to counter increasing Chinese and Russian interests in the region.

<sup>34</sup> Information provided through author's interviews with local residents.

<sup>35</sup> Massalaki, A, Stewart, P, Bigg, MM and Goller, H, 'U.S. drone crashes on landing at airport in Niamey: Niger sources', Reuters, 20 October 2014. Accessed at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-niger-usa-drones/u-s-drone-crashes-on-landing-at-airport-in-niamey-niger-sources-idUSKCN0l92CF20141020>

<sup>36</sup> "US pilot error among possible explanations for Reaper crash in Niamey." Intelligence Online, Issue 818, 28 November 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2018/11/28/us-pilot-error-among-possible-explanations-for-reaper-crash-in-niamey,108334484-art>

<sup>37</sup> In June 2018, GA appointed a business developer to handle its relationship with the French Air Force, retired Lieutenant Colonel Christophe Fontaine, a former commander of the Belfort Squadron, the French drone unit. Fontaine later joined the French military intelligence service, the Direction du Renseignement Militaire (DRM).



Author with a local street restauranteur on Ubari high street 2016. The road in the background goes to Uwaynat and Ghat.

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