

OPINION

# C. William Walldorf Jr.: To avoid another ‘Black Hawk Down’ incident, US policy in West Africa has to change



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U.S. special forces train Nigerian forces in Agadez, Niger, on April 12, 2018. Niger has been a centerpiece of American efforts to combat surging Islamist militancy in the Sahel region for a decade.

Tara Todras-Whitehill/The New York Times




By **C. WILLIAM WALLDORF JR.**

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After a brief hiatus following [the coup there in late July](#), the United States [has resumed military operations](#) in Niger. Drones and manned aircraft are back at work. U.S. defense officials [hope full ground operations](#) and training will resume at some point soon as well.

None of this is good news. Thirty years ago, 18 U.S. soldiers died and were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in what's known as the Black Hawk Down incident. Especially with France now pulling all forces out of Niger, the unsettling possibility of that happening again runs high today if U.S. troops remain in West Africa. Anti-Western sentiment and violence are on the rise in the region. U.S. troops will likely get caught in the crossfire, as in Somalia. It's time for President Joe Biden and his administration to follow France's lead and pull back U.S. forces from combat zones in West Africa.

The United States currently has about [1,100 U.S. soldiers](#) in Niger. For nearly a decade, U.S. forces have been engaged in train, assist and advise missions to combat jihadist insurgencies. In reality, they are doing far more. Like Somalia three decades ago, U.S. commandos are in combat action across West Africa, making the potential loss of American lives “an occupational hazard,” a U.S. defense official said in 2021.

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And these operations are about to get a lot more dangerous for U.S. soldiers when they resume. The recent surge in military coups in West Africa has fueled jihadist recruitment and violence. Militant Islamist attacks have increased 70% in Mali since a 2020 coup there. In Burkina-Faso, attacks are up by 30% since a pair of coups last year. Niger is headed in the same direction. Violence has soared since the July coup and will get only worse with recent moves by the junta to lock out all foreign observers, including the United Nations.

Added to the danger this violence presents to U.S. forces, [anti-Western sentiment](#) is near an all-time high across West Africa. Most is directed at the former imperial master, France. But anti-U.S. sentiment is pronounced too. “Terrorism has increased since the arrival of U.S. soldiers” and “(U.S. soldiers) are creating the conditions for the Sahel (region) to blow up,” [two leading Nigerian political figures said](#) critically of U.S. policy in 2018.

In short, none of this is good for U.S. forces. Today, they are sitting on powder kegs in West Africa. If Washington soon resumes business as usual, as now appears to be the case, U.S.

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troops will face significantly more hostile resistance given increased insurgent strength and anti-Western sentiment. The French withdrawal leaves the United States holding the bag too. With insurgent ire now more directly focused on U.S. forces, casualties will almost certainly follow.

In the past, the U.S. public accepted casualties like these in West Africa as necessary to fight the global war on terror. When four commandos died in an ambush near Tongo Tongo, Niger, in 2017, the event made headlines but quickly faded from public view. At the time, the Islamic State militia was surging in strength, and polls showed deep public concern about terrorism.

Things are different today. Rather than terrorism, China and Russia now dominate national attention. With no major international terrorist strike on U.S. or European soil since 2017, terrorism has faded from public view. Not surprisingly, there is also no public attention today to West African jihadists since terrorist groups there have never attempted or intended to attack the United States. Despite affiliations with Islamic State and al-Qaida (for publicity and recruitment, not global jihad), no group in West Africa presents a global-reach threat to U.S. security interests.

That means if there is another Tongo Tongo anytime soon, the mismatch between strategic costs (U.S. casualties) and benefits (no security threat) could create the same kind of national uproar President Bill Clinton faced in 1993 over Somalia. Conditions are ripe for another Black Hawk Down incident in West Africa.

Policy needs to change in two ways. First, the Biden administration should follow existing contingency plans and move U.S. troops out of Niger and other combat zones in West Africa. Most troops in the region could come home or be redeployed elsewhere given the low terror threat posed to the U.S. in West Africa today.

Second, the Biden administration needs to better advocate for civilian rule in West Africa. While participation in efforts at forceful regime change and nation building should be avoided — another lesson from Somalia — Washington needs to quit obsessing about terrorist threats that aren't threats in West Africa, declare recent coups "coups," and cut security assistance to Niger, Gabon and other military regimes in the region.

West Africa needs less force and more peacemaking today. Civilian rule offers the best pathway to this, as the prior democratic government in Niger demonstrated. It's time for Washington to stand for that.

By changing policy now before it's too late, the United States may just be lucky enough to avoid a repeat of past mistakes. Black Hawk Down included.

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