Niger: interference and neo-colonialism in the name of development

Sharing borders with Libya, Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Nigeria and Chad, Niger has long been a hub of multi-faceted migration, with zones that have traditionally had high levels of mobility (Niamey, Zinder, Agadez, Tahoua) – often circular – primarily within the sub-region (West and Central Africa) then, in some cases on towards Libya and Algeria and, in rare instances, towards Europe, where the Nigerien diaspora remains small.

While the country was for many years eclipsed by neighbouring Libya – the EU’s special partner in Gaddafi’s era – and very much on the periphery of migration control negotiations, Niger is today at the core of European policy. This situation has arisen, firstly, through a ricochet effect whereby Niger has taken in migrants from Libya and other countries in the Sahel; as a result of these closures the people who would normally travel along these routes have shifted across to Niger.

On 10 October 2016, Niamy welcomed German Chancellor Angela Merkel with pomp and ceremony. She made no secret of the fact that “security” and “immigration” were her two main concerns. Her purpose was to implement the endlessly repeated “recommendations”: Niger, a “transit country” should receive support in order to play its part as migration filter. Programmes to “reinforce local institutions” would make it possible to clearly distinguish between “refugees” – to be protected by the French president recently said, Niger and its neighbours (Libya, Chad, etc.) should yield, allow their country to become a territory of camps and accept their role as hotspot (see Brief #4). The neo-colonial underpinnings inherent in this view of Euro-African relations has led the highly accommodating Niger authorities to remind us that the interests of their nationals and their national sovereignty deserve greater consideration. These intergovernmental negotiations are still ongoing, whereas in Libya deals are struck directly with the heads of militias who are willing to play jailor, provided they can get their hands on the funds doled out to the border guards of the European Union (EU).
Although the country has substantial natural resources (notably uranium), Niger is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world. The country, which is largely in exchange for international political endorsement, is to stem the flow of migrants in the region - all supposedly destined for Europe - by "retaining" populations in the country's departure zones and by facilitating deportations from or to neighbouring countries. African nationals ricochet from one border to the next, sometimes under cover of an agreement, as is the case between Algeria and Niger, which, in turn - through the International Organization for Migration (IOM) - sends non-nationals back to their country of origin, or enables their "voluntary" return from their national territory (see box).

At the risk of destabilising part of the sub-region, Niger, a transit country, has taken up the mantle and discourse of the EU's security-based approach and has become a buffer country, intended to keep migrants in place by deterring and criminalising their movement. In all, this is taking place within a regional area of free movement (ECOWAS protocol) and despite the fact that the "transit economy" represents a key source of revenue for the country's population. The meagre rewards reaped locally have serious repercussions (see below). With strong displays of discontent from "actors in the field of migration" in the Agadez region, Niger could soon find its status as special partner downgraded. The main financial flows are already being redirected to Libya, which is once again dominating the attentions of Italy and the EU.

The Sahel is among the priority zones listed in the Trust Fund for Africa, which funds activities in many countries throughout the sub-region. Nearly 140 million euros (140M€) have been allocated to Niger through this funding instrument in order to prevent irregular migration, ensure "better management of migration" (91.9M€) and "develop a global strategy for stability, security and resilience" (48M€, of which 36M€ is for "border management and security") - a paltry sum, especially in light of the six billion euros the EU has pledged to give Turkey for the same purpose (see Brief #5).

In concrete terms, 60% of funds relating directly to migration is intended for "keeping populations in their home countries," stemming and controlling migration, and sending back migrants. Of the 140 M€, only 26 M€ goes directly to Niger (AJUJSEN programme and PAIERSA action plan). The rest is to be managed by six inter-governmental or cooperation agencies (see box) and one local NGO. Largely drawn from the budget normally devoted to "decommodifying the terms of funding essentially align with the EU's own interests and make little contribution to improving the lives of the local population.

Following the allocation of EU funding, migration in Niger - hitherto considered "transit" - is now described as "irregular". This, in turn, leads to the operational and repressive powers of local authorities, ramping up of border checks, profiling of migrants and the "monitoring" of travel. EUCAP Sahel Niger - whose mandate was extended to include migration issues in August 2015 - and foreign armies present in Niger (see box) are stepping in to assist in these operations, which is a sign of how concerns ostensibly about "security" are actually being manipulated to achieve other ends.

Ministry of the Interior has been appointed to assist local security forces in their mission of "territorial control, investiga- tion and monitoring of public order."

Aside from the European agency Frontex - which has had a liaison officer in Niger since August 2017 - 120 international experts have been deployed across the ter- ritory as part of the operation EUCAP Sahel Niger, while a "Joint Investigation Team" (EJI) brings together Spanish, French and Nigerien police. All the while, the French, German and Italian military—present to support the French-led ope- ration Barkhane — alongside the American army, are taking part in the Sahel OS Summit.

Action by the IOM essentially consists of monitoring movement and policies on returns (participation in re- fugee missions from Algeria, running five transit centres open to people who have shown a willingness to return to their points of departure, and promoting "voluntary" return ope- rations).

Alongside the IOM, the main government development- associated features of the Trust Fund for their actions that will, supposedly, help to reduce the number of departures. As part of a "State reconstruction" project, CIVPOL, the consulting and service company of the French

THE AGENTS OF CONTROL OVER NIGER'S BORDERS

Failure foretold: transforming the transit economy by force of arms

without other professional opportunity - sinks deeper into poverty as mounting frustration leads to fears of another armed rebellion. Even though civil society has opposed this crackdown in the name of security, despite intensified repression, the elected officials on the region of Agadez - who previously stood firmly against these measures - now express support for "keeping populations in their countries of origin." The scramble to pocket European funding has indeed begun.