

SMALL STATES AND ARMED DRONES

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Abstract

Discussions about the United States, China, and Russia dominate the 'drone debate', yet small states—including Niger, Djibouti, Burkina Faso, and the Seychelles, to name but a few— are also an active part of the 'drone game'. Some are looking to acquire their own drones, whilst others are taking advantage of the rise in remote warfare to host secret drone bases for Great Powers. It is these small state drone bases that are the focus of this report. What are the risks for small states? What are the opportunities? It is these questions, alongside the broader considerations for Great Powers, that are discussed within this paper.

Key findings

Opportunities:

- Economic Benefits: Infrastructure, Equipment, and Monetary Investment.
- Security Benefits: Military Training, Joint Operations, and Strategic Partnerships
- Political Benefits: Regional Status, Increased Agency

Risks:

- Security Risks: Civilian and Military Unrest, Civilian Casualties, Public Mistrust, Destabilisation
- Political Risks: Erosion of Sovereign Control, Rule of Law, Accountability and Transparency

Executive summary

Small states can profit from the hosting of Great Power armed drones. A state such as Niger, which is the focus of this report, shows us that the hosting of American drones can boost economic security and national security, alongside regional political status. For example, multi-million-dollar investments in infrastructure, equipment, and military training, alongside cash investments for the leasing of land, are just a few of the ways in which the small state can make gains. Joint military operations with Great Powers are another broader benefit that can increase a regime's regional credibility and regional power status; especially if drone, foreign special forces, and national forces work together to tackle terrorism, fight organised crime, and strengthen borders. It is the 'Drone + Special Forces + Proxy Forces' model that the US has chosen as a framework for its involvement in a number of small states. There are, however, certain risks that should not be overlooked by both the host and the Great Power. The risks depend on the small state under analysis; yet, each risk outlined in this report is intended as a lesson worthy of consideration by any small state and Great



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Power looking to establish a working relationship. The erosion of sovereign power and the rule of law will be discussed alongside public disquiet, regime instability, and the influx of other Great Powers into the region. The main conclusion is that, although there is the potential for considerable gain, the hosting of drones may, if the risks are not mitigated, undermine the benefits for both parties and could even prove counterproductive.

Analysis:

Niger, Djibouti, Burkina Faso, and the Seychelles are just a few examples of the small states and micro nations that have facilitated the launch of American drones. Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Senegal, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, Algeria, Botswana, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, and Zambia are other regional nations that have hosted, or continue to host smaller American sites – often called ‘lily pads’ – which have the potential to facilitate drone systems in the future.¹ In addition to this, nations such as Britain, France, Italy, China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, are expanding their own drone programmes and may further expand their relationships with smaller states to include the hosting of these hi-tech remote control systems. As a result, there is potential for an increasing number of smaller states to join the ‘drone game’ over the coming years. To begin, it is worth considering what this new environment may look like and what the complex implications of these new drone based relationships may be for both the small states and Great Powers involved.

In this new environment, small states are likely to take on a role of increased importance when it comes to assisting Great Powers with threats to their national security. As a result, small states will obtain a certain leverage, control, and, power in international politics, deciding, in theory, which Great Powers can operate drones from within their territorial boundaries as a means to counter terrorism, organised crime, or insurgency. Increased agency may be a welcome benefit for a small state in this new environment. Great Powers may find themselves competing for the same access to a small state, meaning the mistakes of past drone hosting, but also the tantalising benefits offered to other states, may be taken into account by a small state when deciding which Great Power they can cooperate with/ benefit from. So, the actions of a Great Power, both now and in the future, take on increased importance, setting norms of behaviour for the drone hosting process. This, of course, all depends on the small state being discussed. In practice, some small states may find it difficult to reject the advances of one, or even multiple, Great Powers in this new environment; especially if debt, colonial links, or trade links are heavy influencers on the process. One worry is that upon accepting the advance of one Great Power a small state may simply become saturated with competing or even cooperating drone powers. This is important for small states to consider. We only need to look at the swarms of large states competing in Djibouti (especially China, Japan, US, Spain, France, and Italy) or the lack of communications between allied powers operating in Niger (France-US) to see some of the complexities and risks for a host nation.² Another possibility is that the small state may use the opportunity to play Great Powers off one another, accepting the assistance of multiple rival state actors. This is a dangerous game, with the small state reaping the benefits, whilst Great Powers compete and contest in their national borders. Yet, with the increased role for small states in mind, it is important to consider these potentially appealing factors. It, however, also important to consider drawbacks, of these partnerships. A focused analysis of Niger, now a five-year veteran of drone hosting, allows us to explore and learn from some of the experienced profits and some of the risks that have arisen from these agreements. These lessons provide a useful, albeit tentative, framework to help explore the complexities of this increasingly important issue.



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Niger is not only a small state but, according to the UN, one of the poorest and least developed in the world.³ The drone partnership between the US and Niger began in 2013 when President Obama announced he would send one hundred American military personnel to establish a new drone base in the country.⁴ Built to track and target terrorist groups across the broader Sahel and Sahara region, this base was just one of a number of drone bases situated in strategically important locations around the globe. Niger is important because it is caught at an insecurity crossroads. Threats from Boko Haram are manifest in the south of the country,⁵ whilst more importantly for the US, the various franchises of ISIS, AQ, and other terroristic groups threaten towns and villages towards Mali in the west, Libya in the north, and have the potential to export terrorism globally.⁶ On top of this, organised criminal gangs use the country's porous borders to smuggle migrants, arms, drugs, and refugees through the vast region, an issue that has become a priority for European nations due to the ongoing migrant crisis.⁷ As a result, Niger has become a point of interest and focus for the United States, but also European powers. This is not wholly unwelcome attention. The Issoufou government (democratically elected in 2011 after a military coup in 2010) has struggled to counter insurgency, fight terrorism, and patrol Niger's vast borders. As a result, Western powers have been courted by the Issoufou regime. Issoufou himself is seen as 'everything the West wants in an African leader' due to his pro-Western stance and continued cooperation on issues of international security.⁸ It is for this reason that the EU has invested 610 million euros in 2016 to help curb migration and smuggling routes in Niger, whilst France has invested money, military personnel, and close air support to assist the 'G5 Sahel' to combat terrorism.⁹ This group is made up of troops from Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania.¹⁰ Yet, this is only the start of the investment in Niger. The addition of new US drone bases marks an acceleration of external support.

The world's super power, the United States, has chosen Niger as a central node for its AFRICOM operations in the region. The plan involves the use of armed drones, originally flown from Niamey Airport (within Niger's capital), alongside the training and deployment of Nigerian forces as proxies on the ground. This is important for Niger. Traditionally the nation has had an under equipped and fractured military. Military coups have been a regular occurrence in the poor and unstable nation since obtaining independence from France in 1960. With the hosting of armed drones, plus the training of Nigerian military forces, comes the opportunity to invest in the military, strengthen borders, increase security, and keep the governmental regime strong. At a command level the military appears content. The government, with the help of the military, has quashed all recent attempted coups by all disenfranchised minorities.¹¹ Thanks to US assistance, Niger now boasts 2,000 Special Operations personnel in its ranks.¹² Col. Maj. Moussa Salaou Barmou (the officer in charge of the Nigerian special forces) stated, 'it's important to still have support from the U.S. to help train my men, to help with our shortfalls'.¹³ Stability and security for the state appear to be positive side-effects of the co-operation. The U.S. and Europe have, however, also benefited from this partnership. The 'drone + national forces' strategy appears to have paid dividends. The US is able to carry out high profile drone strikes in Libya and Somalia, but also help provide an 'eye in the sky' to protect and assist Nigerian ground forces as they cut off smuggling routes towards the shores of Europe. As *The New York Times* reported in March 2018, American drones flew from Niger to Libya and carried out the targeted killing of Musa Abu Dawud, a high-ranking official in Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.¹⁴ In addition, according to Chatham House, the once booming smuggling routes through Niger have been interrupted, reducing the illegal movement of people and goods across the country.¹⁵ So, the foreign presence in the country is here to stay, and in fact, in the coming years, activity will actually increase in Niger.



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A large patch of desert outside of the city of Agadez, in the north of Niger, is currently being transformed into a new military hub. At 110 million dollars to build, and 15 million dollars a year to run, the base will be the second largest in the region and, according to U.S. Air Force officials, it will be the largest troop labour construction project in U.S. history.¹⁶ The base, due for completion in 2019, will boast both MQ-9 Reaper drones and U.S. Army Special Forces. According to AFRICOM spokeswoman Samantha Reho, the strategic location in Agadez will 'improve U.S. Africa Command's capability to facilitate intelligence-sharing that better supports Niger and other partner nations, such as Nigeria, Chad, Mali and other neighbors in the region and will improve our capability to respond to regional security issues'.¹⁷ After half a decade, therefore, it appears that Niger has grown to be a more secure nation, albeit in an insecure regional environment. A myriad of attractive investments, alongside increased military capacity and drone support, have allowed it to take on a role in the G5 Sahel and tackle broader regional security issues. Such advances have, however, come at a price and are by no means guaranteed for a further five years.

The case of Niger not only highlights the benefits of drone hosting, but it also shows some of the potential pitfalls of the agreement. The worries expressed from within Nigerian society are diverse, but each seems to stem from an underlying public mistrust about the intentions of foreign actors and the proximity of the nation's government to said actors. The American construction of the large new drone base in a remote part of the nation has become the focus of this tension. Niger's colonial past may help to explain this distrust, but there are also concerns about transparency, with the public kept in the dark 'due to national security reasons' about what is actually being undertaken in the country. As *The Intercept's* Joe Penney revealed in February 2018, people in Niger worry that the American drone base, alongside the fight against terrorism, might well be a front for the extraction of the nation's gold, oil, uranium, or underground water reserves. As Penney explained, '[i]n my two weeks in Niger, I heard theories that the Americans were fomenting the terrorists themselves, digging for gold, or they're after uranium, or oil, or even possibly the natural water aquifer beneath the Sahara, one of the largest in the world. Other than government officials, no one believed the Americans were here for security'.¹⁸ Although such claims may seem fantastical, there is a serious side to these concerns. Public distrust in foreign actors, and the national government's inability to address these concerns, may lead to public unrest. It should be remembered that Niger is a nation with a strong history of coups and public uprisings. There are those within rival political factions who have already begun to harness the anti-Western narrative to attack the Issoufou government.¹⁹ This is at a time when the government is attempting to enact major social and economic reforms, with a large and unpopular suppression of civil society being undertaken as a means to bring in new finance laws, control the price of amenities, and drive economic diversification.²⁰ The reforms, it is argued by the Issoufou government, will generate more income for the state and build private industry, but it is also likely to drive up the cost of living.²¹ As such, it is a turbulent time for Niger and mitigating the public worries about Great Power involvement in the nation may help strengthen the regime. Increased public consultation and/or information dissemination about American and allied actions within the country may help to quell some of these concerns. It is true that some interactions have taken place between the Americans and the locals, yet this has largely been carried out through training workshops on basic hygiene.²² Not only would the locals prefer more direct aid, but also some engagement on the specifics of US involvement in the country and how it may affect their lives.²³ Indeed, a diverse range of groups within Niger - from human rights groups, to the elements of nation's military - are worried about the nature of the military cooperation with the US.



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With increased American military involvement on the ground in Niger, varying groups within the nation's military have begun to raise concerns. Although the original remit was for training, American special forces now 'assist' Nigerian forces on the ground. With overhead drone and helicopter support, they engage in kill or capture missions near to the border with Mali. This has led to a split narrative in the Nigerian military. Despite positive statements coming from the military elites, lower ranking factions are concerned about the influence of American military might. The concern is that Great Power involvement undercuts the Nigerian military's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and undermines its traditional role as an arbiter of power in Nigerian politics.²⁴ As Nigerian civic leader, Nouhou Mahamadou, has stated, 'the presence of foreign bases in general and American in particular is...a serious attack on the morale of the Nigerian military'.²⁵ Yet the military is not the only group with concerns. There is also anxiety within the general populous, with a disenfranchised public specifically worried that American drones are only in the country to fulfill American aims and not to help with the rising threat of Boko Haram in the south of the nation. It should be noted that despite spokespeople for the US military frequently referencing the fight against Boko Haram in the country, there has been little known engagement by the American's to counter the attacks in the south of Niger.²⁶ In fact, the most important impact on civilian life thus far has been the foreign assistance to close off smuggling routes, a business that was once a vital lifeline for the local populous.²⁷ So, the worry is that Great Powers are operating in the country, yet with little regard for the concerns and security of the Nigerian population.

Of course, the U.S. is not alone in being the target of public unease; French forces now operate up to 2000 troops in the nation, 470 Italian troops are in the north of Niger to help stop smuggling, and Germany have frequently expressed their intent to assist in counter terrorism missions, with a German airbase planned in Niamey and drones currently operating nearby in Mali.²⁸ One point to note here is that, with increasing numbers of Great Powers conducting both special forces and drone missions in the region, there is a possibility for things to go wrong and for 'blue on blue' incidents to take place. As Phillippe Frowd, an expert on Nigerian border security, has stated, 'the worry is that Niger is becoming a playground for foreign militaries'.²⁹ It was only in November, 2017 that American special forces stepped up their role in the country, joining Nigerian forces (and watched over by American drones) on a mission to kill or capture a key IS leadership target.³⁰ In this mission, the group was ambushed, the drone was unable to pick out friend from foe, and nine American and Nigerian personnel were killed.³¹ It was only three hours later that French mirage jets were called in to perform a show of force, leading experts like Frowd to conclude that the French knew little about the operation.³² With so many forces working in the same region it is vital that communication between allied forces is maintained as a means to avoid strikes on allies or innocent civilians. Indeed, this leads us to another, prominent, concern expressed within Niger; specifically, the risk of drone strikes on civilians.

The concern here is that American drones may, through accident or error, cause the death of Nigerian citizens. Nigerian human rights groups are well versed in the controversies of previous American drone operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and understand that when things go wrong, the people or government of the host nation has little chance of obtaining justice. These concerns are not unwarranted. Finalised in January 2013, the US-Nigerien Status of Forces Agreement outlines a number of legal stipulations and waivers that provide support for the Nigerians' concerns. It is important to add that this agreement was signed without the agreement of the Nigerian parliament, thus creating legal ambiguity within the document. A major concern is the provisions it puts in place for dealing with civilian casualties. As the agreement stipulates;



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'the Parties waive any and all claims (other than in contractual claims) against each other for damage to, loss, or destruction of the other's property or injury or death to personnel of either Party's armed forces or their civilian personnel arising out of the performance of their official duties in connection with activities under this Agreement'.³³

In short, the concern here is that American military personnel, contractors, or even armed drone operations are not accountable to the civilians they fly over, nor the government of the country they fly from. There is a process by which third parties can make a claim against the U.S., but this would be processed under U.S. law and by the U.S. government. With the controversies around civilian casualties during previous American drone operations, but also recent crashes by American drones in other small states, it is clear to see why there are concerns about this legal waiver. We only need to look at the two U.S. drone crashes in the Seychelles between 2011-2012, or the crash of a U.S. Reaper drone into Niamey airport in Niger (2016), for pertinent examples of the mistakes that can happen.³⁴ In addition, as Amadou Roufai, a Nigerien administration official, stated, '[w]e are afraid of falling back into the same situation as in Afghanistan, with many mistakes made by American soldiers who did not always know the difference between a wedding ceremony and a training of terrorist groups'.³⁵ Abbas Yahaya, a prominent imam in Niger, added to this sentiment by arguing, '[a] drone is manned by people on a military base in America, and many times they make mistakes, killing people who aren't extremists'. As he concluded, 'This won't solve anything; it will only bring more insecurity'.³⁶

Conclusion:

Overall, it is possible that the small state and the Great Power can make major gains when a drone hosting relationship is entered into. Yet, as this case study of Niger shows, issues of transparency, sovereignty, public disquiet and national stability must be carefully managed if the relationship is to remain stable and the positives maintained. Armed drones are, in particular, a major point of contention within Niger. Indeed, as the U.S., Germany, Italy, and France continue to increase their military footprint in this small state, and the U.S. finished its new major drone base in the north, it is important to consider and dwell upon some troubling factors that have been raised by the people of Niger. Transparency is lacking in Niger and the public lack trust in the relationship between the Nigerian government and foreign actors. Added to this is the continued insecurity brought to the population by Boko Haram attacks in the south of the country, a problem that is still to be engaged with by the U.S. military. The Nigerian military add their own concerns, worried that they are being marginalized from their traditionally prominent rolls in both defense and politics. Finally, the Issoufou government is implementing unpopular financial, social, and market reforms in the country, providing political rivals with strength and public support. It is at this point that we should consider whether another larger U.S. drone base, and increased foreign activity in the nation, may destabilize, as opposed to strengthen, this small state at this point in time. If transparency continues to be stifled, and the public disconnected from actions within their sovereign borders, could a simple mistake by a U.S. drone, be it technical fault or accidental death, act as a catalyst for unrest? The words of Joe Penney should give us pause for thought here and lead some important questions being asked about American and allied policy in Niger. As Penney stated, '[a]rmed drones are a major issue anywhere the U.S. uses them, but in Niger, the American base is in a major city not far from potential drone targets. Judging from the secrecy and lack of trust thus far, it's not hard to envision a future in which an errant drone strike causes the population of Agadez to turn against the base'.³⁷ If Niger and the Issoufou government, a vital and



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stable ally in the region, were to fall as a result of the U.S. drone mishap, the power void that would open could lead to an increase in the terroristic and criminal activity, both in the region and internationally.

¹ Nick Turse, (November, 2015). *The US Military's Best-Kept Secret*, The Nation. Retrieved from: <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-us-militarys-best-kept-secret/>

² Gordon Lubold and Jeremy Page, (May, 2018). Laser From Chinese Base Aimed at U.S. Military Pilots In Africa's Skies, Pentagon Charges, *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/laser-from-chinese-base-aimed-at-u-s-military-pilots-in-africas-skies-pentagon-charges-1525351775>. Also see U.S. Department of Defense, (May, 2018). Department of Defense Press Briefing on the results of the Investigation into the October 4, 2017, Ambush in Niger, *U.S. DOD*. Retrieved from: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1518332/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-on-the-results-of-the-investigation-into-t/>

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⁵ Arthur Boutellis & Youssef Mahmoud (2017) Investing in Peace to Prevent Violent Extremism in the Sahel-Sahara Region, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 12:2, pp. 80-84.

⁶ Associated Foreign Press. (March, 2018). Five killed by Boko Haram in Niger attack, *News 24*. Retrieved from: <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/five-killed-by-boko-haram-in-niger-attack-20180326>. Also see Ryan Browne, (April 2018). US warns of growing African terror threat, *CNN*. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/19/politics/africa-isis-al-qaeda-threat/index.html>

⁷ Luca Ranineri and Neil Howard, (August, 2017). Human smuggling: the pride of Niger's economy, *Open Democracy*. Retrieved from:



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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/neil-howard-luca-raineri/human-smuggling-pride-of-nigers-economy>

⁸ Alex Thurston, (September, 2017). Niger's Issoufou Is Everything the West Wants in an African Leader, *World Politics Review*. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23116/niger-s-issoufou-is-everything-the-west-wants-in-an-african-leader>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ France Dipolmatie. (January, 2018). G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Sahel Alliance. Retrieved from: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/defence-security/crisis-and-conflicts/g5-sahel-joint-force-and-the-sahel-alliance/>

¹¹ Associated Foreign Press, (January, 2016). Niger holds 13 over failed December coup, *News 24*. Retrieved from: <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/niger-holds-13-over-failed-december-coup-20160113-2>

¹² Eric Schmitt, (April, 2018). A Shadowy War's Newest Front: A Drone Base Rising From Saharan Dust, *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/us/politics/drone-base-niger.html>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Eric Schmitt, (March, 2018). American Drone Strike in Libya Kills Top Qaeda Recruiter, *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/28/world/africa/us-drone-strike-libya-qaeda.html>

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¹⁶ The Associated Press, (April, 2018). US builds drone base in Niger, crossroads of extremism fight, *Defence News*. Retrieved from: <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2018/04/23/us-builds-drone-base-in-niger-crossroads-of-extremism-fight/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Joe Penney, (February, 2018). Drones in the Sahara. *The Intercept*. Retrieved from: <https://theintercept.com/2018/02/18/niger-air-base-201-africom-drones/>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Personal Interview with Philippe Frowd, June 6th, 2018.

²¹ President Issoufou calls his reforms the 'Niger Renaissance Programme', stating that his 'administration has worked hard to ensure that Niger is open for business' he said. "We are investing across a number of sectors and looking for strategic long-term partners. The country is northern Nigeria's most important trading partner and we offer a haven of stability in the region'. African Media Agency. President Issoufou Presents Niger Renaissance Programme at Economy Series in New York. Retrieved from: mediaagency.com/president-issoufou-presents-niger-renaissance-programme-economy-series-new-york/

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²⁴ Ibid.



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²⁵ The Associated Press, (April, 2018). US builds drone base in Niger, crossroads of extremism fight, *Defence News*. Retrieved from:

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²⁶ When it comes to American military involvement in the south of Niger against Boko Haram, details become ‘a little hazy’. This is, of course, due to special forces operations — but we know some training of both Nigerian and Nigerien forces in the south-east of Niger and some involvement in the Diffa region. This, according to the NYT, was to counter broadly defined IS affiliated forces. Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, (March, 2018). U.S. Kept Silent About Its Role in Another Firefight in Niger, *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/world/africa/niger-green-berets-isis-firefight-december.html>. Also see Personal Interview with Philippe Frowd, June 25th, 2018.

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²⁸ As Chancellor Merkel stated during a visit in 2016 ‘There is a strong link between illegal migration and the trafficking of illicit arms in conflict zones, and we will help Niger to fight this phenomenon by providing Niger's army with equipment, notably vehicles, other materials and expertise’. The Federal Chancellor, (October, 2016). Expanding assistance for the Niger. Retrieved from:

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³⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, (May, 2018). Department of Defense Press Briefing on the results of the Investigation into the October 4, 2017, Ambush in Niger, *U.S. DOD*. Retrieved from: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1518332/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-on-the-results-of-the-investigation-into-t/>

³¹ Ibid.

³² U.S. Department of Defense, (May, 2018). Department of Defense Press Briefing on the results of the Investigation into the October 4, 2017, Ambush in Niger, *U.S. DOD*. Retrieved from: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1518332/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-on-the-results-of-the-investigation-into-t/>

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³⁴ Reuters, (October, 2014). U.S. drone crashes on landing at airport in Niamey: Niger sources, *Reuters*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-niger-usa-drones/u-s-drone-crashes-on-landing-at-airport-in-niamey-niger-sources-idUSKCN0I92CF20141020>.

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³⁷ *Ibid.*



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