

# OF WALLS AND MEN

## Securing African Borders in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**Laurent TOUCHARD**

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## Abstract

African borders are well-known for their porosity. Although they are crucial economic interfaces, they also crystallize political and security tensions, in both inter-State wars and intra-State conflicts involving rebels or autonomist groups. The continent's internal borders can also be exploited as a resource fuelling these confrontations through trafficking, contraband, and corruption but also because they may offer the protection of a diplomatic sanctuary. To deal with these issues, the African defense and security forces need to engage in various strategies aimed at securing these areas. In order to do so, they tend to resort to two major types of mechanisms. On the one hand, the "walls" and other static devices which can rely on rather traditional means or use new innovative technologies. On the other hand, the security forces, which have to increase their mobility and be able to cooperate both on a national and international level in order to guarantee their efficiency.

## Résumé

Les frontières africaines sont réputées pour leur porosité. Si elles sont de vitales interfaces économiques, elles cristallisent également des tensions politiques et sécuritaires, aussi bien dans le cadre de guerres interétatiques que des conflits intestins impliquant des groupes rebelles, sécessionnistes, ou autonomistes. Mais les frontières du continent peuvent également être exploitées comme une ressource alimentant ces affrontements à travers les trafics, la contrebande et la corruption, ainsi qu'en offrant la protection d'un sanctuaire diplomatique. Face à ces défis, les forces africaines doivent s'engager dans des stratégies de sécurisation diverses. Deux principaux types de mécanismes se distinguent. D'une part les « murs » et autres dispositifs statiques mobilisant des moyens bien connus mais aussi des nouvelles innovations technologiques. D'autre part les forces de sécurité, qui font le choix de la mobilité, et doivent pour garantir leur efficacité, relever le défi de la coopération nationale et internationale.



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# Introduction

African borders are known as much for their porosity as for their governing principle of intangibility. Yet, in 2014, only 35.8% of the continent's land borders were clearly delimited.<sup>1</sup> To improve relations between nations and reduce territorial disputes, the African Union initiated the African Union Border Program (AUBP) with the aim, *inter alia*, of helping African States “address cross-border criminal activities through pragmatic border management”.<sup>2</sup> Some costly but necessary efforts have indeed been made as part of the programme which, in just a matter of years, has demarcated a total of 4,000 kilometers along 24 borders and led to five agreements signed between nations such as the Comoros and Mozambique in 2011, the Seychelles and Tanzania in 2012, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2014, Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso in 2014, and lastly Namibia and Botswana in 2017.<sup>3</sup>

However, despite these efforts, the marking of borders does not reduce their porosity or the ease with which traffickers and insurgents cross from one country to another. Meanwhile, African defense and security forces still very often struggle to ensure appropriate control over these interfaces to guarantee territorial security and free-flowing trade. The progress made in just fifty years is nonetheless remarkable. At the Cairo session held in July 1964, as the continent's decolonization was drawing to an end, the Organization of African Unity, created a year earlier by the newly independent countries, established the principle of intangibility of borders:

Considering that border problems constitute a grave and permanent factor of dissention, conscious of the existence of extra-African maneuvers aimed at dividing African States, considering further that the borders of African States, on the day of their independence, constitute a tangible reality, [the Assembly] solemnly declares that all Member States pledge themselves to respect the borders existing on their achievement

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1. M. Foucher, *Frontières d'Afrique. Pour en finir avec un mythe*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2014.

2. African Union Border Programme (AUBP), “Uniting and integrating Africa through peaceful, open and prosperous borders”, *African Union Peace and Security*, updated on 9 November 2018, available on: [www.peaceau.org](http://www.peaceau.org).

3. N. Berr and R. Moschny, “Support to the African Union Border Programme (AUBP)”, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in cooperation with the African Union, December 2017, available on: [www.giz.de](http://www.giz.de).

of national independence.<sup>4</sup>

Intangibility of borders was subsequently better defined by the international court of justice, in the ruling of 22 December 1986 over a border conflict between Burkina Faso and the Republic of Mali:<sup>5</sup>

The essence of the principle [of intangibility] lies in its primary aim of securing respect for the territorial boundaries at the moment when independence is achieved. Such territorial boundaries might be no more than delimitations between different administrative divisions or colonies all subject to the same sovereign. In that case, the application of the principle of *uti possidetis* resulted in administrative boundaries being transformed into international borders in the full sense of the term.<sup>6</sup>

The principle of *uti possidetis*, derived from the Latin locution “*uti possidetis, ita possideatis*” meaning “may you continue to possess such as you do possess”, is the fundamental principle underlying that of intangibility.<sup>7</sup> In the present case, the territories granted are those from the colonization with the resulting borders. In 1964, only two countries contested this principle, namely Morocco which wanted the Spanish Sahara (future Western Sahara) and Somalia which claimed numerous territories from its neighbors.<sup>8</sup> Yet since that date, and despite the widely recognized principle of intangibility, the low rate of demarcation has allowed some doubt to remain over what the intangible border actually was, thereby letting these interfaces turn into points of political, economic, military and security tension.

A hundred and twenty years earlier, in 1884, the Berlin Conference laid down the “rules” of the scramble for Africa between the new industrial powers. The new borders were not, however, established and this was only done later, through bilateral negotiations between European powers. French geographer Michel Foucher explains how they were mostly drawn “in a short quarter of a century (1885-1909) for more than 70% of their length. [...] 38% of the lengths were delimited in the first ten years after the Berlin Conference and 50% in the first fifteen years, between 1885 and 1900. [...] The process ended with the France-Spain division of Morocco in 1911-1912 and the

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4. Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organisation of African Unity, *Texte des discours prononcés à la conférence*, Cairo, 17-21 July 1964, Administration de l'information, 1964.

5. International Court of Justice, “Case concerning the frontier dispute (Burkina Faso/Republic of Mali)”, Judgment of 22 December 1986, available on: [www.icj-cij.org](http://www.icj-cij.org).

6. *Ibid.*

7. J. M. Sorel and R. Mehdi, “L’*uti possidetis* entre la consécration juridique et la pratique : essai de réactualisation”, *Annuaire français de droit international*, No. 40, 1994, pp. 11-40.

8. The 1960 Independence Constitution also speaks of recovering “lost territories”. See C. Cook and D. Killingray, *African political facts since 1945*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991.

annexation of Libya by Italy.”<sup>9</sup> The delimitations of borders were then, for 13% of them, redrawn during the two world wars, and then at the time of independence.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this major colonial factor, we must nonetheless bear in mind that these “straight” lines drawn by Europeans were very often merely geometric approximations of the delimitations of earlier African political entities which were fully aware of the border concept. The 16<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of African States with “centralized structures”.<sup>11</sup> The period was marked by the development of the slave trade which contributed to the birth of a form of State, capable of handling commercial matters, but also a form of discriminate governance over populations who, depending on their allegiance, were either protected, subjected to tribute or victims of *razzia* and sold to foreigners.

The limits of the State thus gained in importance, even though they continued to change and were not clearly drawn out lines but still boundaries, or more accurately, marches. At that time, the border of the Funj Sultanate, in the north east of today’s Sudan, was protected in Nubia by the fortresses of Ibrim and Al-Dirr. They were taken by Ozdemir Pasha who in turn had a fortress built to mark “the southern limit of Ottoman Egypt”.<sup>12</sup> In fact, border tensions were what triggered the “first war of Ethiopia” at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century between Christian Abyssinians and the Muslim Funj.

Going further back in time, the end of the Middle Ages saw the expansion of Islam across the continent and the multiplication of coastal contacts with Europe, especially Portugal. The African continent then began to feel the influence of changes at work in the West where the idea of a modern State, exercising total sovereignty over a fully delimited territory was emerging. Zara Yaqob, emperor of Ethiopia from 1434 to 1468, reinforced his borders by establishing garrisons of loyal troops. The Mali Empire, a “sort of confederation”<sup>13</sup> including a large part of the Sahel and Western Africa, had troops posted at its most exposed borders. At the same time, the Hausa Kingdoms, in what is now north-west Nigeria, implemented an elaborate coverage of the territory.<sup>14</sup> Under the reign of Lat Sukaabe, Head of the Kingdom of Cayor, in the current Senegal, the State lined up men dedicated to protecting the territorial borders. In addition to artificial

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9. M. Foucher, *Frontières d’Afrique. Pour en finir avec un mythe*, op. cit.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. D. T. Niane (ed.), *Histoire générale de l’Afrique*, vol. IV. *L’Afrique du XII<sup>e</sup> au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: Éditions UNESCO, 1997.

14. B. A. Ogot (ed.), *Histoire générale de l’Afrique*, vol. V. *L’Afrique du XVI<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: Éditions UNESCO, 2000.

boundaries, the landscapes further served as demarcation, like the Zaire river which ran along a large part of the Kongo Kingdom in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

During the High Middle Ages, the Aksum Empire, which controlled what is now northern Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, maintained border garrisons until its collapse in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Also worthy of mention is the Sungbo's Eredo, an intermittent system of ditches and berms covering 160 kilometres surrounding what is today Ijebu-Ode in southeast Nigeria. Uncovered in 1999 by a team of British archaeologists, the system is believed to have been built between 800 and 900 CE and to have played both a defensive and political role with the aim of unifying the villages into a kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the clearly marked delimitation of a geographical area to facilitate protection and federate those who live within it, there is sometimes a “magical” aspect to the fortifications marking out the area, as British archaeologist Patrick J. Darling described:

One important dimension, absent in Western theoretical models, is the role of earthworks as barriers against the spirit world outside: into the ditches were cast the corpses of those with no sons to propitiate their restless spirits with the proper burial rites and, at City wall entrances, annual ceremonies augmented old charm pots to keep evil forces at bay.<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to common belief, the history of borders in Africa therefore began well before the Berlin Conference. Pre-colonial Africa was familiar with the principle of territorial borders, and even of very clear limits. This principle and its applications date back well before colonial times, with the organization of geographical space changing over the centuries, according to power considerations and community, ethnic and linguistic ties.

Above and beyond the illusion of an African singularity, studying African borders is an opportunity to recall that the continent also develops through its quest for a form of politics capable of controlling its territory and its people by force and law, even though the process may be more fragile in certain countries. Two fundamental questions thus arise and will structure this report: firstly, the issue of the link between borders and conflicts in Africa, and secondly that of the systems and measures that can be put in place to guarantee the security of borders while contributing to the stability and development of the continent.

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15. P. Spring, *Great Walls & Linear Barriers*, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2015.

16. P. J. Darling, *A Legacy in Earth: Historical Archeology in Nigeria*, Trenton: Africa World, 1998.

# The role of borders in African conflicts

While it is sometimes said that borders are not a major security issue in Africa due to the prevalence of internal crises over international tensions, a number of inter-State conflicts or civil wars must not be overlooked, as they result in redefining borders. Borders are not extraneous to the conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. They are not the sole cause of them, because border disputes often only reflect more profound political, social and cultural tensions. Three major interactions should be successively distinguished: firstly, conflicts over the redefinition of borders between two African countries; secondly, independence conflicts, aiming for the secession of a part of an African country – and therefore the creation of a new border –; and lastly, the role of borders as a vital resource for the protagonists in the conflict – governments and armed groups – both as an area for trafficking and as a protection, granting access to what can be a safe haven.

## Conflicts over the redefinition of national borders

Contrary to common belief fuelled by the 1964 principle of intangibility, African borders have been called into question on several occasions since the end of World War II, either by armed conflict or by law. We can mention several examples. In eastern Africa, in March 1963, border skirmishes took place between the Kenyan and Somali forces until diplomatic relations between Mogadiscio and Nairobi broke down in December of the same year. These tensions continued with the Shifta war, after the name given to Somalis living in north-west Kenya and who wanted to be joined to Somalia, with the country's unofficial support. These rebels were called "shifta", i.e. "bandits", by the Kenyan government.<sup>17</sup> This latent war finally ended in 1967 with Kenya succeeding in maintaining control over its territory. However, the Shifta did not cease their violence, including during the period leading up to the Somali civil war in the 1990s and the emergence of the al-Shabaab jihadist movement at the end of the years 2000.<sup>18</sup>

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17. A. de la Grange and J. M. Balencie (ed.), *Mondes rebelles. Guerres civiles et violences politiques*, Paris: Michalon, 1999.

18. *Ibid.*

The idea of a “Greater Somalia” also applied against neighboring Ethiopia with a first conflict occurring in 1964. The Ogaden war arose as a result of Somali President Siad Barre’s support for the irredentist movement of the Western Somali Liberation Front fighting in the south-east of Ethiopia. In July 1977, the conflict by proxy between Mogadiscio and Addis-Abeba turned into open war when the Somali armed forces invaded Ogaden. Initially under strain, the Ethiopian forces counter-attacked with help from the Soviet Union and Cuba and ultimately prevailed.<sup>19</sup>

Other wars between States were generated by territorial disputes in border regions: two conflicts between the Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and Mali between 1974 and 1975 and then in 1985 claimed hundreds of lives on both sides.<sup>20</sup> The dispute in question concerned the Agacher Strip, a sliver of land approximately 275 kilometers long. The conflict first broke out between populations, mainly over water control, heightened by a series of droughts. Here, the border course was more an aggravating factor than a cause, the neighboring population wanting to lay hand on the resources on either side of a border.

In the African Great Lakes region, the clash between Uganda and Tanzania from 1978 to 1979 was initially triggered by the Ugandan leader Idi Amin Dada who accused his Tanzanian counterpart, Julius Nyerere, of stirring up trouble in Uganda. With support from Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, Amin Dada launched a military operation in October 1978 with the pure and simple aim of annexing the northern provinces of Tanzania. With help from Ugandan opposition figures, Nyerere responded efficiently and pushed the Ugandan troops to retreat. The fall of Uganda’s dictator in April 1979 put an end to the short-lived attempt to annex Kagera.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, border delimitations in themselves, i.e. those inherited from colonialism, can also be the cause of serious tensions, sometimes sparking brief armed confrontations or skirmishes that continue over time as latent conflicts: recurring tensions between Somalia and Kenya since the Shifta War, antagonism between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi peninsula, border dispute between Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire, tensions between Eritrea and Djibouti, etc. In Chad, the intervention of Libya in support of the rebel groups of the National Liberation Front of Chad

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19. T. Cooper, *Wings over Ogaden: The Ethiopian-Somali War, 1978-1979*, West Midlands: Helion & Co., 2015.

20. M. Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Encyclopedia of Casualty and Other Figures, 1492-2015*, Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2017; T. Cooper, P. Weinert, F. Hinz and M. Lepko, *African MiGs*, vol. II. *Madagascar to Zimbabwe, MiGs and Sukhois in Service in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Houston: Harpia, 2011.

21. T. Cooper and A. Fontanellaz, *Wars and Insurgencies of Uganda 1971-1994*, West Midlands: Helion & Co., 2015.

(FROLINAT), and then after they came to power, of the Transitional Government of National Unity (GUNT), was also highly connected with the border issue.<sup>22</sup> In northern Chad, Tripoli wanted to claim the Aozou strip, a piece of land 100 kilometers wide and over 1,000 kilometers long, which it suspected of being oil-rich. The dispute dates back to the Stresa agreements signed in 1935 by Laval and Mussolini, although never ratified or applied, which provided for the transfer of this land from France to Italy. The border was eventually recognized in 1955 by independent Libya. When he came to power in 1969, Gaddafi went back on this recognition, and not content with giving the FROLINAT bases, occupied the strip in 1973. The “Guide” then went even further, giving free rein to his ambitions to change the African borders in favor of Libya. Early in 1981, he even announced Libya’s merger with Chad.<sup>23</sup> The project soon dissolved on its own, amidst the torment of the Chadian wars, with Libya suffering defeats by Hissène Habré’s Chadian forces supported by France and the USA.<sup>24</sup>

Not all border conflicts in Africa are solved solely by resorting to weapons. The OAU followed by the AU have encouraged peaceful resolution of border disputes between States as the only viable way of maintaining the principle of intangibility of borders. The law and international arbitration have also played an important role. Between 1960 and 2010, 57% of global border disputes referred to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) were African.<sup>25</sup> Examples include the dispute between Botswana and Namibia (independent since March 1990), submitted to the ICJ in 1996 which finally awarded the disputed territory to Botswana in 1999, a decision by which Windhoek abided.<sup>26</sup>

## Independence conflicts

In sub-Saharan Africa, secessionist tensions and conflicts arose early on. The first secession at the time, now forgotten, occurred in Côte d’Ivoire in 1959, when the Kingdom of Sanwi self-proclaimed its independence.<sup>27</sup> France, which was still a colonial power, repressed the initiative harshly. However,

22. Shortly after the 1969 coup in which Muammar Gaddafi took power.

23. R. Buijtenhuijs, *Le Frolinat et les guerres civiles du Tchad (1977-1984)*, Paris: Karthala, 1987.

24. V. Kovana, *Précis des guerres et conflits au Tchad*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000; M. Debos, *Le métier des armes au Tchad*, Paris: Karthala, 2013; T. Cooper and A. Grandolini, *Libyan Air Wars. Part 1: 1973-1985*, West Midlands: Helion & Co., 2015; A. Delalande, A. Grandolini and T. Cooper, *Libyan Air Wars. Part 2: 1985-1986*, West Midlands: Helion & Co., 2016.

25. M. Foucher, *L’obsession des frontières*, Paris: Perrin, 2012.

26. C. Apostolidis, “L’affaire de l’île de Kasikili/Sedudu (Botswana/Namibie). L’arrêt de la CIJ du 13 décembre 1999” (Case concerning Kasikili/Sedudu Island (Botswana/Namibia). Judgment of the ICJ, 13 December 1999), *Annuaire français de Droit international*, No. 45, 1999, pp. 434-451.

27. L. Koffi Koffi, *La France contre la Côte d’Ivoire. L’affaire du Sanwi : du malentendu politico-juridique à la tentative de sécession*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013.

the Sanwis repeated the attempt in 1969, taking advantage of Abidjan's recognition of Biafra to step into the breach. The consequences were less violent than in 1959, and the crisis was dealt with quite peacefully by the Ivorian authorities.

Another secessionist initiative developed in eastern Africa with the Eritrean rebellion which emerged in 1961.<sup>28</sup> At the end of a bloody war that claimed more than 350,000 lives up to the end of 1988,<sup>29</sup> Eritrea finally gained independence in 1993.<sup>30</sup> The successful secession of Eritrea did not put an end to the conflict between the two countries, which became a confrontation over the new border route in 1998. These struggles show that a confirmed secession, and therefore a modification of the borders, is not the catch-all solution for securing lasting peace between two previously hostile communities inside a given territory. In both cases, the secession did not put an end to the logic of war. It simply displaced it, from a battle between a government and an insurgent liberation movement to a fight between two States. Although the conflict ended in 2000, the tensions, which sometimes degenerate into violent skirmishes, still remain today. The border zone between the two countries is one of the most fortified in Africa. The situation could nonetheless finally move forward, with changing attitudes and new policies<sup>31</sup> helping to restore order.<sup>32</sup>

In central Africa, secession wars immediately followed the independence of Congo in June 1960. The South Kasai proclaimed its independence in August. But border uncertainty in the country was caused mainly by the Katanga wars between 1961 and 1963. The Katanga independence movement, led by Dr Moïse Tshombé, stemmed from ethnic factors but above all political (refusal of the socialist power of Patrice Lumumba, ambition of former colonial powers and other countries in the region to maintain an influence in Congo) and economic factors (with certain mining companies keen to keep their control over the significant natural resources). The intervention of UN forces in order to reintegrate the province and the withdrawal of some important international backers led to the defeat of the Katanga rebels and Congo recovered its borders in January

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28. On the wars between Ethiopia and Eritrea, see: A. Fontanellaz and T. Cooper, *Ethiopian-Eritrean wars*, vol. I. *Eritrean war of independence 1961-1988*, West Midlands: Helion & Co., 2017.

29. M. Clodfelter, *op. cit.*

30. However, the event is only a partial exception to the principle of intangibility of borders insofar as the territory existed beforehand as a fully-fledged Italian colony. In other words, the country has the geographical space that it had with the colonial borders.

31. "Éthiopie : une nouvelle gouvernance qui pourrait mener à la paix avec l'Érythrée", interview with P. Ferras, director of the l'Observatoire de la Corne de l'Afrique, IRIS, 28 June 2018, available on: [www.iris-france.org](http://www.iris-france.org).

32. "Entre Éthiopie et Érythrée, un long chemin vers la normalisation", *RFI*, 20 September 2018, available on: [www.rfi.fr](http://www.rfi.fr).

1963. Peace was not, however, restored, since another civil war broke out at the end of 1963 and lasted until 1965. Secessionist attempts emerged again in 1966 and 1967 at the time of the mercenary revolts,<sup>33</sup> and then during the first and second Shaba conflicts in 1977 and 1978. During these wars, the Katangese were supported by Angola, in response to Zaire's support for UNITA, the movement opposed to the Angolan government. From 1946 to 1998, the country experienced no less than twenty-four secession attempts.<sup>34</sup>

One of the worst secession wars in Africa occurred in Nigeria, with the partition of the oil-rich Biafra region which led to a civil war in May 1967.<sup>35</sup> Again, political, religious, ethnic and economic factors intermingled, the modification of the border being, once again, an expression rather than a cause of the conflict. The Republic of Biafra disappeared after its defeat on 15 January 1970<sup>36</sup> but the secessionist attempt did not vanish totally. After being quite dormant for decades, it has roused again recently in connection with tensions around the sharing of resources, particularly oil.<sup>37</sup>

Africa is racked by many other secessionist crises which are either latent or materialize through violent rebellion actions of varying intensity: Casamance with Senegal, the English-speaking separatist movement in Cameroon, the conflict for the independence of Cabinda from Angola, etc. Some other and sometimes bloody conflicts between communities (lineages, clans, ethnic groups) over their territorial limits should not be overlooked either. These include the conflict between the Umuleri and Aguleri communities in Nigeria from 1995 to 2000, which caused several hundred deaths.<sup>38</sup>

The independence finally acquired by South Sudan in July 2011, following a referendum supported by a large part of the international community after an almost uninterrupted guerrilla war between 1955 and 2005, did not bring peace. An umpteenth conflict broke out, this time over modifications to the border between the "former Sudan" and the new State. The squabble concerned control over oil-rich lands, with both countries

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33. A. Hudson, *Congo Unravelling: Military Operations from Independence to the Mercenary Revolt 1960-1968*, West Midlands: Helion & Co., 2012.

34. M. Foucher, *L'obsession des frontières*, *op. cit.*

35. J. Wolf and C. Brovelli, *La guerre des rapaces : la vérité sur la guerre du Biafra*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1969.

36. A. J. Venter, *Biafra's War 1967-1970: A Tribal Conflict in Nigeria that Left a Million Dead*, West Midlands: Helion & Co., 2015; P. S. Jowett, *Modern African Wars*, vol. V. *The Nigerian-Biafran War 1967-1970*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2016.

37. T. Chanda, "Nigeria : sécessionnisme d'hier et d'aujourd'hui", *RFI*, 27 May 2016, available on: [www.rfi.fr](http://www.rfi.fr).

38. A. Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Tragedy of Endowment*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007.

launching several offensives between May 2011 (the independence had yet to be officially proclaimed) and 2012.

The problem of the Tuareg people in the Sahara particularly reveals the effects brought about by the existence of clearly drawn borders. The social group they form is split into several communities, each with their own claims (including separatist), living in five countries: Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria and Libya. The most recent Tuareg uprising occurred in Mali in early 2012 and paved the way to the establishment of several Jihadist movements in the north of the country, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>39</sup> The borders of Mali were therefore *de facto* temporarily modified, the northernmost part of the country being severed until France intervened in January 2013. The Tuareg issue is not the only one facing Bamako and its neighbors, with significant problems between communities. But, again, the problem is less a question of borders forcing people to live together on the same territory than a lack of sovereignty, with governments struggling to create a common base over and above the differences and past events.

## Borders as a resource for war

While they are undeniably zones of controversy, opposition and confrontation, borders in Africa are also, and maybe above all, a considerable resource, not solely for trafficking and the contraband that travels across the entire continent, but also for protagonists of political violence who find both protection and a means to thrive. For instance, during the long Bush war in Rhodesia between 1972 and 1979, the revolutionary movements of Zimbabwe used independent Mozambique as a strategic sanctuary in which to recruit, train and obtain supplies. Large camps were set up, with military advisors from the Communist bloc. Exercising its “right of pursuit” in an extended and controversial way, Rhodesia carried out helicopter, aircraft and motorized raids,<sup>40</sup> sometimes in combination, well beyond its borders— and was in fact condemned in 1976 by UN Security Council resolution 386 for its violations of the sovereignty of Mozambique.

All armed groups in Africa, from the jihadists in the Sahel to the Mai-Mai in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), know that borders, as they exist, represent a considerable asset. Tactical use of borders by insurgent movements is made easier by their porosity, on land suited to

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39. Already present prior to the fall of Mali in 2012. However, alongside Ansar Dine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), they set up a military and administrative foothold in the territory taken over by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). The jihadists then ousted the latter and seized the lands conquered by MNLA.

40. L. Touchard, “Guerre dans le bush”, *Batailles & Blindés*, No. 72, April-May 2016.

travel on foot or by motor vehicles and propitious to evasive action. From one territory to another, defense and security forces are often insufficient and disadvantaged by a lack of resources and, in most cases, by ill-defined or absent rights of pursuit. The borders, meanwhile, are not adequately demarcated. Such conditions call for caution to avoid crossing over onto neighboring territory, sometimes with disastrous consequences. For example, in December 2016,<sup>41</sup> Burundian soldiers pursuing opposition members on DRC soil were taken as a target by Congolese soldiers.

In addition, border transgression has often long been cultivated by civilians, or traffickers turned fighters. This knowledge of borders stems from the contraband culture of a great many inhabitants who are used to trading from one territory to another, totally disregarding the generally abstract line. This trade may also take advantage of economic differences between two nations, caused for example by the existence of government “sponsored” goods (fuel, food) or conversely, of surcharged products, which create artificial and easily exploitable comparative advantages. Cross-border trafficking in the Sahara for example dates back to distant times, well before the emergence of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) which later became al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Nomadic merchant-traffickers have been travelling the desert for centuries. In the 1980s and 1990s, trafficking in cigarettes, petrol, all-terrain vehicles and diamonds was already well in place.

Smugglers know borders, and how to take advantage of surveillance and security weaknesses. Along most African borders, and even at official crossing points, trafficking is part of the everyday commercial activity of many African nations. Servicemen, and police and customs officers are naturally also part of this process, sometimes seeking less to control than to exploit this grey economy, levying “taxes” that are seldom paid to the Treasury.

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41. “RDC : cinq militaires burundais abattus dans le Sud-Kivu”, *Jeune Afrique*, 23 December 2016, available on: [www.jeuneafrique.com](http://www.jeuneafrique.com).



# Tools for securing borders in Africa

African borders are places of exchange just as much as they are zones of confrontation and rivalry. These interfaces stretch several hundred thousand kilometers. While they may be neglected because they are outlying, they are also essential for State security and international trade. This profile has major impacts in terms of defending, protecting and securing the areas in question. With cross-border threats posed mostly by non-government organizations practicing guerrilla warfare and often associated with trans- and intercontinental smuggling and trafficking, African defense and security forces face numerous challenges. Two types of system have emerged over time and structure cross-border security policies: firstly “walls” – i.e. all the static systems designed to ban access to a territory and therefore channel flows around crossing points to facilitate their surveillance and security – and secondly, “men”, i.e. the deployment of security forces patrolling on either side of the border.

## Securing territories with walls

### ***A historical practice against traditional threats***

Walls, fences and other static security systems have the advantage of being visible to the population, the international community and, naturally, potential enemies. Even if the wall does not exactly follow the border line, it will at least provide a setback demarcation. Such obstacles have been present in Africa for centuries, from enclosures around huts and villages to the border fortifications already mentioned.<sup>42</sup>

In modern times, the building of walls to “lock” borders was adopted as of the colonial period. In 1931, to prevent Libyan rebels from using Egyptian territory as a safe haven, the Italians built a 270-kilometre long line with “several layers of barbed wire entanglements, some of which were electrified, along a control route connecting forts communicating by

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42. C. Seignobos, “Des fortifications végétales dans la zone soudano-sahélienne (Tchad et Nord-Cameroun)”, *Cahiers ORSTOM*, Vol. 17, No. 3-4, 1980, pp. 191-222.

telephone and radio”.<sup>43</sup> In 1936, France began the construction of the Mareth Line, extending over 45 kilometers along the border between Tunisia and Libya, in response to Italy’s aggressive policy on the continent, particularly after it conquered Ethiopia. But it was the decolonization wars that saw modern security systems multiply: firstly, in Algeria, along the border with Morocco, where an embryonic barbed wire fence was installed by the French army in June 1956. This obstacle is sometimes called the “Pédron Line” after the commanding general of the army corps of Oran. Another was built along the border with Tunisia in 1957 and later become known as the “Morice Line” after the Defense Minister of the time.

The system was then “equipped with new improvements to enable the units to intercept the occasional members of the ALN [National Liberation Army] who venture into its entanglements. [...] It will combine barbed wire, trenches, ditches, traps, mines of all kind, blockhouses, radar systems and artillery, security sweeps, infrared night-time detection and aerial observation.”<sup>44</sup>

In 1959, the “Challe Line” doubled and reinforced the Morice Line. The density of mines was considerable, and electric fencing was added to the barbed wire. This system, described euphemistically as a “warning sign”<sup>45</sup> covered 450 kilometers of border. Armored, motorized intervention units (the patrol) were ready for action, especially at night, along with artillery batteries. The barricade along the border with Morocco, which stretches over 750 kilometers, was entirely electrified in 1958. Even though it did not change the outcome of the Algerian War, the formidable efficiency of these systems had a decisive impact on the military power relationship inside the Algerian borders, rendering the resupply of the rebels much more difficult.

In southern Africa too, “walls” were erected to counter rebellious movements. During the Bush war, Rhodesia attempted to protect itself from incursions by the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) from Mozambique. Salisbury set up a continuous barrier, the *Cordon Sanitaire* (CORSAN)<sup>46</sup> which appears to have drawn inspiration from the Morice Line in Algeria. The CORSAN consisted of a series of obstacles: fencing with

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43. G. Pervillé, “La ligne Morice en Algérie, 1956-1962”, *Panoramiques*, No. 67, summer 2004.

44. A. Beaufre (dir.), *La guerre d’Algérie*, t. XIV, Paris: Tallandier, 1974 (edition in 24 volumes). On the origins of fortified lines along the borders with Morocco and Tunisia, also see: G. Pervillé, *op. cit.*

45. G. Penchenier and P. Desgraupes, “Cinq colonnes à la une”, *INA*, 6 March 1959, [fresques.ina.fr](https://www.fresques.ina.fr/); J. Delmas, “L’évolution des barrages frontières en Algérie. La bataille des frontières”, *Institut de stratégie comparée (ISC)*, available on: [www.institut-strategie.fr](http://www.institut-strategie.fr).

46. J. K. Cilliers, *Counter-insurgency in Rhodesia*, Dundee: Croom Helm, 1985; a wealth of information about the CORSAN and the war in Rhodesia in general; P. Moorcraft and P. McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War: A Military History*, Bransley: Pen & Sword, 2008.

alarm devices and minefields along a track designed to facilitate intervention operations. In practice, however, the results were poor; inadequate force levels and insufficient minefield density prevented any real prohibiting effect. Weather conditions damaged these mined obstacles, either by “sinking” them into the ground or uncovering the traps by erosion. Maintaining the system proved too expensive for an economically desperate nation. The international disgrace triggered by the use of anti-personnel landmines was particularly counter-productive for Salisbury, already subject to international sanctions.

South Africa also developed intermittent electric fences starting in 1984, along its borders with Zimbabwe and Mozambique. They were installed along areas propitious to crossing. At the time, apartheid was in full application in the country whereas its neighbors supported the movements opposing the segregationist policy of Pretoria. The aim was therefore to prevent infiltrations from countries considered hostile and to block the influx of refugees fleeing the civil war in Mozambique (1976-1992).<sup>47</sup> Highly feared by the local people, the fence along the border with Zimbabwe was dubbed “Snake of Fire”<sup>48</sup>.

In August 1980, faced with the mobility of the Polisario Front, Morocco began building “sand walls” in Western Sahara. The first wall soon stretched 300 kilometers. Six other berms, of a similar length, were built between 1984 and 1987, thus locking up 80% of the country’s surface area, i.e. most of its “usable land”.<sup>49</sup> This set of walls pursues three aims:

[It aims to] protect the strategic objectives of Western Sahara and southern Morocco; to intercept the attack columns of the Sahrawi People’s Liberation Army (APLS) [armed branch of the Polisario] in order to inflict as many losses as possible; to “lay blame” on the Polisario Front and its external backers: Algeria and Libya (until August 1984), by making them the aggressor.<sup>50</sup>

The system was gradually equipped with anti-vehicle ditches, sand berms and minefields. In addition to sector forces intended to respond to any enemy action and control points positioned every six to ten kilometers, the wall’s efficiency was enhanced with technology including numerous ground-based radar systems. The various extensions and walls built over time can be seen as a “marching border”.<sup>51</sup> The wall proved to be effective, significantly dulling the military potential of the Polisario and diminishing

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47. T. Monteiro, “‘Hundreds killed’ by South Africa’s Border Fence”, *New Scientist*, No. 1701, 27 January 1990, available on: [www.newscientist.com](http://www.newscientist.com).

48. *Ibid.*

49. A. de la Grange and J. M. Balencie, *op. cit.*

50. “Dossier Sahara occidental”, *Guerres et conflits d’aujourd’hui*, No. 9, 1985.

51. *Ibid.*

its members' morale. But its cost was considerable and the deployment it involved hindered the modernization of Moroccan land forces. The system was nonetheless efficient: while it did not possess the entire Sahrawi territory, Morocco had most of it and forced the Polisario to remain hunched up in a thin strip of land.

Fighting trafficking and clandestine migration is traditionally another reason why States erect security walls. But they are seldom effective because smuggling and cross-border trade very often stem from profound economic, demographic or even social forces that an artificial system cannot entirely contain, particularly as surveillance staff are often corrupt and crossings can easily be paid for. This is true of the Algerian and Moroccan fences<sup>52</sup> where sophisticated electronic means,<sup>53</sup> designed mainly to counter trafficking, are rendered ineffective by the complicity of certain units whose role is undermined by the endemic corruption of the security sector. It is also the case of the electric fencing between Botswana and Zimbabwe, officially erected for veterinary reasons, to prevent the spread of cattle diseases.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, the nature of walls may change with time. This is particularly illustrated by the "Snake of Fire" between South Africa and Mozambique. In February 1990, the fencing was "reconfigured" to cease being a fatal danger.<sup>55</sup> An agreement signed on 9 December 2002 led to the destruction of a part of the fence, to benefit the wildlife in the Grand Limpopo Transfrontier Park.<sup>56</sup> Today, this obstacle is no longer an obstacle. Not only it is poorly controlled by security forces suffering from budget shortages and inadequate numbers, the fence in question is in an appalling condition,<sup>57</sup> with whole sections left completely open, providing well-known crossing points for traffickers. They improve their knowledge of the region with GPS navigation systems, ensuring they have full command of the geography, sometimes superior to the security forces.

To make up for these deficiencies, Pretoria has recently been studying ways of developing the use of technology, which would also unburden the

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52. M. Ben Mhidi, "Morocco and Algeria Keep Building More Barriers", *The Economist*, July 2017, available on: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com).

53. A. Benantar, "Sécurité aux frontières : portée et limites de la stratégie algérienne", *L'année du Maghreb*, No. 14, 2016, pp. 147-163.

54. C. Udelsmann Rodrigues and J. Tomàs, *Crossing African Borders: Migration and Mobility*, Lisbon, Center of African Studies (CEA) ISCTE-IUL, Lisbon University, 2012.

55. J. A. Mora, *African Frontiers: Walls to Face Threats*, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, January 2016.

56. "Major Developments in Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park Applauded", *Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park*, 5 March 2017, available on: [www.greatlimpopo.org](http://www.greatlimpopo.org).

57. R. Nel, "Mozambique-SA 'Border Fence' Is a Complete Joke", *The Citizen*, 7 October 2016, available on: [citizen.co.za](http://citizen.co.za).

army. The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR),<sup>58</sup> an official research and development organization under the authority of the South African Department of Science and Technology, has, since 2012,<sup>59</sup> recommended systematically using technologies that already exist in the country and integrating them into a command and surveillance system.<sup>60</sup> Field experiments have begun to test the use of sensors, communication mechanisms and networks in combination which render patrol deployment and intervention action worthwhile, depending on the situations. In other words, intelligence saves on forces since they no longer need to be everywhere all the time or to patrol the borders without knowing exactly where to go. The sensors and platforms under study obviously include drones. In 2016, the South African air force reactivated the 10 Squadron which likely uses *Seeker* 400 drones, and the CSIR is working on the development of the Long Endurance Modular UAV (LEMU).<sup>61</sup> Technology also includes ground-surveillance radar (the Squire radar acquired from Thales in 2010 as well as thermal cameras), systems for intercepting cellular communications and even satellite imaging. Pretoria indeed joined the “race to space” in 2010 with the creation of a space agency. Since 2014, it has no doubt had a Russian military observation satellite Kondor-E<sup>62</sup> (in low Earth orbit). Some more “active” systems are also being considered to hinder the efforts of traffickers and poachers, particularly GPS jammers. According to the CSIR’s concept, the information collected will be centralized to create a predictive database. In July 2017, Defense Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula promised to find a solution to the border control issue. There are particularly plans to create a border management agency.

### ***Walls against terrorists?***

Building walls and security barriers has seen some revival in Africa in connection with the fight against terrorism. Tunisia, for example, decided to resuscitate the Mareth Line along the border with Libya, which has been plunged into the chaos of civil war since 2011. The erection of a protection device commenced after the Bardo museum attack on 18 March 2015, for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility and whose attackers had trained in Libya. This is also the case of the terrorist responsible for the

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58. Defence and Security, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, available on: [www.csir.co.za](http://www.csir.co.za).

59. K. Helfrich, “CSIR Tests Smartphone for Use in Border Safeguarding”, *DefenceWeb*, 16 October 2013, available on: [www.defenceweb.co.za](http://www.defenceweb.co.za).

60. “CSIR Maintains Better Border Protection Is Achievable”, *DefenceWeb*, 30 November 2016, available on: [www.defenceweb.co.za](http://www.defenceweb.co.za).

61. Focus on CSIR Long Endurance Modular UAV (LEMU), *CSIR*, available on: [www.csir.co.za](http://www.csir.co.za).

62. “Kondor-E”, *Gunter’s Space Page*, available on: [space.skyrocket.de](http://space.skyrocket.de).

Sousse attack in June 2015. The threat became even more apparent with the assault on Ben Guerdane, at the Libyan border, which the Jihadists attempted, in vain, to take in March 2016. Faced with this growing threat from the East, Tunis began building a security barrier with support from the international community.

To begin with, a basic obstacle was put in place consisting of berms and ditches partly irrigated to prevent vehicle crossings. The system was then gradually improved, namely by widening the ditches to make them even more difficult to cross. It is organized around passive elements and mobile intervention units. It covers 168 kilometers and is gradually being strengthened thanks, particularly, to \$24.9 million in US aid granted by the Obama administration<sup>63</sup> for surveillance devices and training of Tunisian personnel. In 2017, another \$20 million grant was provided to extend the wall south. Germany has also contributed by supplying thermal cameras, sensors and various other equipment. The German Army has thus supplied mobile reconnaissance systems, and HESCO gabion barriers. Hensoldt delivered and installed surveillance equipment (night-vision devices and particularly five *Spexer* radar systems) and provided training for the Tunisian forces. The German border police was also involved in this support, donating in particular the night-vision equipment.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to these passive protection measures, the wall is patrolled by operationally capable ground intervention units and benefits from aerial resources such as *Scan Eagle* drones and Maule MXT-7-180 *Star Rocket* light reconnaissance aircraft. These aircraft can also perform liaison missions, or even emergency medical evacuations, thanks to their ability to touch down and land over very short distances.

Tunis is obviously aware that potential terrorists can find alternative routes, just as the authorities know that units can be set up inside the country via Internet. The wall is not intended to prevent intrusion of armed members from Libya, but rather to sound the alarm bell while slowing them down. The time the jihadists lose allows the intervention forces to step in and fulfill their role.<sup>65</sup>

These systems have an impact on the deprived people in southern Tunisia who, for decades, have lived on cross-border trafficking and contraband: although they are not the target of these security measures, they

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63. "U.S. Support for Tunisian Border Security Project", U.S. Embassy in Tunisia, 25 March 2016, available on: [tn.usembassy.gov](http://tn.usembassy.gov).

64. M. Monroy, "Germany Funds New Border Control Technology in Tunisia", *digit.site36.net*, 20 December 2017, available on: [digit.site36.net](http://digit.site36.net).

65. M. Ben Mhidi, "Morocco and Algeria Keep Building More Barriers", *The Economist*, July 2017, available on: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com).

pay the price due to the interruption – or at least the higher cost – of cross-border exchanges, which were their principal source of income. This economic marginalization and the ensuing discontent could eventually prove to be an even bigger threat, by triggering a process that the jihadists turn to their advantage.<sup>66</sup>

Niger is facing a similar problem. The fight against Boko Haram has prompted the authorities to pursue a policy of economic draining and border closing, particularly in the region of Diffa and the western banks of Lake Chad at the eastern tip of the country. As in Tunisia, the operational efficiency of the system comes at the cost of impoverishing people who have no choice but to turn to a resource-border which becomes a closed border.<sup>67</sup>

Another anti-terrorist wall of questionable efficiency is situated at the border between Kenya and Somalia. The decision to build it was made following the attack on Garissa University in April 2015 by the al-Qaeda affiliate Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab. Like the Tunisian barrier, its role is not so much to prevent all Jihadist infiltrations into the whole of Kenya than to protect the north-west of the country, starting with the most exposed towns situated some twenty kilometers from the border, such as Omar Jillo. They are frequently targeted by Somali fighters who attack both security forces and civilians.

The current project is supposed to extend over some 700 kilometers for a total cost of 1.4 billion dollars.<sup>68</sup> Israel is discreetly supporting its construction.<sup>69</sup> The barrier consists of sections of concrete walls, barbed wire entanglements and ditches. It is under surveillance from gate houses as technical resources are installed, particularly a system of cameras. Units of the Kenyan armed forces are responsible for patrol.

The efficiency of the barrier, even on a tactical level, is nonetheless poor, the main reason being the quality of the forces guarding it.<sup>70</sup> As elsewhere in Africa, the endemic corruption of security and defence forces increases the chances of crossing for those who can afford to pay. Secondly, the system is weak over certain important portions of its route: a determined enemy can get over the barbed wire obstacles, even with relatively few means. The ditches are merely a symbolical obstacle, capable at the most of blocking all-

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66. A. Boukhars, "The Potential Jihadi Windfall from the Militarization of Tunisia's Border Region with Libya", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January 2018, pp. 32-36.

67. "Évacuation du lac Tchad: le rapport qui accable le Niger", *RFI*, 11 May 2015, available on: [www.rfi.fr](http://www.rfi.fr).

68. B. J. Cannon, "Terrorists, Geopolitics and Kenya Proposed Border Wall with Somalia", *Journal of terrorism research*, Vol. 7, No. 2, May 2016.

69. J. Starkey and G. Carlstrom, "Israel Will Help Kenya Build a Wall to Keep Out Terrorists", *The Times*, 7 July 2016.

70. B. J. Cannon, "Terrorists, Geopolitics and Kenya Proposed Border Wall with Somalia", *op. cit.*

terrain vehicles. Lastly, comes the question of financing the upkeep of such a large structure and its crowding-out effect on other items of expenditure.

Building such a wall also raises a strategic problem in terms of the false sense of security it creates among the population, the security forces but also among politicians who tend to overestimate its effectiveness after promoting its construction. This feeling has disastrous consequences on the troops' morale and on political and social resilience when events bring home the reality. Countries deciding to build a security barrier should therefore clearly explain its limits, and ensure they do not trigger the syndrome of the notoriously bypassed "Maginot Line".

Lastly, as in Tunisia, the building of the Kenyan "wall" poses political problems, especially among local population groups, resulting in its construction being suspended a first time early in 2018, then again in March of the same year when it reached a small village located along its route.<sup>71</sup> Beyond this isolated case, the controversy is fuelled by the isolation and separation felt by border communities, since the project only includes five crossing points over hundreds of kilometers. The wall is also accused of encroaching on portions of Somali territory. All these factors are stimulating irredentist movements among the Somali communities that have always lived in this part of Kenya.<sup>72</sup> And not without reason, as north-western Kenya is not only traumatized by the violence of the Shabaab fighters, but also by years and years of crime committed by the Shiftas (cf. above), who never truly disappeared and are now attracted to the Jihadist ideology of al-Shabaab.

### ***Great Walls or Maginot Lines?***

Are walls an effective solution for securing borders? The answer depends on what we expect of them. It would be unrealistic, and no doubt dangerous, to expect them to fully seal off a territory. Yet, despite the building and maintenance costs, they are sometimes more cost effective than it would seem, particularly from a strategic perspective, when they are integrated into a long-term, coherent policy of territorial control. In this regard, the Moroccan sand wall is a model of its kind. It has frozen a border, by becoming a political "wall of occupation" just as much as a siege wall. It has considerably hindered the motorized units of the Polisario while adding to Moroccan sovereignty, transforming a still evanescent occupation into a long-term *fait accompli*. Although it will no doubt disappear as such, as

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71. P. Vidija, "Kenya Suspends Construction of Somalia Border Wall to Ease Tensions", *The Star*, 31 March 2018, available on: [www.the-star.co.ke](http://www.the-star.co.ke).

72. B. J. Cannon, "Terrorists, Geopolitics and Kenya Proposed Border Wall with Somalia", *op. cit.*

political solutions are found for Western Sahara, it has nonetheless contributed to achieving Morocco's strategic goals.

Regarding the Tunisian and Kenyan walls, again we must remember that they are not designed to completely prevent the entry of terrorists, but to render it more difficult. The aim is to make it more difficult for Jihadists to launch more or less ambitious assaults, with conventional resources, from neighboring territories where their fighters can also move around and obtain supplies with a certain ease. If they enable the respective forces to reorganize themselves, to rationalize deployment of their units at borders while building confidence among the population, then they will have achieved concrete, stabilizing results in situations that are otherwise inextricable.

However, owing to the social impact, not to mention the environmental impact which is almost always overlooked, the construction of these walls faces another problem. They undeniably separate communities more brutally than any border line that no one respects. And while they may provide protection, they also cause human tragedies and generate resentment which, in turn, incite and fuel violence. They cannot therefore be systematically built in inhabited areas, where they create more problems than they actually solve, given the social and political impacts. This is the situation currently facing Kenya.

Finally, the tactical aspects must be taken into account. Firstly, building walls only makes sense along routes whose ends are difficult to bypass geographically, and over the shortest length possible. Both the Tunisian and Kenyan walls meet this criterion. The first benefits from the Mediterranean Sea in the north, a desert distanced from towns and the potential strategic targets of the Jihadists in the south. The second can rely on Ethiopia in the north, a country experienced in fighting uprisings with competent security forces albeit unequal in value, and on the Indian Ocean in the south. Conversely, building a real barrier along the border between Niger and Libya would make little sense. Although it would be quite short, approximately 350 kilometers, it would be easy to bypass unless it were extended to Mali in the west and to Chad in the east. Furthermore, the configuration of the ground at the northern border is not suited to this kind of structure, because topography is also important: hilly or mountainous areas make construction more complicated and push up the cost.

Regarding the technical aspects, while great hopes may be placed in technology, it can also be source of disappointment. Climate conditions, for example, can rapidly deteriorate cutting-edge and often easily damaged equipment (radar, thermal sensors, etc.). Similarly, if the staff is not adequately trained, the equipment is not always easy to use. Sensors can

easily be deceived by false alerts, such as animals.<sup>73</sup> This problem is encountered along the barrier between the US and Mexico, for example, despite using some of the most sophisticated technology in the world.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, there is the question of antipersonnel landmines, now prohibited by the Ottawa Treaty signed by all African nations with the exception of Morocco, Libya, Egypt and Uganda. Landmines remain a key element of the Moroccan barrier in Western Sahara where they offer undeniable tactical “added value”, despite being costly, dangerous and complex to implement and maintain – not to mention the political cost of using a weapon condemned for its devastating effects on civilians.

To restore a delaying or defensive role to these new systems, new technologies could be an alternative. Artificial intelligence and autonomous vehicles could particularly lead to “killer robots”, the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent to the previous century’s landmines. Similar devices have already been used in Israel, with the *Guardium*<sup>75</sup> mobile system being replaced with the *Border Protector* and the *Sentry-Tech* static system, or in South Korea with the semi-autonomous system SGR-A1<sup>76</sup> used against North Korea that preceded Seoul in this area in 2010.<sup>77</sup> With proper maintenance, they offer several advantages, and particularly “save” on personnel and therefore resources.<sup>78</sup> However, they involve an ethical issue. There is no real guarantee that humans will always remain “in the loop” and some countries could be tempted to remove this level of control in favor of a robot. Whereas the US or Russia have come down against the prohibition of this equipment, the European Parliament demands it.<sup>79</sup> If the idea were to take root in Africa,

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73. S. Savitz, “Would a Border Wall Be Effective?”, *The RandBlog*, 26 September 2016, available on: [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

74. United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Southwest Border Security. CBP is evaluating designs and locations for border barriers but is proceeding without key information*, Report to Congressional Requesters, July 2018; and also see: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Privacy impact assessment update for the Border Surveillance Systems (BSS)*, DHS/CBP/PIA-022(a), 21 August 2018, which presents in detail the former and new devices used at US borders, particularly in the south.

75. “Information on Israel’s Largest Aerospace Concern”, *IAI News*, No. 13, 2005, available on: [www.iai.co.il](http://www.iai.co.il).

76. R. Crotoft, “The Killer Robots Are Here: Legal and Policy Implications”, *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 36, January 2015, pp. 1839-1915.

77. D. Cavanaugh, “Robot Guns Guard the Borders of Some Countries, and More Might Follow Their Lead”, *Offiziere.ch*, 12 April 2016, [www.offiziere.ch](http://www.offiziere.ch).

78. “Robotisation de la guerre : le soldat SGR-A1, l’ultime sentinelle”, *Contrepoints*, 7 January 2015, available on: [www.contrepoints.org](http://www.contrepoints.org); also see: R. Hémez, “Robots terrestres. Expérimenter aujourd’hui pour les employer efficacement demain”, *Défense & Sécurité Internationale*, No. 136, July-August 2018.

79. J. Lausson, “Le Parlement européen appelle à interdire les robots tueurs ‘avant qu’il ne soit trop tard’”, *Numerama*, 13 September 2018, available on: [www.numerama.com](http://www.numerama.com).

the Kenyan wall could be a “gateway”, particularly in light of the close security partnership between Israel, the leader in this area, and Nairobi.

## **Police officers, soldiers, customs officers: the men at borders**

Border control is often the responsibility of police forces whose officers work out of more or less dilapidated posts, positioned along major roads. These police units generally lack even the most basic resources: they have few or no vehicles, little or no equipment for administrative tasks, and inadequate communication means consisting most often of just their personal smartphones. They lack training due to budget shortages, as military institutions generally take precedence over the police. African governments themselves have frequently been encouraged in this direction, after gaining independence and throughout the Cold War, by exogenous doctrines focused on conventional war rather than protecting populations. These shortcomings mean that the territorial network, particularly at borders, is currently deficient. And to make matters worse, cooperation between security forces is often poor and is no better between security forces and the armed forces.

One of the most well-known shortcomings of police forces at African borders is the lack of intervention units. Niger is a notable exception, with its Mobile Company for Border Control (CMCF), set up and trained with US support with a view to countering Boko Haram. Based in the Diffa area, this elite, mobile police unit is capable of swiftly coming to assist border posts, or patrolling without the fear of being endangered by better armed enemies. New specialized units inspired by this example should be assigned to the country’s other borders.<sup>80</sup> In Côte d’Ivoire, police security battalions have particularly been formed to counter the highway bandits, especially in border areas. The concept has proved effective in its early stages even though the highway bandits are still a major danger for both civilians and security forces.

Another problem facing police forces is the weakness of their weapons to deal with insecurity. In the most exposed zones, posts are frequently transferred to less dangerous places, set back from the border. But they are then less effective. In the Sahelo-Saharan strip, another solution consists of putting police forces under the protection of the gendarmes, considered more capable of countering armed attacks, as in Niger. In reality, although the gendarmes are effectively better armed and trained, their combat

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80. “L’Allemagne et les Pays-Bas vont financer une police de contrôle au Niger”, *VOA Afrique*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2018, available on: [www.voafrique.com](http://www.voafrique.com).

capabilities are often inferior to the enemy that is well equipped with assault rifles, anti-tank rocket launchers (also effective against infrastructure), and heavy machine guns mounted on all-terrain vehicles.

To restore authority over their borders, many African countries must therefore rely on their armed forces rather than on failing homeland security forces. Measures to regain control range from simple patrols, to quite large-scale operations. This visibility of the armed forces is absolutely necessary to establish a lasting tie with the inhabitants of these outlying regions, to whom the army is often the only tangible materialization of the government's existence. Once this tie developed, the civilians are more likely to provide the patrols with information, enabling them to promptly respond to a most often clandestine and short-lasting threat.

After suffering several serious setbacks in the years 2000, Mauritania has developed a pragmatic system to counter threats at its borders, due particularly to the presence of armed groups partly associated with the Jihadist movement. Firstly, Nouakchott declared an exclusion zone along the Malian border, prohibiting all travel in an area 850 kilometers long and 250 kilometers wide. If an individual or vehicle is detected, it may be automatically considered a target by military forces. Secondly, new units have been created: the Special Intervention Groups (Groupes d'intervention spéciaux - GIS), each with approximately two hundred well-trained and duly paid men.

In 2018, Mauritania has lined up at least six GIS, patrolling mostly in the exclusion zone, on a rota basis over long periods. According to a mimetic principle that is well known in strategy, their method of operation is identical to that of their enemy, the Jihadist *katibat*: they move around autonomously, carrying their fuel, supplies and ammunition on all-terrain vehicles or motorcycles, thereby escaping most of the usual logistics constraints. Just like the Jihadists, the GIS have considerable fire-power with vehicle-mounted heavy machine guns. These weapons allow them to engage their enemy at a distance, or at least retaliate within an identical radius, which is a vital factor in the desert where shelters are often lacking.<sup>81</sup>

The GIS are also efficient thanks to the information they obtain locally<sup>82</sup> and with support from the Mauritanian ISR means including Cessna 208B.<sup>83</sup>

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81. "Avec les soldats mauritaniens, dans le maquis sahélien", *Le Monde*, 3 February 2017; also see the very informative, although earlier documentary on the SIG, by J. Andre and T. Mjaeid, "Mauritanie: face à l'ennemi invisible", *France 24*, 9 November 2011, available on: [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com).

82. J. Andre and T. Mjaeid, *ibid*.

83. A. Delalande, "Les forces aériennes du G5 Sahel", *Défense & Sécurité internationale magazine*, no. 135, May-June 2018; according to the author, the G5 forces depend on the USA and France for ISR.

Naturally, the GIS may also work with other units, especially those of the National Guard. Now that Jihadist fighting has ended in Mauritania, there is no doubt that the concept has proved to be operationally appropriate, even though other more global factors also contributed greatly and the result has been achieved by synergy. It is in fact being studied closely by other countries in the Sahel. Again, without being totally innovative, its simplicity and the operational difficulty the Jihadists had in finding ways to counter it make it particularly efficient.

While the system of an exclusion zone and special intervention groups is well-suited to Mauritania, it would be difficult to transpose elsewhere, in more densely populated border areas than west Sahara. Another original solution has been developed by the Sudanese and Chadians, with cross-border patrols. After years of confrontation through the intermediary of militia, N'Djamena and Khartoum ended their war by proxy in January 2010. They then decided to create “a joint civilian-military system to guard and secure the 1,360 kilometers of common border – the Chadian-Sudanese Joint Border Force (FMTS), of which the first units were deployed in February”.<sup>84</sup> The force comprises 3,000 men, half Sudanese and half Chadian. As confidence began to build between the two former enemies, the two countries agreed on a “reciprocal right of pursuit whenever an armed group crossed the border”.<sup>85</sup> The mechanism which led to the success of the joint border force was initially modest, in line with clearly identified needs and at a pace suited to the forces involved. This is a crucial aspect: it takes time to build relations and mutual confidence, and time is a key success factor of coordinated action.

Shortly after *Operation Serval* in 2013 which saw the liberation of northern Mali from the Islamic coalition led by AQIM and Ansar Dine, France and its Sahelian partners were in search of a new security organization to deal with the re-articulation of the threat that all the experts agreed would not stop at the borders of Mali. The example of the FMTS then very directly inspired the Nouakchott process contact group, later the “G5 Sahel”, comprising Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso. In January 2015 in Bamako, these countries’ Chiefs of Staff attended a meeting of the Operational Coordination Committee which moved to transpose certain features of the FMTS to the G5 Sahel.<sup>86</sup> The countries considered arranging joint border patrols, in addition to creating joint units.<sup>87</sup>

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84. C. Robinet, “Genèse de la force conjointe du G5 Sahel”, *Ultima Ratio*, 16 January 2018, available on: [ultimaratio-blog.org](http://ultimaratio-blog.org).

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. L. Touchard, “Quels défis pour la force conjointe du G5 Sahel ?”, *Défense & Sécurité internationale*, No. 134, March-April 2018.

The armed forces adopted the Cross-border military cooperation partnership, signed in November 2015 by the five chiefs of staff. It soon became apparent that joint cross-border military operations (OMCT in French) would serve as a basis for a more ambitious project, the G5 Sahel joint force:

The joint operations are the first functional step of a joint force. At present, these operations meet both national and cross-border operational needs. The joint force in fact exists in practice; it should now be confirmed in its current form through joint operations, by giving it a formal G5 Sahel seal.<sup>88</sup>

The idea of this force was accepted on 6 February 2017 and its operating concept adopted on 13 April 2017. While the concept of cross-border patrols and operations initially took shape from the bottom upwards, always with the pragmatism to which all the military participants aspired, and the G5 “Joint Force” was developed gradually at the pace dictated by the local players, the initiative soon gained speed in response to external pressure, particularly from the main funders and military backers – primarily France – which were impatient to reduce their logistic footprint in Sahel and let the Joint Force take over from international engagements (MINUSMA, EUTM, Barkhane, etc.).<sup>89</sup> However, this rush is not consistent with the nature of the confrontation with Islamic terrorists.

In August 2018, another initiative was taken, this time further east. Niger, Libya, Chad and Sudan agreed to create a joint operation centre,<sup>90</sup> suggesting that local variations of the FMST may be developed between members to the agreement.

By operating in a space where the notion of a clearly drawn border is less marked, these cross-border patrol initiatives reflect a relationship with space that has dominated African history, in which the border is an area of transition and exchange rather than a rigid line drawn in the sand. While accepting the idea of modern-day marches, they assert the presence of governments but without fragmenting them. Whether joint or otherwise, these operations can be conducted quite informally, between military leaders, without the need for political decisions. These tactical, operative or even strategic arrangements, when they are organized at a high level, serve an empirical approach to save on forces. Rather than having to cover the whole length of a border, the dedicated units of two countries can better

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88. “Relevé des conclusions de la réunion des experts des États membres du G5 Sahel”, Secrétariat permanent du G5 Sahel, 2 March 2016, available on: [www.g5sahel.org](http://www.g5sahel.org).

89. L. Touchard, “Quels défis pour la force conjointe du G5 Sahel?”, *Défense & Sécurité internationale*, No. 134, March-April 2018.

90. S. Zapita, “Libya, Niger, Sudan and Chad Agree to Create Joint Operation Centre to Strengthen Border Security”, *Libya Herald*, 12 August 2018, available on: [www.libyaherald.com](http://www.libyaherald.com).

share their efforts, organize their systems, improve their coverage of zones. Furthermore, the cost of implementing cross-border patrols and maintaining them over time is much lower than the cost of building a protective barrier.

Without going so far as these cross-border systems, unilateral patrols by a single country on its own side of a border are also pertinent. Arrangements concerning cross-border action are not always possible or wanted, even where they are informal and very local. Mistrust or even distrust between States and sovereign tensions can prevent cooperation. This, for example, is the case of Algeria vis-à-vis its Saharan neighbors. Notwithstanding, the system of Algerian patrols is effective overall. In southern Algeria and at the Libyan border, the border guards (GGF) have been increasingly well trained and equipped since 2008.<sup>91</sup> They continue to receive new vehicles (Mercedes G-class), and new control posts have been set up, etc. As a result, smugglers and Jihadists are frequently intercepted in this vast transit zone that the Algerian Sahara represents.

In any event, when carried out with professional forces and units trained in this kind of mission who know the ground, patrols can prove highly effective to counter traffickers and perform certain reconnaissance or combat missions against irregular enemies. The national guards, particularly with camel-mounted units, are very appropriate, as auxiliary security forces can also be. However, they must be rigorously supervised as they can otherwise be toxic for the population and for security: without adequate control or left to their own devices, they often tend to serve particular interests rather than those of the community as a whole.

Unfortunately, these light security forces are often ill-used, particularly in French-speaking Africa, due to doctrines that need changing and updating. The meltdown of a part of the Malian National Guard in 2012 is a perfect illustration. In emergency situations, these light forces are often used as fully-fledged combat units, which they are not. On the other hand, if they are used well, they offer great potential in intelligence. Moreover, by being close to isolated people, they embody a presence at low cost. This kind of light, paramilitary unit, whether they exist or need to be created,<sup>92</sup> can lighten the burden weighing on the armed forces. They are undoubtedly an avenue to explore in the quest to perfect the concept of cross-border patrols.

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91. "ANP Histoire et mémoire du cinquantenaire", *El Djeich*, special issue, November 2012.

92. In the English sense of the word, i.e. units whose primary function is security but which also have combat capabilities.



# Conclusion

Africa is capable of finding its own specific solutions to manage its borders. To do so, it must endorse an African concept of borders to rise above the question of colonial inheritance. Border fragmentation can undoubtedly be transcended in Africa as it has been in Europe and other parts of the world. In so doing, African countries could create “modern frontiers” guaranteeing both the security of territories, the flow of exchanges and peace for their people.

African defense and security forces obviously have a role to play in the process of re-appropriating the territory. As border guards, they have long contributed to its devaluation by using it as a space for confrontation in conflicts of power, or exploiting it as a resource and a collection point for a security sector blighted by corruption. But the actions of African armed forces and their auxiliaries can also be more positive, by improving and securing flows at borders, following the example of cross-border operations which dislocate the principle of intangibility of borders but without destroying it. They therefore help to reshape African borders by integrating a more cooperative dimension.

As for walls and other static security systems, they are not necessarily a heresy. Nonetheless, numerous pre-requisites must be met before they can be installed. And one is the need for patrols, because without them, any defensive obstacle is devoid of meaning and reaches no further than the vision of its sentries and other sensors. Drones and aircraft help to increase this outreach. But they are not on the ground. This is also one of the strengths of patrols, and even more so of cross-border patrols, which are in contact with the local people and fight the enemy over control of the territory.

Because they reflect a cultural perception of borders as spaces rather than lines, because they are fully suited to operational and financial capacities in Africa, but also because they are adapted to the enemies to be fought, cross-border security systems are an opportunity and a future for defense in Africa. Although modest compared to large forces such as the G5 Sahel, they could nonetheless become essential for security on the African continent.

The question of African borders and their security ultimately boils down to the more fundamental issue of the States' "sovereign capacity", i.e. their ability to make decisions and to select the most appropriate defense means rather than those that serve private interests. Borders are sometimes said to be the only cause of wars in Africa, but this is not true. Borders do not start wars nor are they the condition of peace. They are what governments, and behind them, societies, decide to make them.





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