



Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on February 2, 2013

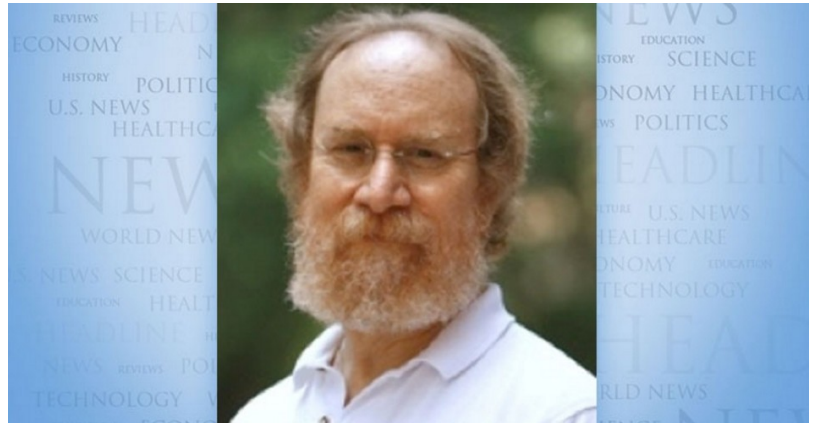
The Ominous U.S. Presence in Northwest Africa

Ominously but unsurprisingly, the U.S. military's Africa Command wants to increase its footprint in northwest Africa. What began as low-profile assistance to France's campaign to wrest control of northern Mali (a former colony) from unwelcome jihadists could end up becoming something more.

The [Washington Post](#) reports that [Africom](#) "is preparing to establish a drone base in northwest Africa [probably Niger] so that it can increase surveillance missions on the local affiliate of Al Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups that American and other Western officials say pose a growing menace to the region." But before that word "surveillance" can bring a sigh of relief, the *Post* adds, "For now, officials say they envision flying only unarmed surveillance drones from the base, though they have not ruled out conducting missile strikes at some point if the threat worsens."

Meanwhile [Bloomberg](#), citing American military officials, says Niger and the U.S. government have "reached an agreement allowing American military personnel to be stationed in the West African country and enabling them to take on Islamist militants in neighboring Mali, according to U.S. officials... No decision has been made to station the drones."

The irony is that surveillance drones could become the reason the "threat worsens," and could provide the pretext to use drones armed with Hellfire missiles — the same kind used [over 400 times](#) in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, killing hundreds of noncombatants. Moving from surveillance to lethal strikes would be a boost for jihadist recruiters.





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Exactly whom do the jihadists threaten in northern Mali? They threaten anyone who wishes to live free of extreme Sharia law, such as the nomadic Tuaregs in the north and the 90 percent of Malians in the south. Before the jihadists were routed by welcome French and Mali troops, they inflicted horrific violence in northern towns like Timbuktu.

But are the jihadists a threat to Americans at home? It's hard to see the case. Since we know that the original al-Qaeda grievances against the United States were about brutal U.S. intervention in the Muslim world, we already know how to minimize, if not eliminate, a domestic threat from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: withdrawal from the region. If American forces and drones come home, any real danger will subside. The jihadists will be too preoccupied with local and regional matters to bother with Americans minding their business thousands of miles away.

But should the U.S. government stop intervening there? From President Obama down, most people foolishly think the interests of the American people depend on what happens almost anywhere, and therefore virtually any crisis requires the application of U.S. power in some form. Outgoing defense secretary [Leon Panetta](#) says the U.S. support role in Mali "is the kind of model that you're going to see in the future."

Africa is of particular interest to the policy elite because of its oil, gas, and other important resources. So American officials are eager to make sure those resources are controlled by friends. In the past that objective has led the U.S. government to support brutal rulers, which in turn has engendered hostility toward the United



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States. Demonstrations on behalf of democracy are often suppressed with weapons stamped “Made in the USA.” This does not go unnoticed by the repressed population.

The point is that intervention is ultimately self-defeating, because it creates the enemies the government says it seeks to defeat. The way to obtain resources is through peaceful market purchases.

On the other hand, “humanitarian intervention,” however alluring, must be rejected. Saving Malians from violent jihadists in itself is a worthwhile cause, but the U.S. government can’t do it without using force against innocent people, including American taxpayers.

And remember the law of unintended consequences. U.S.-led NATO intervention against Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi aided jihadists (as it does in Syria) and provided the arms cache that powered the trouble in northern Mali. That’s how things work. After helping France and the Malian central government defeat the jihadists, will Obama then help suppress the Tuaregs’ hopes for autonomy, which could be next on the central government’s agenda?

This is the treacherous web that empire weaves. The U.S. military is too blunt an instrument for such complex situations. American security lies in nonintervention.

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