

Paris seizes on Niger kidnapping to sow “war on terror” panic

By Kumaran Ira
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In recent weeks, French authorities have warned of a major risk of terrorist attack in France being prepared by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. AQIM recently claimed responsibility for kidnapping seven workers at French mining companies in Niger.

On September 16, five French nationals, a Malagasy and a Togolese were kidnapped in the Arlit region in northern Niger. All of them worked for the French state-owned firms Areva and Satom, mining uranium in Niger. A few days later, AQIM claimed responsibility for the kidnapping in a message broadcast on the Al Jazeera satellite news network. It is believed AQIM is holding the hostages in the deserts of northern Mali.

Paris said that the hostages are believed to be alive and all efforts were mobilized to release them, including possible negotiations with AQIM. On September 23, French Defense Minister Hervé Morin told RTL radio, “For the time being, our concern is getting in contact with Al Qaeda, and hearing their demands, which we haven’t heard. What we want is for Al Qaeda—at one time or another—to put demands on the table.”

Last week, France sent some 80 special forces troops and military aircraft to Niamey, the capital of Niger, and installed a military operating base to begin searching for the hostages. For the first time, Niger has allowed France to use its territory and airspace for hostage searching operations. According to *Le Monde*, these include reconnaissance jets flying from neighboring Chad, and French commandos operating from Mauritania.

These operations are deepening the intervention of French imperialism and its proxy forces in the region. On September 19, two Malian women were killed during an air raid by Mauritania against AQIM near Timbuktu. The Malian government condemned the attack. A former Malian minister told *Le Monde*, “Today our country is the theater of a war between foreign forces.”

The government and media have seized upon this event to shift the political atmosphere in France with repeated warnings of terrorist attacks. The threat from AQIM has

provided numerous headlines in France’s major papers in recent weeks.

The government has set the national terror threat level at “red,” the second-highest level. Authorities claimed that a female suicide bomber, whom they referred to as a “ghost woman,” might be preparing an attack in Paris transport systems. Soldiers were mobilized to the main areas in Paris, including the Eiffel tower, and main train stations.

Subsequently, Frédéric Péchenard, the general director of the national police, discounted the “ghost woman” reports. He told *Libération*, “This was intelligence we received, but which today—I won’t go into the operational details—no longer appears credible.”

In an interview to *Le Journal de Dimanche* on September 12, the head of France’s counterespionage and counterterrorism intelligence agency stated, “[T]he menace has never been greater,” and is at the same level as in 1995, when Algerian Islamist terrorists set off a bomb in the Paris regional train network.

Echoing this warning, French Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux said, “A series of clues gathered in recent days and hours shows the terrorist threat is at a high level.” He added, “Against this terrorist threat, our vigilance is reinforced. This is why we are still on a ‘red’ alert level, but also why the ‘red’ alert level is reinforced.”

Political opponents of Sarkozy have criticized the manner in which the terrorist warnings were made. Former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin said, “What’s important is taking measures, acting; I think it serves no purpose to create panic here and there around our country.” He said the government’s public relations policy was “clumsy and sometimes even cynical.”

These warnings of terrorist threats come as Sarkozy’s government faces rising discontent in the working class. The government’s anti-democratic measures, such as the ban against the burqa, mass deportation of Roma, and participation in the NATO occupation of Afghanistan, are profoundly unpopular. So is its social policy, especially plans for massive cuts in pensions.

On September 25, *Le Monde* discussed hopes that the African intervention might suppress opposition to Sarkozy's pension cuts, writing that, "[T]he kidnapping of Frenchmen in Niger by Al Qaeda might create a climate of 'union sacrée.'"

The "union sacrée" was the agreement by political parties, including social-democratic parties, to suppress strikes and the class struggle in France during World War I. In the current context, this is an unmistakable reference to hopes in the ruling class that fear of terrorist attacks will undermine working class opposition to social cuts.

Given the interest of the ruling class in stimulating a "war on terror" panic, the emergence of reports that elements of the French state were aware of plans for the kidnapping—and allowed it to proceed—are of the greatest political importance. These reports raise the possibility of a deliberate campaign by elements of the French state or security apparatus to create a terrorist panic and poison public opinion.

Local authorities in the Arlit region had warned Areva some two weeks before the kidnapping. *Le Monde* published a warning letter sent to Areva by Niger security officials on September 1, saying that "the security situation" in the region around Areva's mines was getting worse, explicitly warning about Arlit.

The letter warned of the arrival of "a convoy of eight Toyotas carrying a group of armed men" the previous weeks. It continued, "The response by elements of the defense forces did not allow this armed group to accomplish its goal, which consisted, according to our intelligence, in taking away military materials and expatriate personnel." It concluded, "You will understand that, in these circumstances, the threat from the AQIM group must be taken seriously."

However, in the subsequent kidnapping, a large group of armed men was supposedly able to arrive in a heavily guarded area and kidnap Areva's personnel, without encountering any resistance. Areva released a statement asserting that "at least five cars and 40 armed men were able to penetrate the city, without meeting anyone."

Gilles Denamur, a retired officer who had briefly worked for Areva in 2007, said, "How were a bunch of bearded men able to arrive in a city like Arlit, where strangers are found out an hour after they arrive, and then stay there probably 48 hours to follow people and prepare the operation?"

Jacques Hogard, president of EPEE—the firm that advises Areva on site security and coordinates with authorities in Niger—said the kidnapping was "a quasi-military operation." He added, "The kidnapers had very precise knowledge and could not have operated without complicity inside Areva." He repeated that there were "internal betrayals."

It must be underlined that Areva is a major French state-run firm, operating in a highly strategic location and industrial sector, nuclear energy, with close connections to French security services. Under such conditions, an allegation by well-placed security officials that Areva is complicit in the attack amounts to an allegation that the French state itself is complicit in the attacks.

Under the banner of fighting terrorism, French imperialism is moving to violently reassert itself in the Sahel, where it is the former colonial power. In July, France and Mauritania carried out a raid on an AQIM camp in northern Mali claiming ostensibly to liberate a French hostage, killing some AQIM members. AQIM later claimed that the French hostage had been executed in retaliation for the Franco-Mauritanian raid.

The French government's intervention into the region—deploying troops and fighter planes without resistance from local governments—underlines the illusory character of post-war decolonization, led by factions of the native petty bourgeoisie. Today, none of these regimes can or wish to rally the masses in their home countries or in the French working class against imperialist intervention.

Niger is the third-largest uranium producer in the world, and its uranium reserves are being plundered by foreign firms. France, which obtains 78 percent of its electricity from nuclear energy, relies on a significant part of Niger's uranium. Areva has exploited these uranium reserves for 40 years. It mines the Arlit and Akouta deposits, which produced over 3,000 metric tons in 2008. Areva has invested €1.2 billion in the Imouraren deposit, which is expected to produce almost 5,000 metric tons per year for over 35 years.

The French ruling class is pursuing a reckless policy in the Sahel to secure its vital interests, while neglecting totally the catastrophic social and economic conditions faced by millions of people there. Most of countries in the Sahel face extreme levels of poverty. About 80 percent of Niger's population, or nearly 12 million people, are threatened by famine, and Niger ranks last in the UN Human Development Index. Over 60 percent of the population lives on less than \$1 per day.

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