

# CHAD:

## In the crosshairs of Western counterterrorism strategy



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# CHAD: IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF WESTERN COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

## INTRODUCTION

The Sahel, the transition zone between the Sahara and Sub-Saharan Africa and one of the most fragile areas in the world, has emerged in recent years as a region of increased geopolitical importance for Western countries. Poverty, inequality and a lack of respect for democracy and human rights have been the norm for decades. In recent years the Sahel has become a hotspot for terrorist groups, frustrating any attempt to improve the social, political and economic landscape of the countries located in this area, namely, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Chad and Mauritania.

Among them, Chad has emerged as the lynchpin of a French-dominated Western geopolitical strategy in Central Africa to counterterrorism<sup>1</sup>. In this space, several international operations have been established, such as the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram in 2015<sup>2</sup>, or the most recent Operation Barkhane initiated by the French in 2014<sup>3</sup>, both having their headquarters in the Chadian capital, N'Djamena. However, the situation is far from stable, and liable to change at any moment. Whereas Chad was regarded as an oasis of stability in relation to the other Sahelian states, political upheaval and security threats are constant. The recent death of its long-standing president Idriss Déby, at the hands of rebel fighters, risks jeopardising the whole international strategy in the Sahel. The unexpected leader's demise, the same day his re-election to a sixth six-year term was announced, has caused turmoil. He died due to wounds sustained during a clash between his troops and a Chadian military-political group based in Libya, the Front for Change and Unity in Chad (FACT). This group had launched an offensive in the days surrounding Chad's election, to "exploit electoral tensions and as a call to other opponents to join their cause", some experts maintain<sup>4</sup>.

For some time now, analysts have been warning about the risks if Déby's reign came to an abrupt end, thus, opening a succession crisis<sup>5</sup>. This essay aims to analyse the perils arising from the

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<sup>1</sup> Chafer, T. (2019, September 4). *Chad: France's Role and Political Instability*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/chad-frances-role-and-political-instability-23842>

<sup>2</sup> African Union. (n.d.). *Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram / The Africa-EU Partnership*. Africa-Eu-Partnership.org. <https://africa-eu-partnership.org/en/projects/multinational-joint-task-force-mnjtf-against-boko-hara>

<sup>3</sup> Ministère des Armées. (2021, April 14). *Opération Barkhane*. Gouv.fr. <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/afrique/bande-sahelo-saharienne/operation-barkhane/dossier-de-reference/operation-barkhane>

<sup>4</sup> Moncrieff, R., Lesueur, T., & Gazzini, C. (2021, April 22). *Chad: What are the risks after Idriss Déby's death?* International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/chad/tchad-quels-risques-apres-la-mort-d-idriss-deby>

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group. (2021, January 22). *New Challenges for Chad's Army*. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/chad/298-les-defis-de-larmee-tchadienne>

vacuum of power left by the president and to ultimately answer the following research question: ‘To what extent is the French, and by association the West’s, strategy in the Sahel in danger due to the death of Idriss Déby?’ In order to do this, the paper follows a precise structure: firstly, some context of how the country became at the centre of international efforts to counterterrorism in the Sahel and the recent events following Déby’s demise will be explained. Secondly, there is an examination of the risk arising in the new scenario concerning succession tensions, rebel groups aiming to overthrow the transitional military government, and social and political upheaval. Lastly, after consciously assessing the material, a conclusion is provided about the subject matter.

## **HOW CHAD BECAME THE LYNCHPIN OF THE WEST’S COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY**

Idriss Déby, son of a humble herder, was born in the northern Chadian desert eight years before Chad gained independence in 1960 from the French. Later on, he enrolled in the military and completed part of his training in France, where he qualified as a pilot<sup>6</sup>. Returning to Chad in 1979, he found the country torn between rival warlords. Déby allied with one, Hissène Habré, who in 1982 came to power with the former colonial power’s support. The West regarded Habré as a bulwark against the threat placed by the pan-Africanist leader of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, who had expansionist plans on northern Chad<sup>7</sup>. Idriss Déby served as Habré’s commander-in-chief of the army until December 1990, when he overthrew his mentor and predecessor in a *coup d’état*. Déby seized power, and Chad became a presidential republic, with a multiparty system in name only. Despite promises of democracy, he consolidated his grip on power for three decades skillfully rigging elections and crushing all political opposition<sup>8</sup>. In addition, abuses against the Chadian population and the lack of press freedom gained him the reputation as one of Africa’s most feared leaders.

Aware of his regime’s lack of international legitimacy, Déby played his hand cleverly by pursuing a strategy of military diplomacy. Firstly, he built up its military capacity, utilizing the billions of dollars in oil revenue accumulated since Chad started exporting at the beginning of the 2000s. An example of this is when the World Bank provided a loan to support the construction of a pipeline to transport oil into neighbouring Cameroon. The agreement had been that Chad would invest the revenues in improving the country’s poor and underdeveloped education and health systems,

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<sup>6</sup> Walsh, D. (2021, April 20). Idriss Déby Dies at 68; Poor Herder’s Son Became Chad’s Longtime Autocrat. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/world/africa/idriss-deby-chad-obituary.html>

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2016, May 3). *Q&A: The Case of Hissène Habré before the Extraordinary African Chambers in Senegal*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/03/qa-case-hissene-habre-extraordinary-african-chambers-senegal#1>

<sup>8</sup> The Economist. (2021, April 24). *The death of Chad’s leader shakes the West’s attitude towards strongmen*. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/04/24/the-death-of-chads-leader-shakes-the-wests-attitude-towards-strongmen>

building infrastructures and creating jobs<sup>9</sup>. However, this was ignored and Déby diverted the funds to heavy investments in the army. According to World Bank data, in 2009, military expenditures reached their peak: \$670 million, a full 8 percent of GDP<sup>10</sup>.

In addition, after normalising its relations with Sudan in 2010, the country became a critical military power due to its relative stability compared with the rest of the region. Chad finds itself at the crossroads of the most significant conflicts in Central Africa: to the East, the ever-lasting political and humanitarian crisis in the Sudanese region of Darfur; to the north, the instability coming from Libyan's decade long civil war; to the South, persistent conflict in the Central African Republic and to the West, the threat of Boko Haram and other jihadist groups<sup>11</sup>. Déby capitalized on his country's strategic, albeit precarious, location and swiftly positioned Chad as a regional champion of peace and a security provider. Chad hosts a sizeable French army base and the headquarters of Operation Barkhane, which involves 5,100 French troops. Also, the G5 Sahel, a regional organisation to fight jihadists in the area, is coordinated from there, and Chad has sent a 1,200-strong detachment to the volatile Liptako-Gourma region, which borders Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Chad is the largest troop contributor to the UN MINUSMA peacekeeping force in Mali<sup>13</sup>.

By deploying its soldiers on multiple fronts, the Chadian regime has consolidated its alliances with Western countries, and its engagement has been rewarded with Western financial and political support. For instance, the EU allocated 442 million euros for the 2014-20 period under the 11th European Development Fund to assist the country in reforms concerning food and nutritional security, the rule of law and sustainable management of resources<sup>14</sup>. In addition, thanks to France's patronage, Chad was elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term in 2013<sup>15</sup> and, more recently, the country's foreign minister, Moussa Faki, was elected as head of the African Union Commission in 2017.

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<sup>9</sup> Vircoulon, T. (2010, September 9). *Oil in Chad: The Fragile State's Easy Victory over International Institutions*. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/chad/oil-chad-fragile-states-easy-victory-over-international-institutions>

<sup>10</sup> World Bank. (n.d.). *Military expenditure (% of GDP) - Chad | Data*. Retrieved May 4, 2021, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=TD>

<sup>11</sup> Hudson, C. (2021, April 27). *Washington's role and responsibility in Chad*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/washingtons-role-and-responsibility-in-chad/>

<sup>12</sup> Moncrieff, R., Lesueur, T., & Gazzini, C. (2021, April 22). *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> The UN Security Council. (2021). *Situation in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General*. In *United Nations*. [https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s\\_2021\\_299\\_e.pdf](https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2021_299_e.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> European Commission. (2013, November 7). *Press release: European Union announces increase in development aid for Chad for 2014-2020*. European Commission. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_13\\_1033](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_1033)

<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group. (2016, March 30). *Chad: Between Ambition and Fragility - Chad*. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/chad/chad-between-ambition-and-fragility>

Nonetheless, the death of the leader who built Chad's strategy of military diplomacy raises concerns over the future of all these operations and uncertainty around how events in Chad will unfold. By turning a blind eye to its domestic affairs, the international community now faces a likely implosion of all the issues which were ignored for so long as Chad's military commitment outweighed the political, social and economic deficits its population was enduring. As the former Chief of Staff to the US Special Envoy to Sudan, Cameron Hudson, states: "He [Idriss Déby] was a killer who brought order and discipline to an unstable region but imposed fear, poverty, and misery on his own people. In his wake, he leaves a legacy of ashes at home and across the region".<sup>16</sup>

## **FAMILY SCRAMBLE FOR POWER**

The first source of instability comes from the former leader's family. A few hours after Déby's death was confirmed, a Transitional Military Council (TMC) run by Mr Déby's 37-year-old son, Mahamat Idriss Déby, took charge, dissolving the parliament and announcing a rule period of 18 months until a "free and democratic" election can be held<sup>17</sup>. The swift movement has been regarded highly irregular, essentially a *coup d'état*, as the national constitution states that in the case of vacancy of the Presidency of the Republic, the president of the parliament should take over and proceed to new presidential elections within 90 days<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, perpetuating his father's nepotism, most of its 15 appointed ministers already held positions under Deby's rule, including his ally, Albert Pahimi Padacke, the new prime minister.

According to the BBC's security and media analyst, Hellen Abatoni, tensions are running high in the upper levels of government, especially amongst his family members. Following their father's death, Mahamat Idriss Déby and his stepbrother, Zakaria Idriss, quarrelled over the succession, as the latter claims to be next in line<sup>19</sup>. Other family members are also jockeying for influence, such as Hinda Déby Itno, the most prominent among Déby's several wives. She has been very influential in decisions related to appointments and dismissals in government, allocating family members and relatives to high positions and also plays an essential role in the Chad oil sector<sup>20</sup>. It remains to be seen if Hinda will use her leverage to sway the power transition.

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<sup>16</sup> Hudson, C. (2021, April 27). *op. cit*

<sup>17</sup> Nako, M., & Ramadane, M. (2021, April 21). Chad in turmoil after Deby death as rebels, opposition challenge military. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/ozatp-uk-chad-deby-idAFKBN2C819Z-OZATP>

<sup>18</sup> Article 81. Constitution of Chad, (2018). [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Chad\\_2018.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Chad_2018.pdf?lang=en)

<sup>19</sup> Abatoni, H. (2021, April 23). Chad family feud intensifies transition tensions after Idriss Déby's death. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56850715>

<sup>20</sup> Open Central Africa. (2020, May 25). *Chad: Between the oil curse and a family feud*. Opening Central Africa. <https://openingcentralafrica.com/en/2020/05/25/chad-between-the-oil-curse-and-a-family-feud/>

Furthermore, Idriss Déby's time in power was characterised by the patronage system he created that benefitted his tiny ethnic group, the Zaghawa —which make up only about 1.1% of the population, according to CIA's World Factbook<sup>21</sup>— and through the alliances established with other ethnic groups by strategic marriages<sup>22</sup>. Thus, he positioned his sons, daughters and brothers-in-law in top positions at the security and intelligence services. However, this has not guaranteed absolute loyalty within the family. Timan Erdimi, the former president's nephew, is the leader of the Union of Resistance Forces (UFR), a coalition composed mainly of rebel Zaghawa fighters based in Libya. Déby was able to repel his attacks in 2008 and 2009 thanks to French military intervention.<sup>23</sup> More recently, in 2019, Timan's brother, Tom Erdimi, who lives in exile in the US, has called on the Chadian military to join the UFR and depose Déby.<sup>24</sup> The two brother's opposition to their uncle goes back to 2006, when Déby announced his plan to stand for re-election, even though Timan and Tom Erdimi saw themselves as natural successors<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, the appointment of Idriss Déby's son as the chief of the Transitional Military Council means that power continues to be concentrated in the hands of Déby's inner clan, and it can be expected that those who opposed his father will oppose him too.

## **THE MILITARY ARMY FALLS APART AND THE POPULATION RISES UP**

The second threat to stability the new government could face is within the army, as nepotism was also a common practice in the military hierarchy. The Zaghawa members and sometimes even the Bilia, the Bideyat ethnic subgroup to which Idriss Déby belonged, were generally appointed to the higher ranks and enjoyed almost complete impunity<sup>26</sup>. This lack of meritocracy and regional and ethnic divides in the command positions has undermined the army's cohesion, stressed ethnic tensions, and promoted low levels of discipline<sup>27</sup>.

Moreover, another pressing issue is troop desertion from the army, to join some of the rebel groups circulating in the area. For example, the group in charge of the death of the former president, FACT, published a statement two days before the skirmish announcing that on their way to the capital

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<sup>21</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). (2021, April 27). *Chad - The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/chad/#people-and-society>

<sup>22</sup> Dickow, H. (2021, April 21). *Idriss Déby Itno offered Chadians great hope, but ended up leaving a terrible legacy*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/idriss-deby-itno-offered-chadians-great-hope-but-ended-up-leaving-a-terrible-legacy-159443>

<sup>23</sup> Moncrieff, R., & Lesueur, T. (2019, February 13). *Rebel Incursion Exposes Chad's Weaknesses*. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/chad/au-tchad-lincursion-des-rebelles-devoile-les-fragilites-du-pouvoir>

<sup>24</sup> Le Tchadanthropus Tribune. (2019). Message de Mr Tom Erdimi de l'UFR. In *YouTube*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvUllxGg2fY&ab\\_channel=LeTchadanthropusTribune](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvUllxGg2fY&ab_channel=LeTchadanthropusTribune)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group. (2016, March 30). *op.cit.* p. 11

<sup>27</sup> International Crisis Group. (2021, January 22). *op.cit*

some of Deby's soldiers had already abandoned their positions and arms to them. They then invited other Chadian soldiers to “serve the nation” and join their rebellion<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, the fear now is that troops deployed abroad to fight terrorism will need to come back home to tackle a possible outbreak of civil war. As Cameron Hudson suggests in his analysis for the Atlantic Council think tank: “FACT could well be successful in tapping into pent-up frustration from within the military and civilian ranks”.<sup>29</sup>

The third threat to the government comes from the Chadian people. Chad is the third-lowest country on the Human Development Index, with a life expectancy of 54.2, the second lower worldwide<sup>30</sup>. Years of corruption (Chad is 160 out of 179 on the Corruption Perception Index<sup>31</sup>) and diversion of funds towards arm reinforcing and political and social oppression risk awakening social protests. Last February, police and demonstrators clashed over Mr. Déby’s decision to run for a sixth term<sup>32</sup> and at the end of April, thousands took to the streets in protest against the TMC ruling. Reports account that at least six people died in clashes with police<sup>33</sup>. With few options, angry Chadians are also much more at risk of radicalization and joining Islamist extremist groups that are fighting against the government. For now, the Chadian opposition politician, Yaya Dillo Djérou, has requested an inclusive dialogue with the military council in order to open the path towards a peaceful transition of power<sup>34</sup>. However, with rebel forces an imminent threat, this seems increasingly unlikely.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has outlined, identified and critically analysed the different fronts Chad’s political and military class will have to endure in the short and long term. The challenges are serious, not only for the country itself but also, as it has been illustrated, for the Sahel region as a whole. Ruling family tensions could open a breach prompting a war of succession among Déby family members. In addition, rebel groups may use the moment to seize power, which could jeopardise the path for

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<sup>28</sup> Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad. (2021, April 17). *Communiqué de Presse N°008/B.E/2021*. <https://www.facebook.com/LeFACT/photos/a.1706511352971723/2961462934143219/>

<sup>29</sup> Yade, R., & Hudson, C. (2021, April 20). *FAST THINKING: After the death of its president, Chad is on the brink*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/fastthinking/fast-thinking-after-the-death-of-its-president-chad-is-on-the-brink/>

<sup>30</sup> United Nations Development Programme. (2020). *Latest Human Development Index Ranking | Human Development Reports*. Hdr.undp.org. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking>

<sup>31</sup> Transparency International. (2020). *Corruption Perceptions Index 2020 for Chad*. Transparency.org. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/tcd>

<sup>32</sup> The Economist. (2021a, April 22). *Chad's strongman president, Idriss Déby, is killed by rebels*. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/04/22/chads-strongman-president-idriss-deby-is-killed-by-rebels>

<sup>33</sup> Reuters. (2021, May 2). *Chad's military names new government but opposition still unimpressed*.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chads-military-names-new-government-opposition-still-unimpressed-2021-05-02/>

<sup>34</sup> Assala, K., Agence France Presse, & Africa News. (2021). *Chad: Opposition ready for “inclusive dialogue” with military council*. Africanews. [https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/01/chad-opposition-ready-for-inclusive-dialogue-with-military-council/?utm\\_term=Autofeed&utm\\_medium=AfricanewsEN&utm\\_source=Twitter#Echobox=1619854565](https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/01/chad-opposition-ready-for-inclusive-dialogue-with-military-council/?utm_term=Autofeed&utm_medium=AfricanewsEN&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1619854565)

a democratic transition. Still, it remains to be seen if Mahamat Idriss Déby's will is to keep his word and hold the promised elections in 18 months. Scepticism is high, since the country has never seen a peaceful regime change in its modern history.

In addition, regarding the question launched in the introduction: 'To what extent is the Western's strategy in the Sahel in danger due to the death of Idriss Déby?' Interpreting Chad's current scenario, it seems that the international community might need to rethink and seriously assess its presence and operations on the ground. For a considerable time, Western strategy, particularly that of France, has entrusted developing its counterterrorism in Chad's stability, hoping that the authoritarian leader would be able to contain any domestic problems. However, now this strategy has proven to be short-sighted since it relied upon the life of only one man. Hitherto, reactions in the West to Déby's death have been cautious, although pointing in the same direction: the need to guarantee the country's stability. "We must hold Chad. If it fell apart, the entire Sahel would be shattered", declared the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell in an interview with the French newspaper, *Le Monde*<sup>35</sup>. However, the reality is that, with the loss of his leader, Chad has become a ticking time bomb, with a future that is far from certain.

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<sup>35</sup> Le Cam, M. (2021, April 28). Josep Borrell : "Au Sahel, nous avons peut-être signé trop de chèques en blanc." *Le Monde*.fr. [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/04/28/josep-borrell-au-sahel-nous-avons-peut-etre-signe-trop-de-cheques-en-blanc\\_6078353\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/04/28/josep-borrell-au-sahel-nous-avons-peut-etre-signe-trop-de-cheques-en-blanc_6078353_3212.html)

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