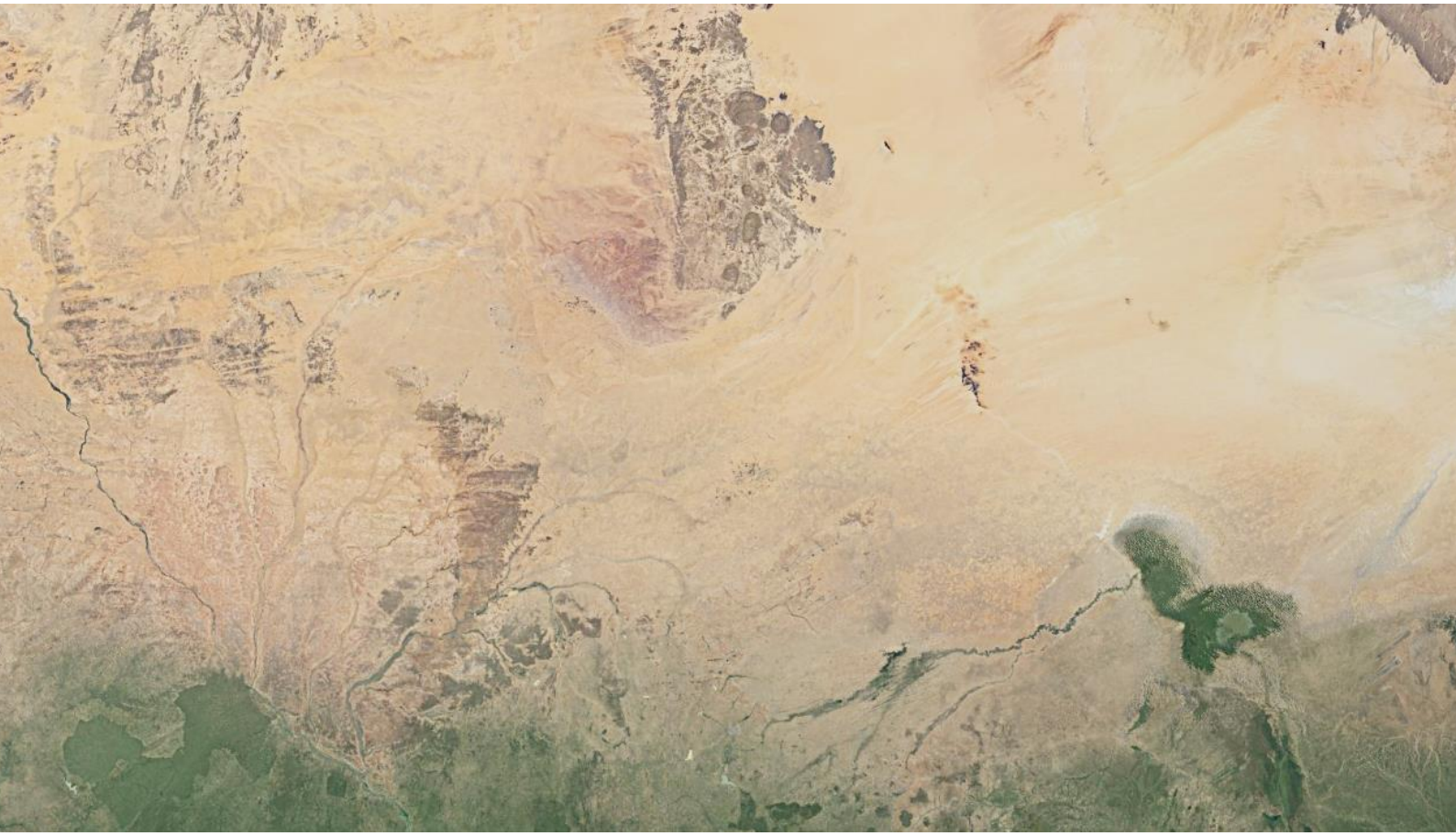
Tracing Turbulent Skies

An Assemblage Approach to the Expanding Military Drone Activity in the Sahel



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Abstract

Military drones are increasingly flying above the Sahel, watching and killing inhabitants. Remarkably, the military drones in the Sahel have received little academic scrutiny. This thesis researches how the US, France, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Mali, Niger and Chad, by means of practices of assemblage, have been able to expand military drone activity in the Sahel between 2006 and 2020. Drawing upon documents and media, such as academic research papers, investigative journalism, news reports, governmental documents and video's, this thesis shows that the proliferation of drones in the Sahel is not caused by a single, powerful actor. Rather, it is the work of a dynamic, complex and heterogeneous set of situated actors that operate within and between overlapping contexts to obtain their incompatible objectives.

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1. Introduction

Quietly, the skies above the Sahel in Africa have become filled with local and foreign military drones.[1] Currently, military drones circulate over the soils of Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Mali.[2] The drones routinely watch inhabitants of the Sahel, while some of these drones target individuals and infrastructure. The United States (US) and France deploy the largest military drones, who in turn are reliant on local partnerships to use them.[3] In recent years, a public backlash arose against foreign military (drone) operations in the Sahel. Protests have risen in Niger and Mali, while journalists and human rights activists in Niger, Cameroon, Mali, Ethiopia, France and the US have been silenced.[4] Yet, despite these criticising voices, the use of drones seems to be increasing even more.[5] Taking these tensions into account, this thesis analyses how the US, France and states in the Sahel together have enabled the expanding military drone activity in the Sahel.

Remarkably, although international interventionism in the Sahel has been extensively debated in academic literature, military drone activity in the Sahel has received little academic scrutiny.[6] The few scholars that have researched drones in Africa are Rotte (2016), who analysed the incentives and problems of the use of drones in African context, and Ogunfolu and Fagbemi (2015), researching if US drone warfare in Africa is in line with international law. In general, however, military drones have been increasingly researched and some scholars speak of an emerging academic field of "drone studies" (Demmers & Gould, 2018: 365). Within the field of drone studies, scholars fall within four strands of research: (a.) the implications of drones on warfare, (b.) the legitimacy, ethics and (c.) effectiveness of drones and (d.) the impact of drone warfare on military personnel.

Firstly, scholars that focus on the implications of drones on warfare underline the proliferation of military drone use, calling contemporary security strategies "dronified" (Shaw, 2013; Wall & Monahan, 2011). Scholars explain why militaries rely on drones and how this technology has changed the space and time of war. Drones can constantly monitor and kill within a space of an undeclared battlefield, making war permanent and everywhere

[1] A military drone is a military aircraft that is flown by pilots from a distance. Drones are also called uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAV) or remotely piloted aircraft (RPA). See table 1 for a timeline on drone activity in the Sahel.
[2] See table 1, "*Timeline of drone activity in the Sahel*".
[3] The US and France need to get the approval of states in the Sahel to use military drones on their soil. Chapter 5, 6 and 7 analyse the partnerships between the US, France and states in the Sahel.
[4] See chapter 4 and 6.
[5] See chapter Reassembling and Authorizing Knowledge and table 1.
[6] See for example Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen (2020: 860-861) for a discussion on academic literature on international interventionism in the Sahel.

(Akhter, 2019; Shaw, 2013; Gregory, 2011). Secondly, scholars look at the legitimacy and ethics of drone deployment. Within this strand, scholars focus on whether drones used for (signature) strikes abide or violate a legal framework and whether their use is ethical or not (Bonds, 2019; Heyns, 2016; Schwarz, 2016; Shaw & Akhter, 2012). Scholars mostly agree that a drone in itself is not an illegal weapon, but that its use can be controversial (Heyns, 2016: 825; Shaw & Akhter, 2012). Furthermore, scholars often highlight the irony of "killing with care" (Bonds, 2019; Schwarz, 2016). The third strand analyses the question of whether the use of drones is effective within military missions, looking at the costs and consequences of drone use (Hazelton, 2017; Boyle, 2013). Lastly, scholars try to understand the effects of drone warfare on military personnel (Enemark, 2017; Holmqvist, 2013).

These strands of research provide useful contributions to examine how the use of drones has changed warfare and what the effects and consequences of their use are and can be. Yet, these engagements do not deepen the understanding of how drone activity affects relations between parties in a military intervention. A focus on these relations creates a window through which there can be explored how military drone deployment causes certain tensions, discourses and practices to arise in military interventions. As stated in the first paragraph, the US and France rely on local partnerships to use military drones in the Sahel. It is unclear how the US and France partner up with states in the Sahel to use drones for their military missions and what the effects of this drone coalition are. Furthermore, it is not fully understood if and how protests against foreign military missions in the Sahel have influenced the military drone coalition in the Sahel. By highlighting how the military drone coalition in the Sahel is shaped and reshaped and what effects it generates, I aim to enrich academic research on drone warfare and empirical knowledge on military drone activity in the Sahel

To illuminate the coalition of parties and drones in the Sahel, I draw on assemblage theory and Li's (2007: 265) analytical framework "practices of assemblage". Assemblage theory focusses on social relations between actors (such as states) and materials (such as drones) to understand the complex social world (Demmers & Gould, 2018: 367; De Goede & Simon, 2013: 317; Li, 2007: 264). The framework of practices of assemblage highlights *how* relations are shaped and reshaped within an assemblage (Li, 2007: 264, 265). In this thesis, I use the label "drone assemblage" to describe the actors engaging in drone activity in the Sahel. In this thesis, the following research question is addressed:

"How have the US, France and states in the Sahel, by means of practices of assemblage, been able to expand military drone activity in the Sahel between 2006 and 2020?".

This research question is divided into six sub-questions which are derived from the framework of practices of assemblage (Li, 2007):

1. *How are alignments between parties forged in the drone assemblage?*
2. *How do technically rendered problems and solutions of the drone assemblage make the assemblage appear coherent?*
3. *How are failures and contradictions managed by the drone assemblage?*
4. *How are debates controlled in the drone assemblage?*
5. *How is the drone assemblage reassembled between 2006 and 2020?*
6. *How is knowledge authorized in the drone assemblage?*

This thesis proceeds in 7 parts. First, in the methodology chapter, I explain that this thesis rests upon a document analysis in which the relations between Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, France and the US are studied. Thereafter, in the chapter on remote warfare, drones and the Sahel, I outline the context of this thesis. I explain that contemporary warfare is characterised by remote warfare strategies, in which drones are extensively used. Additionally, I indicate that the US and France engage in remote warfare in the Sahel, and I give an overview of military drone activity in the Sahel between 2006 and 2020. In the next chapter, I give an explanation of the assemblage approach and outline the framework of practices of assemblage. I show that assemblage thinking provides an entry point to analyse unstable relations between heterogeneous actors, while the complexity and fluidity of the social are taken into account. The following three chapters analyse the practices of assemblage of the US, France and states in the Sahel. I begin by answering the first 2 sub-questions, which are indicated above. I explain that states engaging in the drone assemblage have incompatible goals, but are held together under a discourse of fighting terrorism in the Sahel and technical descriptions of instability in the Sahel and drone operations. In the subsequent chapter, I answer the next two sub-questions. I show that the drone assemblage manages failures and critiques by ignoring or downgrading them and by covering them up. Furthermore, I indicate that the drone assemblage controls debates by undermining and repressing the media and by concealing drone activity. The last two sub-questions are answered in the next chapter. In this chapter, I show that the drone assemblage was constantly drawing together, though simultaneously almost breaking apart. To be held together, the drone assemblage devalued the criticism of civil society, and acted upon its own generated knowledge instead. I end this thesis with a conclusion and discussion, in which I argue that the proliferation of drones in the Sahel was caused by a dynamic and complex set of situated

actors, operating in overlapping contexts. Lastly, I highlight some points in which the debate on drone warfare could be directed to in forthcoming research.

2. Methodology

This thesis rests upon a document analysis. Through document analysis meanings can be uncovered and empirical knowledge, understanding and historical insight can be developed without the influence of the researcher on the data (Bowen, 2009: 27, 29, 31; Mason, 2018: 156). Document analysis is a useful approach when an understanding of complex social processes such as drone activity in the Sahel is challenging to establish with interviews and observation (Bowen, 2009: 29).[7] Drawing upon Mason's (2018: 71) logic on how to sample and select data, I gathered data between mid-February 2020 untill July 2020. In this chapter, I lay out the ontological and epistemological nature of my research and explain my research strategy and sampling and selecting method.

Ontology and Epistemology

The research is constructed around an ontological standpoint of relational interaction and epistemological stance of critical theory and ecological research (Mason, 2018: 5, 8-9, 12). I assume that "life is determined through social and historical process and power relations" and aim to understand the "layerings and interrelationships" between drones and social actors in the Sahel (Mason, 2018: 8, 12). Therefore, I take a perspective that "extends beyond what is conventionally thought of as 'the social'," as I aim to understand how social actors and drones are related to each other and "connected with their surroundings" (Mason, 2018: 12).

Phases

I collected and analysed the data in three phases, namely (a.) identifying the elements of the drone assemblage, (b.) gathering data and (c.) theorizing the data. I did not follow these phases in a 'neat manner,' but rather moved back and forth. I also gathered more data than I ended up using. The movement between phases and the surplus of data is not a sign of research going wrong, as "only by shuttling between larger theoretical questions and detailed observations can we institute the problem and explain it" (Lund, 2014: 231).

Phase 1. I identified key elements of the drone assemblage by reading media reports and documents. Not all elements I identified will be discussed in this thesis as this would make a detailed and nuanced focus on drone activity in the Sahel impossible (Mason, 2018: 71). I excluded actors from my analysis who do not directly use or host drones in the Sahel

[7] Next to analysing documents, I originally planned to also attend a conference as an observer on drone use in Africa between the African Union, representatives of various African states and drone experts in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. By watching the attendees, I could generate data on how the African Union and representatives of African states behaved at the conference. Furthermore, I planned to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews in Addis-Ababa. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to travel and observe social actors and hold interviews.

but do engage in the drone assemblage, like Germany, Israel and China. Germany hosts the headquarters of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), a party that engages in drone warfare in the Sahel, while Israel and China have sold drones to states in the Sahel. I also excluded drone deployment by the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU), as I decided to focus on drone use in state-led military operations. Lastly, I excluded Mauritania. Since I cannot understand Arabic, the official language in Mauritania, I was unable to effectively analyse documents about Mauritania. I did decide to include the US, France, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Mali, Niger and Chad in my analysis.

Phase 2. I collected open-source data through an unstructured approach to allow for serendipity. Data included academic literature, policy papers, media reports, governmental documents, visual media and online conferences. I found these documents by using Google, Google Scholar, WorldCat, YouTube, Wikileaks and government and newspaper websites.

Phase 3. I identified meaningful and relevant passages of texts and other data and pieced them together to build explanations by reviewing, rereading and reading through the data (Bowen, 2009: 32; Mason, 2018: 189, 191). When I found gaps in the data, I went back to the ‘online field’. I stopped with collecting data when a “gestalt of the whole” was created and the data and theory “clicked” into place (Lund, 2014: 231).

3. Remote Warfare, Drones and the Sahel

In this chapter, I outline the context in which this thesis rests. First, I explain how contemporary warfare is characterised by risk aversion and temporally and spatially continuous military operations. In this type of warfare, also known as remote warfare, military drones are increasingly deployed. Thereafter, I describe the Sahel region and give an overview of military drone activity in the Sahel.

Remote Warfare and Drones

Engaging in war is "a high-stakes enterprise" (Griffin, 2010: 8). Therefore, when a state aims to entangle itself in warfare for whatever reason, a propaganda campaign is launched in which images are produced through institutional practices to get public support to engage in warfare (Griffin, 2010: 8). States in the global North for example have portrayed the global South as a "dangerous social body" that needed to be controlled (Duffield, 2002: 1052, 1066; Demmers, 2016: 4-5). In these wars, "local bad actors" such as "terrorists" were portrayed as the cause of violent conflict, especially in Africa (Demmers, 2017: 117, 119). This framework resulted in policy recommendations that argued to target dangerous actors in order to restore stability and allow international economic circulations to create a context in which war was "no longer profitable" (Demmers, 2017: 119). These uncritical imageries served as a legitimization for military operations of the global North in which so-called "local bad people" in the global South could be "hunted" down (Chamayou, 2015: 30; Keen, 2006: 94; Demmers, 2016: 5).

Remote warfare taps into these false imaginaries (Watts & Biegon, 2017: 1). Parties engaging in remote warfare counter "threats" such as "terrorism" without large military forces and from a distance to averse political and military risks (Watts & Biegon, 2017: 1, 3; Demmers & Gould, 2018: 365). As this type of warfare is focused on containing and targeting "threatening" moving bodies rather than waging war over territory, the space of warfare is made "mobile" (Gregory, 2011: 239; Demmers & Gould, 2018: 366). Moreover, the construction of a permanent "threat" results in a justification for an unending military presence to contain these threatening bodies (Keen, 2006: 102; Duffield, 2007: 160, 184; Demmers & Gould, 2018: 367). Keen (2006: 90) shows that the aim of this warfare is not so much to win, "rather the aims in a war are manifold, with many of the most important actors more interested in manipulating (and perhaps prolonging) a declared 'war' for local and immediate benefits," such as "carrying out abuses under the cover of war, making money, and even perpetuating a war because of the political and economic benefits of such a 'state of emergency'." Thus, following Demmers and Gould (2018: 366), Gregory (2011: 239) and

Keen (2006: 90, 97), remote warfare can be defined as an "endless" and "everywhere" war in which political and military risks are averted and warring parties aim to reach and protect certain benefits.

Parties engaging in remote warfare increasingly rely on the use of military drones (Gettinger, 2019: IX-XI).[8] A military drone, also called an uncrewed aerial vehicle (UAV) or remotely piloted aircraft (RPA), is an aircraft that is flown from a distance. Drones are deployed to gather intelligence and surveillance with the goal to track, detect and identify vehicles and people in a wide area (Chamayou, 2015: 38-40; Michel, 2020 :9). This information can be used to determine who or what will be attacked (Michel, 2020: 9). Drones are also used in circumstances that are too dangerous or difficult for crewed vehicles (Michel, 2020: 4, 7). In these cases, drones can gather intelligence in risky areas and release strikes if they are armed. Drones can also support other military vehicles and aircrafts in attacks that are beyond their visual range or give support to strike more precisely (Michel, 2020: 6-7). Thus, drones are aircrafts that support parties engaging in remote warfare, as they can be used to consistently monitor and attack threats across wide spaces, while risks for the military are reduced.

Drone activity in the Sahel

The Sahel is a region in Africa between the Sahara in the North, the tropical savanna in the South, the Atlantic Ocean in the West and the Indian Ocean in the East. Geographical delineations of the Sahel have varied between sources and over time (Antil et al., 2014: 212-213, 216). This thesis focusses on the Sahel countries Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Ethiopia. Since at least the 8th century, civilians have crossed the Sahel and created trading routes (Antil et al., 2014: 108-110). Through trade, communities came in contact with each other, causing languages, cultures and religions such as Islam to spread (Antil et al., 2014: 108-110; Kfir, 2018: 345). From the 19th century onward till approximately the 1960's, civilians in the Sahel have been colonised by France and the United Kingdom. Currently, a significant part of the civilians have limited access to public and basic services such as healthcare, education, water and energy (Zielcke, 2018: 8-9). Moreover, there is a high rate of youth unemployment and civilians are faced with inequality, deep exclusions and human rights abuses.

[8] The development of drones started in 1916, but from the Cold War onward, drones were used more regularly (Cook, 2007: 1, 3; Gettinger et al. 2014: 4). Yet, it was from the 21st century onward that military drone use grew exponentially (Gettinger, 2019: XI). Other military strategies often used by parties who engage in remote warfare include the use of special forces, private military corporations, partnering up with local armed groups, arms transfers and the sharing of intelligence (Watts & Biegon, 2019).

For years, the Sahel has been affected by criminal activity, episodes of manifest violence and armed conflict, which has been accompanied by national and international military operations in which military drones have been widely deployed (Marsh et al, 2020: 6, 8).[9] Although violence is enacted by a myriad of state and non-state actors in the Sahel, only certain groups are portrayed as the cause of instability in the Sahel (Marsh et al, 2020: 6, 8; Carayol, Geel, & Rabecq, 2018: 7-10). These "local bad actors" are identified as terrorists or illegitimate groups.[10] These groups include Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), operating in Mali, Niger and Chad, Ansar Dine and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), operating in Mali, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), operating in Niger and Mali, Boko Haram, operating in Nigeria and Cameroon and rebellion groups operating in Nigeria, Chad, Mali and Niger ("Foreign Terrorist Organizations," n.d.; "France's action," 2020).

The US and France have set up military drone operations in the Sahel in which they made use of remote warfare strategies (Watts & Biegon, 2019). They have partnered up with Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Niger, Mali and Chad, see table 1. Some of these states have used military drones themselves as well. More actors are involved in military drone operations in the Sahel, but I will not focus on these actors as I explained in the methodology chapter. In table 1, an overview of the drone activity in the Sahel is given. In the following chapters, I will analyse *how* the US, France and states in the Sahel together enabled the proliferation of military drones in the Sahel by taking an assemblage approach.

Table 1

Timeline of drone activity in the Sahel.

Year	Event
2006	Nigeria acquired Israelian Aerostar drones to gather intelligence on Boko Haram militants (Nkala, 2014). It seems that around 2009, the nine deployed Aerostar drones were grounded due to poor maintenance.
2007	The US supported the Ethiopian military with armed drones during the military invasion in Somalia ("Somalia," n.d.).

[9] Under manifest violence I understand "violence as visible, instrumental and expressive action," in other words as "an act of physical hurt" (Demmers: 2017: 59).
[10] See chapter 5.

2008 French tactical CL-289 drones were used in almost 80 operational missions and supported the European Union Force in Chad till 2009 (Asencia, Gros & Patry, 2010: 139).

2011 Ethiopia received small Israeli drones (Egozi, 2011).

2011 The US invested millions of dollars in an airfield in Arba Minch in Ethiopia to build a drone base for MALE Reaper drones (Whitlock, 2011; Whitlock, 2016). The US stated the drones would be used to collect surveillance on al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia. As the base steadily turned into a key hub, the Air Force announced the drone flights would "continue as long as the government of Ethiopia welcomes [the] cooperation on these varied security programs" (Whitlock, 2011). In 2015, the drone base was closed down (Whitlock, 2016). US officials were vague about why the base was closed down.

2013 In Salak in Cameroon, near the northern border region between Nigeria and Chad, a Cameroonian military base was extended by the US (Trafford & Turse, 2017). AFRICOM explained that the Salak airbase was an important hub for security assistance efforts. In 2015 the base was extended again and hosted Scan Eagle Drones.

2013 The US built a drone base in Niamey, Niger after a two-year discussion with the Nigerien government (Felsenthal & Alexander, 2013; Whitlock, 2013). An unknown amount of drones and approximately 100 military personnel were stationed in Niger (Felsenthal &Alexander, 2013). The Department of Defence argued the base was built "to promote regional stability in support of U.S. diplomacy and national security and to strengthen relationships with regional leaders committed to security and prosperity" (Felsenthal &Alexander, 2013). The drones have been deployed in Niger, Mali and in Libya to share broad patterns of human activity with French forces and other US partners. French MALE drones were stationed at the base as well (Vilmer, 2016: 2, 5; "French Harfang UAV logs," 2013; "Hollande," 2013). At the time, Niger was the only country in West Africa that allowed the drone base, a former secret US document reveals (Turse, 2016; "Project Summer Sheet," n.d.).

2013 France launched operation Serval in Mali ("Hollande," 2013). In the operation, France used mini drones, like French Survey Copters and Cassidian DRACs, and MALE Harfang drones to gather intelligence (Vilmer, 2016: 2, 5; "French Harfang UAV logs," 2013; "Hollande," 2013).

2014 France replaced operation Serval by the still ongoing counterterrorism mission Barkhane, which operates in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger ("François Hollande's," 2014). The mission began with a 3000 strong force, including two Reaper drones and one Harfang drone ("François Hollande's," 2014; Whitlock, 2014). The drones were based at American drone bases in Niger (Whitlock, 2014).

2014 Cameroon set up various military operations and deployed additional soldiers to fight Boko Haram in the north of the country ("Force report," 2016: 83). A Cameroon news site stated drones and combat helicopters were deployed for the first time ("La guerre," 2014).[11]

2014 Nigeria allowed the U.S. to use an unarmed Predator drone to find 250 Nigerian schoolgirls who were kidnapped by Boko Haram (Gettinger, 2019: 263). The drones were based in N'Djamena in Chad (Schmitt, 2014).

2014 Nigeria bought armed Chinese CH-3A drones (Gettinger, 2019: 263).

2014 The US Department of Defence opened a new drone base named Air Base 201 in Agadez, Niger (Whitlock, 2014). The base is property of the Nigerien military, but operated, paid and built for 5 to 10 million dollars by the US (Whitlock, 2014; Penney, 2018). AFRICOM framed the location of Agadez as "an attractive option" for the base, arguing it was proximate "to the threats in the region" (Whitlock, 2014). From the base, drones could fly over northern Mali and southern Libya.

2015 Cameroon started to use light Israeli Orbiter II drones in their military operations ("Force report," 2016: 84; Dougueli, 2014). Cameroon also received five US ScanEagle surveillance drones which were based at the Salak airbase (Institu, 2015). The drones were used for surveillance and supported artillery strikes (Leberger, 2015). The drones were probably based in Salak, Cameroon (Trafford & Turse, 2017).

2015 France based a third Reaper in Niamey (Stevenson, 2015).

2015 The US deployed a single Predator drone in Chad to search for 250 schoolgirls who were abducted by Boko Haram (Gettinger, 2016).

[11] To my knowledge, the deployment of these drones has not been verified by other sources.

2016 The Nigerian Air Force reported launching a drone attack for the first time and stated to have "destroyed" a logistics base of Boko Haram (Famuyiwa, 2015).

2016 The US used Garoua international airport in Cameroon as a drone base (Hammer, 2016; Gettinger, 2016; Leveille, 2016). The base hosted four Gray Eagle drones (Hammer, 2016).

2017 The Nigerien government announced it allowed the US to arm its drones for its military operations (Cooper & Schmitt, 2017). The Defence Department of the US had pushed the Nigerien government for two years to give the allowance, as Niger hesitated to give the US permission.

2018 Air Base 201 in Agadez, Niger became a key hub in the region and got expanded for 110 million US dollars (Penney, 2018).

2018 The US transformed a base in Dirkou, Niger into a C.I.A. drone base (Penny, Callimachi & Koettl, 2018). Strikingly, the base is only 560 kilometres away from the base in Agadez. It is unclear why the US was in need of an additional base in Niger. The drones are probably used for targeted killings.

2018 The Nigerian Air Force developed in collaboration with Portugal their own surveillance drone, the Tsaigumi (Tauna, 2018; Nigerian Air Force, 2018).

2019 France carried out its first drone strike in Mali in December, only two days after the army finished testing drones for armed operations (État-major des armées, 2019; Web News, 2019).

2019 Niger receives three French Surveillance Delair DT 26 drones ("Delair," n.d.). It was stated the drones would be used for counterterrorism operations.

2020 Niger receives one Surveillance Delair DT 26 drone (Martin, 2020).

2020 Former secret documents revealed the US had planned 12 construction projects in Djibouti, Kenya and Niger (Turse, 2020). The documents seem to show that the US will expand drone intelligence and warfare missions in the Horn of Africa, East Africa and the Sahel.

Note. I do not claim that this timeline includes all drone activity in the Sahel. However, the timeline does give an overview on drone use by the states that are discussed in this thesis.

4. Theoretical Framework: Assemblage

Through the use of the theoretical framework of assemblage, this thesis aims to show how a coalition of actors has contributed to the expanding activity of military drones in the Sahel. Assemblage is an approach that allows for the analysation of the fluidity, complexity and functionalities of systems and structures, such as cultures, spaces, institutions, policies, but also military drone operations (Dovey, 2012: 4). Assemblage thought assumes that structures are an integral part of larger, complex structures (DeLanda, 2006: 10). Simultaneously, assemblages themselves consist of a web of interacting heterogeneous elements, embedded in structures that are intertwined and overlapping with other, outer structures. Assemblage can thus be seen as a framework connecting the micro- and macro levels of the social.

This chapter will first highlight the history of the assemblage approach, followed by an explanation of five assumptions of assemblage. Thereafter, six practices of assemblage, borrowed from the framework of Li (2007), will be introduced. These practices will be explored further in the proceeding chapters of this thesis. This chapter ends with a short introduction of the elements of the drone assemblage in the Sahel that will be discussed later on in this thesis.

Origin and Assumptions of Assemblage

The assemblage approach draws on the work "Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie, 2" of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri (1980). In the book, Deleuze and Guatarri (1980) introduce the concept of assemblage through which they explore how heterogeneous elements self-organize within the complex social world. Manuel DeLanda (2006) then developed the assemblage approach further. Currently, scholars mostly use the assemblage approach to understand how heterogeneous "socio-material" relations, characterized by "unstable, contingent and mutable arrangements," hold together and exercise power to reach "particular strategic ends" (Savage, 2020: 325; Demmers & Gould, 2018: 367; Müller & Schur, 2016: 217; De Goede & Simon, 2013: 317).

The assemblage approach assumes that in social processes, *relations* between component parts are as important as the component parts themselves, if not more important. DeLanda (2006: 10-11) explained this by underlining that an assemblage as a whole is more than the sum of its parts. Heterogeneous elements within an assemblage have their own properties, but it is the exercise of these properties that make the assemblage (DeLanda, 2006: 11). Therefore, the outcome of the assemblage depends on the elements interacting with each other. If the relations between heterogeneous elements were to be structured differently, other

properties of the elements would be highlighted, which would change the assemblage (Savage, 2020: 322; Allen, 2011: 155). This makes assemblages emergent, as assemblages as a whole exhibit new properties that are not present in their component parts (Demmers & Gould, 2018: 367).

Secondly, the assemblage approach presupposes that the nature of the relations between actors and elements is influenced by the time and space in which an assemblage is formed (Savage, 2020: 322-323; Li, 2007: 265). This assumption is based on the idea of the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984). Entities in an assemblage can purposively engage in new relations or reform old ones, yet these relations will always be constrained and shaped by the "practical tools" that are available in the time and space in which they are (re)formed (Giddens, 1984: xxi; Rose, 1999: 22). This means that social structures of assemblages are both constraining and enabling new outcomes of the assemblage.[12] Thus, an assemblage is not a formation of itself but is formed by component parts of other micro and macro assemblages (DeLanda, 2006: 10).

The third assumption of the assemblage approach is that the relations of assemblages are constructed by the agencies of heterogeneous elements.[13] This means that the structure of an assemblage is not *random*, rather relations are *strategically* made by actors in an assemblage (Li, 2007: 265; McCann & Ward, 2012: 328). Heterogeneous actors solely establish relations in an assemblage to reach their own strategic end (Li, 2007: 265). Therefore, as each actor in an assemblage has its own goal, assemblages are recalcitrant and full of tension (De Goede & Simons, 2013:327). Some elements within an assemblage even have such different goals that it seems odd they are engaging in the same assemblage in the first place (Allen, 2011: 154) Therefore, as an assemblage is not a realization of one intention, but a manifestation of the combination of intensions of all actors involved, an assemblage does not have a certain "essence" or single logic (Rose, 1999: 52; Li, 2007: 265; Ong & Collier, 2005: 12). This causes the assemblage approach to focus on the active and strategic pulling together of heterogeneous elements (Li, 2007: 264).

The fourth assumption of assemblage approach is that power is not centralised or distributed hierarchically within an assemblage, as there is no element within an assemblage

[12] I understand social structures as the "rules that are articulated in social interaction and tell people how to "do" social life, and the resources on which people can call to achieve their objectives" (Wallace and Wolf, 1999: 181).

[13] I understand agency as the "power to retrieve the past in the present through storytelling, and transform it into a logic of outcomes" (Apter, 1997: 12).

that can wield power over other elements, thereby leading the assemblage as a whole (Allen, 2009: 208-209; Allen & Cochrane, 2010: 1072, 1076-1077; Allen, 2011: 155).[14] Rather, power is relationally composed through the interactions of actors in an assemblage (Allen, 2009: 207; Allen, 2011: 155). This does not mean that within an assemblage, actors have an equal amount of power to create, reform or resist elements or relations (McFarlane, 2009: 562). Instead, power should be seen as "an always temporary and contingent arrangement of forces that can splinter off in different directions, have different impacts in different contexts, and can be directed towards particular ends, but can never be fully contained" (Savage, 2020: 329).

The final assumption of the assemblage approach is that relations between actors and elements in an assemblage are highly unstable and therefore fluid and malleable (Müller & Schur, 2016: 219; De Goede & Simons, :327; McFarlane, 2009: 562; Ong & Collier, 2005: 12). As the assemblage approach assumes that actors within an assemblage have different end goals in mind and all have a certain amount of power, relations between actors and elements are contingent and often in motion (Ong, 2007: 5). When a relation or element enters, changes or disperses within an assemblage to benefit a certain goal, it is likely this reassembling will be resisted by other relations and actors, since they have different end goals (McFarlane, 2009: 562; Savage, 2020: 326). Thus, an assemblage can be seen as "always *in the process* of coming together […] just as it is always also potentially pulling apart" (McCann & Ward, 2012: 328, not my emphasis).

Taken all together, assemblage thinking provides an entry point to analyse the social as complex and fluid, in which "situated objects" strategically create, reshape and destruct relations without a single pre-headed plan (Müller & Schur, 2016: 219; Li, 2007: 265). Demmers and Gould (2018: 369) and Allen (2011: 156) warn that by analysing the social through assemblages, one can "fall into the trap of proving *that* the social world is "dynamic and fluid" and "heterogeneous, multiple and contingent," making the analysation a "thin description" in which premises are mistaken for results. To avoid this pitfall, this thesis asks *how* situated actors strategically assemble themselves to enable drone activity in the Sahel. In order to adequately unpack this question, I, like Demmers and Gould (2018), will use the framework of Li (2007).

Practices of Assemblage

[14] I understand "power" as having the capacity "to make others inhabit your story of reality" and "to control the action of others" through "the ensemble of rationalities, strategies, technologies and techniques" (Gourevitch, 1998: 48; Springer 2012: 137; Barnett & Duvall, 2005: 43).

Li (2007: 265) identified six practices of assemblage. These practices are (a.) *forging alignments*: the work of social situated actors linking together its objectives to an assemblage by defining an urgent need; (b.) *rendering technical*: the work of representing the assemblage as a bounded area with calculated interventions by describing problems and interventions technically in order to overcome tensions and make the assemblage appear coherent; (c.) *managing failures and contradictions*: presenting failure as an outcome of rectifiable deficiencies, smoothing out contradictions so they seem superficial rather than fundamental and devising compromises; (d.) *anti-politics*: reposing political questions as matters of technique, closing down debates and encouraging citizens to engage in debate while limiting the agenda; (e.) *reassembling*: grafting new elements, reworking existing elements for new purposes and transposing meanings of elements.; (f.) *authorizing knowledge*: specifying and limiting the requisite body of knowledge, confirming enabling assumptions and containing critiques.

In this thesis these practices will be analysed for the drone assemblage in the Sahel. I will elaborate further on the practices in the coming chapters. The focus will be on the practices of states who actively use military drones (US, France, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Niger) and those states in which there is drone activity (Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Ethiopia). By taking an assemblage approach, it is possible to analyse the power negotiations and interactions between these heterogeneous actors, without losing the flexibility and complexity of the social processes running through the military drone activity in the Sahel.

5. Forging Alignments and Rendering Technical

As explained in the introduction, I analyse two sub-questions per chapter, which are based upon the six practices of assemblage identified by Li (2007). This chapter provides an answer to the question "*how are alignments between parties forged in the drone assemblage?*," which is based on the practice of forging alignments, and the question "*how do technically rendered problems and solutions of the drone assemblage make the assemblage appear coherent?,*" which is based on the practice of rendering technical. First, I describe the incompatible objectives of the parties engaging in the drone assemblage, which generates tension. Subsequently, I describe how the assemblage tries to overcome this tension by adopting a discourse of fighting terrorism and by using technical descriptions of the instability and drone deployment in the Sahel.

Forging Alignments

As I explained in the previous chapter, parties partake in an assemblage to reach their own goal (Li, 2007: 265). Often the interests of parties within an assemblage have tension with each other (Li, 2007: 268; Demmers & Gould, 2018: 372). Both Li (2007) and Demmers and Gould (2018) show that, despite these tensions, parties can be forged together into alignments. Li (2007: 269), looking at how forests are managed by various parties with incompatible goals, describes that the parties are linked together in the management of forests by the common perspective of an "'urgent need' for experts to intervene." Demmers and Gould (2018: 369), analysing an extrastate military engagement in Africa, show that parties are drawn together under a "threat representation" of "a selection of 'madmen'" (Demmers & Gould, 2018: 372-373). Thereby, parties in the assemblage portray their intervention as "urgent and necessary" (Demmers & Gould, 2018: 373). Forging alignments through an urgent need is a major feature of the drone assemblage in the Sahel as well.

This section first roughly outlines the heterogenous objectives of the parties involved in drone warfare in the Sahel. This outline is not an exhaustive list of objectives, but rather a sketch to highlight key objectives of the parties. I describe how these objectives overlap and interact with each other, which shows the complicity of the assemblage. Thereafter, I lay out how these different goals generate tension in the assemblage and explain that parties overcome this tension by framing the assemblage as essential to fight the constructed threat of terrorism in the Sahel.[15]

[15] Here, I understand "framing" as the "interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the "the world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (Snow & Benford, 1992: 137).

The objectives of the US and France. The US has economic objectives in the Sahel. In 2000, the US National Intelligence Council (Tenet & Gannon, 2000: 73) expected that by 2015, the US would import 25 percent of its oil from West Africa. Although in 2010 the US was "one of the key players in African energy politics", the US significantly decreased its oil imports from the Sahel afterwards since its domestic oil production boomed (Raphael & Stokes, 2011: 903; "U.S. imports," 2020; Reeve & Pelter, 2014: 7). Currently, the US has still some interests in oil basins in Nigeria and an oil pipeline in Chad and Cameroon ("; U.S. imports," 2020; Enns & Sneyd, 2020 :5).[16] However, more important is the US interest in controlling international African oil transfers, as a decline or increase in the worldwide supply of oil would significantly alter global oil prices (Johnson, 2013). This implicates that disruptions in worldwide oil transfers would put pressure on the US' own oil profits. This causes the US to secure and control the "free flow of global commerce" in order to prevent an massive increase or decrease in oil prices (Varhola and Sheperd, 2013: 327-328; Obama, 2010: 30).

The US linked its oil interests with its security interests in 2002, when the government stated that African oil was to "be treated as a priority for US national security" in which force could be used to secure these interests if necessary (Volman, 2003: 573, 576; Keenan, 2010: 28).[17] Political instability and the expansion of internal conflicts were perceived as major challenges to these interests (Moeller, 2008 in Demmers & Gould, 2018: 369; Raphael & Stokes, 2011: 920; Tankel, 2020: 876; Klare & Volman, 2006: 613). This threat perception radically increased in 2012, when US diplomatic facilities were attacked in Libya (Reeve & Pelter, 2014: 7). To defend the oil interests, the US aimed to contain the instability in "ungoverned spaces" in the Sahel in order to integrate the political economies of these 'remote areas' into the global economy (Tankel, 2020: 882; Raphael & Stokes, 2011: 906, 915, 920). Thus, in order to reach its objective of defending its energy control and redrawing the economic dynamics in the Sahel, the US forged to military align itself with states in the Sahel to be able to continuously monitor the economic circulations.

Like the US, France has significant interests in the natural resources of the Sahel. About 75 percent of French electricity comes from nuclear energy ("Nuclear power," 2020).

[16] The US imported between 0.85 and 3,3 percent of its total imports in crude oil and products from Nigeria between 2014 and 2019 ("U.S. imports," 2020). The US also holds 40 percent of a the interests in a pipeline project in Chad and Cameroon (Enns & Sneyd, 2020 :5)

[17] This was restated several times. For instance, the National Security Strategy of the US stated in 2010, "as long as we are dependent on fossil fuels, we need to ensure the security and free flow of global energy resources" (Obama, 2010: 30).

The uranium, used as fuel for the nuclear power plants, comes for roughly 30 percent from Niger. French companies also have some modest interest in the oil production of Africa (Reeve & Pelter, 2014: 6). Yet, these economic interests alone cannot sufficiently explain the French military intervention.

France's security objectives in the Sahel are formed as well by French civilians living in the region and by migration from the Sahel to France. From the 1990's onward, French secret services have monitored and countered threats against French citizens in Africa (Guichaoua, 2020: 905). Since the 21st century, around 270,000 French civilians have lived in Africa and several of these French citizens have been attacked, kidnapped and killed in the Sahel (Reeve & Pelter, 2014: 7; Fromion & Rouillard, 2014: 32; French white paper, 2013: 54). France's current objective to protect these civilians can therefore be seen as a continuation of the threat perceptions in the 1990's (Guichaoua, 2020: 905). Furthermore, France has constructed migration to its homeland as a security threat (Balzacq, Léonard & Ruzicka, 2016: 509; Karlsrud, 2019: 15; "The military intervention," 2019). France assumes the migration is caused by instability in the Sahel ("The military intervention," 2019). With a military intervention of surveillance and policing, France tries to contain migration from the Sahel to its own country (Megerisi & Lebovich, 2019; "The military intervention," 2019; Duffield, 2010: 62-63; "Migration," 2019). In sum, France has the aim to encourage the economic circulation between the Sahel and France, while it simultaneously aims to contain the "threatening" circulation of migration. To reach this objective, France forges to military align with the Sahel in order to be able to continuously monitor and police these two flows.

The Objectives of States in the Sahel. Actors in the Sahel have used their position in the international system to deliberately obtain resources or forms of security in a myriad of ways (Jourde, 2007: 484; Bayart, 2000: 222; Bagayoko, Hutchful & Luckham, 2016: 3, 10). States in the Sahel have for example received significant funds in aid and military support from the US and France, and in turn, African elites deployed these formal resources to cement their grip on power, legitimize their authority and accomplish political interests that otherwise would be out of reach (Powell, 2017: 54; Charbonneau & Sears, 2014; Bagayoko, Hutchful & Luckham, 2016: 10-11; Kalsrud, 2019: 9). To illustrate, Chad's President Déby has successfully convinced France to fight against a coup d'état in 2006, which ensured Déby's third term of office (Keenan, 2008: 175). In 2017, Chad again persuaded a donor round table in Paris to contribute almost 20 billion dollars to the state, after Déby threatened to scale back its regional security commitments (Thurston, 2017). Likewise, Mali has developed an aid negotiating style that gives donors "appropriate signals of adhesion and commitment"

(Bergamaschi, 2014: 362). Yet, Malians have not completely adhered to the conditions of the aid funds if they contravened their own interests (Bergamaschi, 2014: 363; Tull, 2019: 420). Malian elites have used the aid and military support to protect themselves against competitors and to secure the government from armed groups and its own "coup-prone military" (Tull, 2019: 420, 421). The Nigerien government received a significant increase in aid as well, which gave the Nigerien government the ability to both include and repress opponents (Elisher, 2016). In addition, Nigerien elites who have stakes in the migration economy of Niger were to some degree able to undermine the European initiatives to halt migration from Niger (Bøås, 2020: 11-13). In sum, states in the Sahel have forged to align themselves with the US and France to remain in power and to accomplish their political interests.

Tension. A key tension within the drone assemblage in the Sahel is that while France and the US try to stabilize the Sahel in order to obtain their objectives, states in the Sahel have been accused of deliberately perpetuating instability in order to continue to receive foreign aid and military support and to keep the state under their control (Kalsrud, 2019: 11; Reeve & Pelter, 2014: 6; Lacher, 2012: 12; Iyekekpolo, 2020: 757, 760). This tension within the drone assemblage in the Sahel reached a high point in 2014. At the time, the US supported Nigeria by deploying drones to search for schoolgirls who were kidnapped by Boko Haram (Hammer, 2016).Yet, the US was hesitant about sharing its intelligence with the Nigerian military, as Nigeria was accused of committing grave human rights abuses in their fight against Boko Haram (Schmitt & Searcey, 2016). Furthermore, the US feared that Boko Haram had infiltrated the Nigerian military, an accusation that infuriated Nigerian elites. This tension eventually caused the US and Nigeria to temporarily break their alignment (Schmitt & Searcey, 2016; Hammer, 2016). These tensions show that the drone assemblage in the Sahel does not have a certain essence, but rather is recalcitrant, as each party in the assemblage tries to pursue its own objectives.

Overcoming tension. To sell the military operations in the Sahel to the general public and overcome the tensions within the assemblage, parties used a discourse in which they actively constructed the Sahel as a region in which terrorists threatened local, national and international security (Wing, 2016: 60; Kalsrud, 2019:13).[18] The US military said for

[18] I understand discourse here as "*social relations represented in texts where the language contained within these texts is used to construct meaning and representation. . . . [The] social texts do not merely reflect or mirror objects, events and categories pre-existing in the social and natural world. Rather, they actively construct a version of those things. They do not describe things, they do things. And being active they have social and political implications*" (Jabri, 1996: 94-95). The classification of "terrorism" can thus be seen as a "product of … imagination," or in other words, as a "reconstruction of reality" that can be act upon (Demmers, 2017: 133; Apter, 1997: 6).

example to be afraid that the Sahel would turn into "another Afghanistan, a cancer growing in the middle of nowhere," where "terrorists" could operate in "ungoverned" areas (Fisher-Thompson, 2004; Schmitt, 2003). Additionally, the US framed the Sahel as "weak," "failed" and unable to counter "terrorism" themselves and therefore needed American military support (Schmitt, 2003; Noonan, 2013; Raleigh & Dowd, 2013: 1). Likewise, France constructed the "establishment of terrorist groups" as the key threat in the Sahel, claiming that terrorists were seeking "to achieve a global impact by directly targeting Western interests" ("French white paper," 2013: 42, 54). Moreover, States in the Sahel were said to "often struggle to control their territory" and be "hampered by operational inferiority" and therefore needed French forces to control the Sahel ("French white paper," 2013: 54, 82).

Similarly, states in the Sahel have framed domestic armed groups operating in the Sahel as a threat to international stability that had to be countered in cooperation with the global North (Abrahamsen, 2018: 27) Niger and Mali stated that the "threat of terrorism" in the Sahel would not only affect the Sahel, but also international security ("Ibrahim Boubacar," 2018; "Mahamadou Issoufou," 2019). Nigerien President Mahamadou underlined that the Sahel relied "on countries like France and the United States," stating, "[w]e need cooperation to ensure our security" (Whitlock, 2013). Cameroon also argued that it was "victim of repeated attacks by … terrorists," while Nigerian President Buhari argued that terrorism was its most immediate problem ("Crise anglophone," 2017; "Terrorism," 2015). President Déby framed Chad as the "lock of the Sahel" and supporting the country would benefit Africa and the international community (Caramel, 2017). Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam underlined that cooperation with the US was "essential to curb the menace posed by terrorism" (Powell, 2015). Thus, driven by incompatible objectives, the assemblage pulled itself together by using a common discourse, in which the instability in the Sahel was portrayed as an international threat caused by local extremists groups which had to be countered through international military cooperation (Dowd & Raleigh, 2013: 501).

Rendering Technical

The practice of rendering technical represents the work of parties framing an assemblage "as a bounded arena in which calculated interventions will produce beneficial results" (Li, 2007: 270). Technical interventions include certain modes of perception, vocabularies, forms of judgement, human capacities and non-human objects (Rose, 1999: 52; Ong & Collier, 2005: 8). These technologies are not realizations of a "single will", but created by a range of actors (Rose, 1999: 53). Li (2007: 270) shows that within the forest management assemblage, the practice of rendering technical generates "simplified narratives

of problem/solution that gloss over tensions". This practice makes "the assemblage appear far more coherent than it is," as it brings elements within an assemblage in a plausible, yet awkward alignment (Li, 2007: 270, 273). Similarly, Demmers and Gould (2018: 372) describe that the simplified narratives embrace all parties in the extrastate military assemblage together.

The drone assemblage rendered the instability in the Sahel technical in such a way that the US and France were driven to continuously support states in the Sahel by monitoring and policing vast areas in the Sahel with military drones. Such a military intervention responded to the objectives of the US and France to control economic and migration circulations in the Sahel and the objectives of states in the Sahel to receive support of the global North. This military intervention was established by simplifying the "problem" and "solution" in the Sahel through technologies that gloss over tensions within the assemblage. As shown in the previous section, the drone assemblage portrayed the Sahel as a dangerous area in which local hostile actors, such as terrorists, caused instability that affected national and international security. This mode of perception and discourse rendered the instability (the "problem") in the Sahel technical. Since the assemblage primarily underlined the terrorism threat in the Sahel as the source for instability, defeating terrorism was framed as both the solution and the ultimate goal of the drone assemblage. Furthermore, through this technical description, the drone assemblage made it seem as if all parties engaging in the assemblage had a single, common objective, which gave the appearance that the assemblage was a bounded and coherent arena.

Since defeating terrorism was framed as the solution of the assemblage, a specific mode of perception was created that narrowed the space to interpret the cause of instability in the Sahel differently (Raleigh & Dowd, 2013: 14). Literature shows that instability in the Sahel is caused by other factors than extremism as well. It has been highlighted that in Nigeria the "primary driver of violence" is not religion, but rather "disenfranchisement, inequality, and other practical fears" (Kwaja, 2011: 4). Nigeriens have also joined faith-based organisations to secure themselves and obtain rights and resources which they would otherwise have been denied (Hanonou, 2015: 35, 40). Similarly, it is indicated that in Mali only a minor part of the violence against civilians is caused by religious extremism ("They treat us," 2016: 3-4; Demuynck & Coleman, 2020). Much of the violence is inspired by financial motivations, inter-ethnic conflicts, sexual violence, land appropriation and self-protection. These causes in turn are often driven by poverty, lack of jobs and opportunities. If civilians do align with extremists groups, ideology appears to be at most a secondary factor to

join them ("They treat us," 2016: 4). Furthermore, it seems that Jihadist groups in the Sahel do not have international motivations, but rather focus on local dynamics or aim to change the regime within a state (Dowd & Raleigh, 2013: 502; Raleigh & Dowd, 2013: 3; Carayol, 2020). The most unstable regions in the Sahel are spaces "where non-state agents are actively and effectively competing with the central regime" or with other militia and rebel groups, which indicates that violence is not solely the result of religious extremism, but also a "contests for local power between alternative sources of security, governance and authority" (Raleigh & Dowd, 2013: 8-9).

Additionally, the technically rendered instability makes it hard to accommodate the manifest violence committed by states in the Sahel. Yet, reports highlighted that state militias have abused civilians in counterterrorism operations. A Touareg man stated for example about the Malian military,

> *"We are targeted because we are Arabs or Touaregs or Fulani. […] [E]very Arab is suspected to be close to AQIM. There was even a time when people saw an Arab [and] would shout: 'There goes a jihadist!' This problem resurfaces every time there are tensions. They raise terrorism as a spectre to justify killing us and diminishing our struggle."* ("They treat us," 2016: 4)

Malian soldiers also worked with "ethnic militias […] to identify suspected jihadists and jihadist collaborators in Peul villages. Soldiers thereby [exacerbated] ethnic hatreds and [fed] a climate of mutual recrimination between ethnic groups" (Thurston, 2018: 36-37). In Niger, inhabitants, including children, are inhumanely and violently treated by Nigerien security services "in the context of counter-terrorism or irregular migration, including deaths in custody," while in Salak, Cameroon, an American drone base served as an illegal prison where mostly men, but also women and children, often Muslim and members of the Kanuri ethnic minority, were tortured by the Cameroonian military ("Committee against Torture," 2019; "Cameroon's secret," 2017: 39-43; Hahonou, 2015: 39). The detainees were not Boko Haram fighters, but "people arrested on suspicion of supporting Boko Haram, who are just ordinary people who were at the wrong place at the wrong time" (Trafford & Turse, 2017). In Nigeria, the military is accused of indiscriminately torturing and murdering civilians in areas Boko Haram is operating (Hammer, 2016; Hahonou, 2015: 37). As a result, civilians have joined self-protection groups, bandits or Islamic networks in order to protect themselves (Thurston, 2018: 36-37; Munasinghe et al., 2020: 18-20). Thus, by rendering the instability in the Sahel technical, a simplified narrative was created in which there was less space to acknowledge the causes that underlie the manifest violence. Hereby the assemblage glossed

over the tension that "local bad actors" were not the only cause of instability in the Sahel and states in the Sahel played a significant part in creating instability in the Sahel.

The technical rendered instability in the Sahel also gave the assemblage the opportunity to generate a simplified intervention of "fighting terrorism" (the "solution"). The previous war experiences of the US and France in Afghanistan and Iraq had incited a certain risk aversion and war fatigue (Demmers & Gould, 2018: 365). This made the states wary to be seen as being heavily involved in another "forever war" (Demmers & Gould, 2018: 365; Noonan, 2013). Therefore, the US and France tried to minimise the deployment of troops on the ground and lower the costs and risks of military missions (Noonan, 2013; Summerbell, 2019; Obama, 2020: 4-5).

These requirements could be met by using remote warfare strategies, in which the deployment of military drones played an extensive part.[19] By using military drones, fewer military personnel was needed for the military operations of the assemblage, while the overall risks for the military were reduced (Wall & Monahan, 2011: 248). The solution also made continuous monitoring and policing of vast areas possible, giving the military the flexibility and tactical responsiveness they needed to monitor and control economic and migration circulations and counter the "local bad people" (Gettinger, 2019: IV). The military drone was therefore framed as an "accurate, efficient, and deadly" aircraft, that could precisely counter "local bad people," like terrorists (Espinoza, 2018: 379; Shaw & Akhter, 2012: 1495). Thus, through technical descriptions, the drone assemblage framed terrorism in the Sahel as a national and international threat which had to be countered by military drone operations.

Yet, the simplified solution of stabilizing the Sahel with military drones omissions the difficulty of indicating who the "local bad people" or "terrorists" in the Sahel are. The drone assemblage made it appear as if there is a clear visual difference between terrorists and combatants and civilians. Yet, the visual distinctions between terrorists, combatants and civilians are at least ambiguous, if not non-existent (Espinoza, 2018: 380). This is aggravated by the likelihood that 70% of the force of jihadist groups are hired "ad hoc" and made up of "poachers, criminals or traffickers who are paid with cash, weapons or ammunition" (Burke, 2020). It is guessed that the hardcore of ISGS consists of no more than 200 to 300 fighters. The drone assemblage tries to recognize those "local bad actors" that cause instability in the Sahel by combining algorithms that are based on surveillance data gathered by drones and intelligence generated by ground forces (Espinoza, 2018: 380). The military has to interpret

[19] Other tactics that are used in remote warfare strategies and meet these requirements are employing private militaries and training local military forces (Watts & Biegon, 2019).

the algorithms themselves and decide who is a suspect and who is not. Thus, even though drones are able to strike more precisely than other weapons, this does not mean that they are not less prone to human errors (Wall & Monahan, 2011: :248). Thus, by rendering the solution of military drone operations technical, the drone assemblage glosses over the tension that it is difficult to stabilise the Sahel with military drones.

6. Managing Failures and Contradictions and Anti-politics

In this chapter, I answer the sub-questions "*how are failures and contradictions managed by the drone assemblage?*", based on the practice managing failures and contradictions, and "*how are debates controlled in the drone assemblage?*", based on the practice anti-politics. First, I describe that the drone assemblage manages failures and contradictions by trying to hide, minimize and ignore them, by refusing to share information, by making false declarations and by covering them up. Subsequently, I show that the drone assemblage absorbs critiques by limiting the agenda of debates and by closing them down altogether.

Managing Contradictions and Failures

Li (2007) and Demmers and Gould (2018) show that assemblages use different strategies to manage the contradictions and failures. Li (2007: 277) explains that the forest management assemblage frames the assemblage as not having substantial contradictions, even though they do exist. Li (2007: 278) also amplifies failures are managed by framing them as rectifiable and part of a normal process (Li, 2007: 278, 279). Demmers and Gould (2018: 373) on the other hand show that some contradictions within the extrastate military assemblage were not managed but just ignored. The drone assemblage has used a combination of these strategies to manage failures and contradictions.

As explained in the previous chapter, the drone assemblage legitimises itself by framing the military drone operations in the Sahel small and effective, while "local bad actors" would be accurately killed. Nevertheless, violence in the Sahel has increased five-fold between 2016 and 2019 and military drone operations were expanded ("UN envoy," 2020).[20] Furthermore, numerous human rights violations have been committed by the assemblage.[21] It could be that the deployment of drones has played part in these violations. The African Union declared for example that drones have caused civilian deaths in Niger ("23rd Extraordinary session," 2018: 18).[22]

The drone assemblage managed the contradiction of the expanding military operations and deployment of drones by being (quasi-)secretive and by making false declarations. France has declared several times to take a step back in the Sahel, yet only more French forces have been deployed (Erforth, 2020: 560). In 2014, France expected to deploy

[20] See table 1 for a timeline on drone activity in the Sahel.
[21] See chapter 5.
[22] The AU demanded to respect international human rights and humanitarian law and to carry out independent and impartial investigations into deaths caused by drones, so that victims and their families could receive compensation. I have not found these impartial investigations. Nor have I found other resources that claimed that drones have caused civilian deaths in Niger.

2200 soldiers, but in 2019, 4700 soldiers were deployed ("Hollande au Tchad," 2014; "Press Pack," 2020: 16). Similarly, in 2007 the US Department of Defence declared there were no plans to establish long-term military bases in Africa (Ploch, 2007: 8; Schmitt, 2003). In 2013, the US and Niger refused to share if a US drone base in Niamey would be used permanently or not (Whitlock, 2013). In 2020, the Department of Defence claimed the US had almost no physical footprint in Africa, stating it had only one military base in Africa in Djibouti (Turse, 2020). These statements are false since the US has used long-term drone bases in Niger, Ethiopia, Chad and Cameroon.[23] Furthermore, in early 2020, former secret documents revealed the US planned 12 additional construction projects in Djibouti, Kenya and Niger (Turse, 2020). Ethiopia has tried to cover the military support of the US altogether. In 2007, when the US supported the Ethiopian military in their invasion in Somalia with armed drones and other military arsenals, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles urged that the military operation had to be carried out covertly ("US Embassy," 2007; "Somalia," n.d.).[24] In 2011, the US built a drone base in Arba Minch, Ethiopia. Again, Ethiopia denied the presence of the US on its soil, stating that they "don't entertain foreign military bases" (Whitlock , 2011).

The drone assemblage managed the failure of the increasing manifest violence in the Sahel by downgrading the intensity of the violence and by framing the violence rectifiable or even conquered. In 2014, France stated that the military mission was "effective" as they had almost defeated terrorism in Mali ("Hollande au Tchad," 2014; "Determination," 2020). In 2018, France reassured again that violence was repressed, stating "Barkhane and the partner forces have critically hurt the armed terrorist groups" ("Press Pack," 2020: 15). Furthermore, French general Guibert explained, "in reality, the [terrorists'] attacks [in the Sahel] are not increasing, they are very violent, but episodic. These attacks are the testimony of [terrorists'] weakness, their last resort. […] One day or another, they will lose" (Macé, 2018).[25] The American Enterprise Institute, a think tank that plays a prominent role in US politics, argued "the mission is worth it … [The threat] in the Sahel has been growing even with this mission, but it will certainly worsen more rapidly if the mission ends" (Ward, 2020). Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari argued on the other hand that they had "technically … won the war" against Boko Haram ("Nigeria Boko Haram," 2015). Yet a few days later, Boko Haram

[23] See table 1, "*Timeline of drone activity in the Sahel*".
[24] Meles was worried the US airstrikes, some of which have been supported by the intelligence gathered by drones, could cause the Arab League, EU and African states to weaken their support for the military and peacebuilding missions in Somalia ("US Embassy," 2007).
[25] "En réalité, les attaques ne sont pas en augmentation, elles sont très violentes, mais épisodiques. Ces attentats sont le témoignage de leur faiblesse, leur dernier ressort. […] Un jour ou l'autre, ils perdront."

killed 14 people ("Boko Haram kill," 2015). Likewise, Chad stated in 2020 that it had "killed 1000 fighters during an operation against Boko Haram" and that there was "not a single Boko Haram today in Chad" ("Chadian troops," 2020; "Le Tchad," 2020). However, after the attack, Boko Haram has continued to kill civilians in Chad (Campbell, 2020).

The drone assemblage managed their alleged human rights violations by turning a blind eye to these violations, by minimizing them, stating they were part of a normal process and by covering them up. States have often ignored the cases in which they committed human rights violations (Kalsrud, 2019: 11). Yet, when the assemblage was accused of committing violations, the assemblage downgraded these allegations and argued the violations were part of a normal process. French general Bruno Guibert stated for example about Malian soldiers who committed abuses:

> *"There are always bad apples. War is not pretty, it's never perfect. I'm not trying to minimize or excuse it, but you have to keep in mind that the enemy does not follow any rules. You have to be strong to apply the rules to yourself when you face barbaric practices. The Malian army is making progress. Contrary to what we hear in various quarters, they are holding up. Their behaviour is remarkable in the field with Barkhane. But it takes at least fifteen years to re-pyramid an entire army"* (Macé, 2018).[26]

Likewise, a US ambassador wrote that the Cameroonian elite Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) "*exhibited … professionalism, protection of the civilian population, and respect for human rights,"* although the BIR has been accused of torture practices by Amnesty International (Hoza, 2016; "Cameroon's secret," 2017: 39).

The assemblage has also tried to cover up human rights violations. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) wrote about the French forces:

> *"On 21 May [2017], the Ministry of Defence issued a statement describing a clash in which 'twelve terrorists were neutralised,' and one member of the FAMa killed. In this short statement, the minister 'encourages the FAMa to continue their mission of securing and protecting people and their property.' On 7 June, a second report admitted that 'after G5 Sahel joint force verification missions, areas of doubt still*

[26] "Des brebis galeuses, il y en a toujours. La guerre, ce n'est pas joli, ce n'est jamais parfait. Je ne cherche pas à minimiser ni à excuser, mais il faut avoir en tête que l'ennemi, lui, ne respecte aucune règle. Il faut être fort pour s'appliquer à soi-même des règles face à des pratiques barbares. L'armée malienne progresse. Contrairement à ce qu'on entend ici ou là, elle tient la route. Sur le terrain avec Barkhane, son comportement est remarquable. Mais il faut au moins quinze ans pour repyramider toute une armée. Je ne fais pas d'optimisme béat : les exactions commises ont un impact très négatif en termes d'image. Mais je salue le courage des autorités maliennes ayant immédiatement lancé une enquête, puis d'avoir reconnu et dénoncé les faits."

> *remain,' and indicated that an investigation had been requested. MINUSMA, for its part, conducted investigations and concluded that 'elements of the Malian battalion of the G5 Sahel Joint Force summarily and/or arbitrarily executed 12 civilians at the Boulikessy cattle market.'"* (Carayol, Geel & Rabecq, 2018: 61)

Likewise, US AFRICOM tried to hide they knew about torture practices taking place at the Cameroon drone base in Salak, which US forces had unrestricted access to (Turse & Trafford, 2017).[27] In 2007, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor reported Cameroonian torture practices at the drone base. Again, in 2016, a widely distributed Human Rights Report of Department of State stated people were tortured at the Salak base, citing a report of Amnesty International (Turse & Trafford, 2017; "Custom report excerpts," 2016). In 2017, Amnesty International published a new report about the torture at the base, showing that detainees could see Americans from their chambers, and therefore called for "prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigations" ("Cameroon's secret," 2017: 41, 57; Turse & Trafford, 2017). Yet, in 2018 AFRICOM stated, "to date, U.S. Africa Command has not received any reports of human rights abuses by Cameroonian forces at [the Salak drone base]" (Turse & Trafford, 2017). AFRICOM said it would "conduct a more informal, fact-gathering inquiry in order to determine whether further investigation is warranted," but failed to declare if the findings of the investigation would be publicized (Turse & Trafford, 2017). In sum, the drone assemblage in the Sahel has clearly and actively tried to manage the contradictions and failures of the assemblage by trying to hide them, refusing to share information, making false declarations, minimizing the contradictions and failures and reframing them as rectifiable or part of a normal process, by ignoring them and by covering them up.

Anti-politics.

The practice of anti-politics consists of multiple practices (Li, 2007: 279).[28] Anti-politics consists of the practice of encouraging debate while limiting the agenda (Li, 2007: 282). Li (2007: 283, 282) shows that the forest management assemblage controls debate by enabling certain debates while restricting others and by rewriting reports to fit their objectives. Another anti-politics practice consists of closing down the space to engage in political debate (Li, 2007: 280-283). The drone assemblage actively enacts these practices.

The US and France enable civil society to debate drone activity in the Sahel to a certain degree, but limit the agenda of these debates. AFRICOM restricts journalists from

[27] In chapter 5, more information about the torture practices at the drone base in Salak is discussed.
[28] Demmers and Gould (2018) have not discussed the practice of anti-politics in their academic article.

entering drone bases in the Sahel, for example only a reporter of CNN was allowed to film the drone base in Agadez (Penney, 2018; Hammer, 2016). Simultaneously, AFRICOM prohibits contractors who work at drone bases from talking to the press (Hammer, 2016). Furthermore, AFRICOM refuses to speak to journalists who systematically critique drone missions in the Sahel (Turse, 2018a.). Instead, the US carefully sets the agenda themselves by sharing their videos and press releases of drone missions (AirmanMagazineOnline, 2020).

France too acts as if it encourages debate, yet it sets the agenda by restricting journalists and by altering reports on French military missions. France obliges journalists to follow instructions of the French army, thereby carefully restricting journalists' movements in the Sahel (Carayol, 2020: III). Furthermore, the Agence Française de Développement (ADF), a development institution that is closely associated with the French government and publisher of the scientific journal "Afrique Contemporaine", rejected two critical texts about French military missions in Mali and significantly modified other articles (Charboneau, 2019; Tilouine, 2019). Thus, by setting the agenda, both the US and France practice anti-politics in the drone assemblage.

States in the Sahel limit the space to engage in political debate by undermining the opposition of the government and by repressing journalists. The Nigerien government tried to exclude the Nigerien population in the decision of giving the US permission to construct the drone base in Agadez in 2014 (Penney, 2018). The Nigerien parliament was unable to give official approval for the construction of the base, although this is required by the Nigerien defence treaties. The Nigerien government stated however that the drone base was not a defence agreement, and therefore no approval of the parliament was needed (Penney, 2018). Furthermore, civil society organisations or individuals who did publicly oppose the US drone deployment were at least in some cases detained or intimidated by the Nigerien government ("Drone proliferation," 2018: 57:40 – 58:30).

States in the Sahel often repress oppositional views in the media as well. In Cameroon, journalists frequently face arbitrary detentions and prosecutions ("Cameroon," n.d.). Especially journalists who cover the counterterrorism missions consistently receive threats from the government, resulting in almost no coverage on counterterrorism operations in the press (Lobe, 2016). In Mali, journalists have been murdered and the Malian authorities harass journalists that cover security issues ("Mali," n.d.). Furthermore, if the media criticizes the army, they can be arrested on a charge of "contravening standards and undermining troop morale" ("Mali," n.d.). In Ethiopia, most of the population is never exposed to independent media outlets that could disclose the use of drones as the government controls most of the

radio and television (Mengesha, 2016: 93). If independent journalists do manage to reach the population, they often get attacked by the regime under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation law. A Ethiopan general threatened to retaliate against media that "tarnished the reputation of the armed forces" ("Ethiopia," n.d.). As an Ethiopian journalist stated, "the irony is, the government may pride itself on its efforts to fight terrorist groups, but we [reporters] will think twice before writing about it" (Keita & Rhodes, 2011). Nigerien authorities have restricted press freedom, denied demonstrations of civil society and made hundreds of arbitrary arrests ("Development aid," 2019: 7; "Niger, Fall," 2020; "Niger: Quand," 2020: 4; "Niger 2017/2018," 2018). In Chad, reporters are also often arrested and harassed when covering anti-government protests ("Chad," n.d.). Nigeria has been identified as "one of West Africa's most dangerous and difficult countries for journalists" ("Nigeria," n.d.). Journalists are seriously repressed when covering stories about terrorism, two journalists were even shot dead when they covered Islamic Movement in Nigeria protests. Thus, Sahelian states practice anti-politics by closing down debates through repressing the governmental opposition and the media.

The drone assemblage also closes down debates by minimizing the disclosure of drone activity in the Sahel. Parties often refuse to share how many and what kind of drones are deployed in the Sahel and where and how they are used. It is unclear how many and what kind of drones Ethiopia and the US use in the Sahel, while the amount of drones of Cameroon and Nigeria is unknown ("Force report Cameroon," 2016: 84; Dougueli, 2014; Egozi, 2011; Nkala, 2014; Lin & Singer, 2015; Tauna, 2018; Nigerian Air Force, 2018; "Buhari unveils," 2018). Furthermore, no party in the assemblage has articulated their policies, rules and procedures in how armed and unarmed drones are used. If individuals are attacked by armed drones or by other means with the support of unarmed drones, no information is given on the identities of the killed or injured targets. France only shares how many individuals have been killed, while the US and Nigeria do not consistently share this information.[29] It is also unknown if parties conduct impartial investigations after attacks on individuals.

[29] France carried out its first drone strike in Mali in December 2019, only two days after the army finished testing drones for armed operations ("Barkhane : Poursuite," 2020). In the operation, in which helicopters and ground troops were deployed as well, 40 "terrorists" were "neutralized". Ten days later, 9 terrorists were "put out of action" with a combat helicopter and armed Reaper drone ("Point de situation," 2020). In January 2020 35 militants and 23 motorcycles were "neutralized" by combat helicopters and an armed drone ("Barkhane : Opérations," 2020). A month later, the French government announced again to have "neutralized" 50 militants, destroyed 30 motorcycles and two pickups in Mali with a Reaper drone, Mirage 2000 airstrikes and combat helicopters ("Barkhane : Opérations dans," 2020)

Governments have also released little information about military drone missions. Being concerned about a backlash of civil society, the US has solely stated drones were used in Niger "to promote regional stability in support of US diplomacy and national security and to strengthen relationships with regional leaders committed to security and prosperity" (Felsenthal & Alexander, 2013; Whitlock, 2013). The US refused however to explain why the CIA needed a separate drone base in Dirkou in Niger that was only 560 kilometres away from the drone base in Agadez (Penney et al., 2018). France has solely stated that the drones are extensively used to gather in-theatre intelligence for military operations, including acquiring enemy targets on the ground, and to guide weapons of other aircrafts through target-lasering (Vilmer, 2016: 2, 5; "French Harfang," 2013; "Mali; French," 2013). When Malian journalist Baba Ahmed stated to Major General Patrick Bréthous that France forces communicated little about the military operations, the General reacted:

> *"No! We conduct our operations with the Malian armed forces and it is also up to the Malian authorities to decide whether or not to communicate. We are not there to highlight the results of our operations, but rather to ensure that the armed terrorist groups no longer have any sanctuary"* (Ahmed, 2016).[30]

The Malian government, like the other governments in the Sahel, has not shared information about military drone missions either. Likewise, Nigeria has not shared when and where the drones have been deployed and only confirmed a drone attack against a Boko Haram logistics base in 2016 (Nigerian Air Force, 2018; Nigerian Air Force, n.d.; Drone Proliferation, 2018: 28:00 - 30:00). The Nigerien government also dismissed requests to give any information on why, when and where its own and foreign drones have been deployed (Whitlock, 2013). Djibril Abarchi, chairman of the Nigerien Association for the Defence of Human Rights, an independent watchdog group, said "we just know there are drones; we don't know what they are doing exactly. Nothing is visible. There is no transparency in our country with military questions. No one can tell you what's going on" (Whitlock, 2013). The Cameroonian President Paul Biya did announce the US would support the Cameroonian forces, but it remained unclear when and where drones were used (Bakoa, 2015; Kouekem, 2015; Trafford & Turse, 2017). In sum, the drone assemblage in the Sahel practice anti-politics by being quasi-secretive about what, when, where and how drones are deployed.

[30] "Non ! Nous menons nos opérations avec les forces armées maliennes et c'est aussi aux autorités maliennes de décider de communiquer ou pas. Nous ne sommes pas là pour mettre en avant le bilan de nos opérations, mais plutôt pour faire en sorte que les groupes armés terroristes n'aient plus aucun sanctuaire."

7. Reassembling and Authorizing Knowledge: Encountering Power

7. In this chapter, I answer the questions "*how is the drone assemblage reassembled between 2006 and 2020?*", based on the practice of reassembling and "*how is knowledge authorized in the drone assemblage?*", based on the practice of authorizing knowledge. I explain this through reassembling, parties tried to reach their objectives. Subsequently, I show that this reassembling led to critiques of civil society. These critiques were managed by authorizing knowledge through devaluing the voice of civil society.

Reassembling

Assemblages are not set in stone, but always changing to benefit goals of actors engaging in assemblages. Demmers and Gould (2018: 372) show for example that through reassembling, the extra-state assemblage was further normalized and spatially extended. Li (2007: 284) explains that reassembling practices include "grafting new elements onto the assemblage" and "transposing the meaning of key terms." Both Li (2007: 285) and Demmers and Gould (20018: 372) underline that reassembling causes friction. The drone assemblage has also reassembled to fit the objectives of the engaging parties.

The drone assemblage was extended in terms of space and capacity through reassembling practices. The US spatially enlarged the drone assemblage by transposing the meaning of armed groups (Foreign Terrorist Organizations, n.d.). In 2013, the US identified Ansar al-Dine as a terrorist group by framing that the group had links to al-Qaeda, even though it has been argued that these links are non-existent (Foreign Terrorist Organizations, n.d.; Lister, 2012). In the same year, the US identified three more terrorist groups, Ansaru, al-Mulathamun Battalion and Boko Haram (Foreign Terrorist Organizations, n.d.). In 2018, the US recognized ISIS in the Greater Sahara, ISIS-West Africa and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (Foreign Terrorist Organizations, n.d.). By identifying more groups in the Sahel as terrorist groups, the US legitimised their increasing participation in the region. France extended the assemblage by reworking the definition of the Sahel and by forging new parties into the assemblage. In 2013, France used drones in Mali during operation Serval ("Hollande," 2013). In 2014, France was able to expand the geographical space of its military engagement by launching the mission Barkhane, which was presented as providing security to the Sahel ("François Hollande's," 2014). But as the space of the Sahel is ill-defined, France was able to draw those states into the assemblage that benefitted its objectives. These states were Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger. Furthermore, France intensified its alignment with the US and forged the EU and the UN into the assemblage to get indirect

access to their military assets and to further normalise the assemblage (Tardy, 2020: 543, 548).

The reassembling led to tensions in the drone assemblage. Oppositions of governments and local populations in the Sahel have given critique to the foreign military interventions. The Nigerien opposition stated that the foreign interventions were an infringement of the sovereignty of Niger ("Discours du president," n.d.). This was echoed by locals. Civic leader Nouhou Mahamadou stated, "the presence of foreign bases in general and American in particular is a serious surrender of our sovereignty and a serious attack on the morale of the Nigerien military" ("US builds drone base," 2018). Furthermore, Nigeriens were afraid that the foreign missions would hurt the local population (Penney, 2018). A Nigerien administration official explained, "[Nigeriens are] afraid of falling back into the same situation as in Afghanistan, with many mistakes made by American soldiers who did not always know the difference between a wedding ceremony and a training of terrorist groups" (Penney, 2018). The Malian population also argued that the violence increased because of French forces (Ahmedou & Bayle, 2016). As Mahamadou Coulibaly, member of Groupe des Patriotes du Mali explained,

> *"France can no longer do anything here. It has shown its limits. We want her to pack up. […] Since 2013, we have seen no concrete results. On the contrary, the situation has deteriorated. Jihadists are now present in the centre of the country, attacks on villages and killings of civilians have increased."* (Diffalah, 2020)[31]

The head of a village in central Mali explained that villagers were more afraid of the French forces since they deploy drones, "planes, we hear them coming. But we don't see drones, we don't hear them, we don't know where they come from" (Carayol, 2020: III).

Moreover, the local population and opposition of governments in the Sahel have accused the US and France of not countering terrorism in the Sahel, but using their military missions to obtain resources. In Mali, a significant part of the population suspected that France aimed to control Mali's natural resources (Belsoeur & Tagnan, 2017; Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen, 2020: 855). The host of a Malian anti-government radio station stated, "in the name of the French people, the multinationals are pillaging our resources" (Campbell, 2019). In Agadez, Niger, locals believed the military was not countering terrorism, but instead

[31] "La France ne peut plus rien faire ici. Elle a montré ses limites. Nous voulons qu'elle plie baggage […] Depuis 2013, nous ne voyons aucun résultat concret. Au contraire, la situation s'est dégradée. Les djihadistes sont maintenant présents dans le centre du pays, les attaques de villages et les tueries de civils se sont multipliées."

"digging for gold, or … after uranium, or oil, or even possibly the natural water aquifer beneath the Sahara, one of the largest in the world" (Penney, 2018). In Nigeria, civilians worried foreign powers were going to take over the country, while in Cameroon civilians believed the US military intervened in the country to exploit oil reservoirs along the border of Chad ("Drone Proliferation," 2018: 30:00-32:00; Hammer, 2016). A top opposition politician of Cameroonian President Biya argued similarly, "the United States [has] come to defend [its] interests, particularly as regards the Chad-Cameroon pipeline" (Hammer, 2016). This pipeline transports petroleum from Chadian oil fields to a floating oil facility in the Gulf of Guinea.

In some instances, the local population has expressed their criticism and knowledge about foreign military interventions by protesting against the US and France. In Mali the population protests against foreign interventions since at least 2016 ("Mali : Au moins," 2016). In 2017 and 2018 hundreds of Malians protested in the Capital and northeast Mali and attacked French forces with stones ("Manifestation devant," 2017; Belsoeur & Tagnan, 2017; Richard, 2017; Ahmed, 2019). The anti-French sentiment among the Malian population sharply rose in 2019 (Ahmed, 2019). In 2020, hundreds of civilians gathered in the capital of Mali, holding signs that stated, "Down with France" (Maclean, 2020; "Hundreds of people," 2020). In Niger, a large demonstration broke loose as well in 2019 in which protestors demanded the departure of foreign forces ("Manifestation contre," 2019; "Niger : Manifestation," 2019).

Authorizing Knowledge

Assemblages contain critiques by authorizing knowledge (Li, 2007: 273). Authorizing knowledge is practiced when assemblages distinguish "between valuable and less-valuable bodies of knowledge" (Müller, 2020: 423). Li (2007: 273-275) explains that the forest management assemblage authorizes knowledge by doing research that strategically overlooks the complexities within the field. Demmers and Gould (2018: 372) show that when the assemblage receives critique, the assemblage disregards certain critiques.

The US has also authorized knowledge in the drone assemblage by ignoring and disregarding the critique of the local population. The US analysed the opinion of the local population about US military operations in 2013 (Turse, 2018b.). By doing surveys, the US found that locals were highly sceptical regarding the US intentions in the region. Moreover, a Congressional Research Service report in 2017 stated

> "*The growing foreign military footprint in the country appears to have fed local backlash against both the government and Western countries. Some observers have*

> *raised concerns about plans to move U.S. ISR operations to a new Air Force-constructed base near the volatile northern city of Agadez*" (Arieff, 2017: 3)

Yet, despite this knowledge, the US built military drone bases in Niamey, Niger in 2013 and in Agadez and Dirkou in 2018 (Penney, 2018; Penney et al., 2018).

The drone assemblage practices authorizing knowledge more publicly during the Pau Summit in France in 2020. The summit was organised in response to the protests against foreign military interventions and the anti-French feelings in the Sahel (Élysée, 2019: 19:40-21:30). President Macron admitted it was "ambiguous" if the French military was welcome in the Sahel and therefore wanted to "clarify" and "formalize" the demands of the states in the Sahel (Élysée, 2019: 19:40-21:30). At the summit, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger and the French President Macron reaffirmed their joint fight against terrorism in the Sahel ("G5 Sahel," 2020). After the Summit, the French government concluded that states in the Sahel

> "*expressed the desire for France's military involvement in the Sahel to continue and called for a strengthening of the international presence alongside them. They expressed their gratitude for the crucial support provided by the United States and the desire for it to continue. They repeated that this joint action aims to protect civilians, defend the sovereignty of [states in the Sahel] and prevent the terrorist threat from spreading into bordering countries*" ("G5 Sahel," 2020).

With the Pau Summit, the drone assemblage devalued the critique and knowledge of the local population and government oppositions. The assemblage acted instead on the knowledge of the governments who are part of the drone assemblage. By practicing authorizing knowledge during the Summit, the drone assemblage was even able to draw in a new European military operation, an increase in French soldiers and six additional French MALE drones into the assemblage ("G5 Sahel," 2020; France 24 English, 2020: 13:15 – 13:20, 11:19 – 11:32). Thus, the drone assemblage successfully authorized knowledge with the use of the public Pau Summit.

8. Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to shed light on the drastically under-researched drone warfare in the Sahel. In 2006, the first drones flew over Nigeria, but now, an uncountable amount of drones continuously watch and kill individuals all over the Sahel (Nkala, 2014). Although a myriad of actors are entangled in this drone warfare, this thesis focused on the engagements of the US, France, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Ethiopia. Drawing upon the assemblage approach, this thesis sought to answer the research question, "*how have the US, France and states in the Sahel, by means of practices of assemblage, been able to expand military drone activity in the Sahel between 2006 and 2020?"*

This thesis emphasized that the expanding military drone activity in the Sahel was the result of the active and strategic work of an assemblage of situated actors. While the US, to a certain degree, has strived to monitor and control oil transfers from the Sahel to the global market and France to some extend aimed to track and police economic and migration circulations between the Sahel and France, states in the Sahel partially saw alignments with the US and France as an alternative source for economic gains and political security. Under a discourse of fighting terrorism in the Sahel, in which terrorism was portrayed as a national and international threat, states forged alignments with each other. By rendering the instability in the Sahel and the deployment of drones technical, actors in the assemblage glossed over the tension that the objectives of the states engaging in the assemblage were incompatible, that terrorism was not the only cause of instability in the Sahel and that it could be hard to "stabilise" the Sahel with drone operations. Furthermore, this technical description made it seem as if parties engaging in the assemblage had a single, common objective. This made the assemblage appear more coherent than it actually was.

Between 2006 and 2020, the drone assemblage was constantly in the midst of drawing together, though simultaneously on the edge of falling apart. Through reassembling practices, new actors and geographical areas, such as the EU, UN, Chad and Niger, were drawn into the assemblage, which led to severe criticism from civil society. The assemblage contained the critique by authorizing knowledge behind closed doors and in public. The assemblage devalued the critique of the local population and government oppositions, while it validated and acted upon the knowledge of governments who were part of the assemblage. Furthermore, the assemblage managed the contradiction of the expanding military drone operations by making false declarations, while the failure of the increasing instability in the Sahel was managed by downgrading the severity of violence and by ignoring, normalizing and covering up their human rights violations. The assemblage ensured to control public

debate about drone activity in the Sahel and its consequences by using anti-politics practices. The US and France limited the agenda of debates by restricting journalists and researchers, while states in the Sahel closed down debates by undermining and repressing the media and political opposition. Moreover, the assemblage limited the space to engage in debate by refusing to share what, when, where and how drones were deployed in the Sahel.

This thesis thereby showed the labour of the drone assemblage to sustain its propaganda campaign in which the Sahel was portrayed as a dangerous area which needed to be controlled by an international drone coalition countering threats remotely. This opened up the opportunity for actors engaging in the assemblage to obtain their incompatible economic and security objectives. These findings add to previous research on drones that highlighted how drone operations have changed warfare, if drones abide or violate international law and what the costs and consequences of drone deployment are on the ground and how it affects military personnel, by making the obscure relations between the drone assemblage in the Sahel visible and by addressing the discourses, tensions and practices of parties engaging in drone warfare. The use of assemblage has shown to be especially helpful to show that the proliferation of drones is not caused by a single, powerful actor, but the work of a dynamic, complex and heterogeneous set of situated actors that operate within and between overlapping contexts to obtain their incompatible objectives.

Although this thesis caught the dynamics of relations between parties engaging in drone warfare in the Sahel, this thesis should be viewed as a starting-point to incite debate on how heterogeneous coalitions of actors arrange themselves to deploy drones in military operations. As in this thesis multiple states were discussed, only the upper layer of military drone processes in each state could be researched. It remains for instance unclear why and how actors and elements in Niger specifically interact in military drone assemblages. Future research could therefore analyse the micro- and meso-social processes in drone warfare. This research could be especially insightful when data are collected through interviews, since this thesis only analysed open-source documents. Furthermore, this thesis has not focused on the engagements of China, Israel, Germany, Mauritania, EU and UN in drone warfare in the Sahel, nor on drone warfare in North Africa and the Horn of Africa. Additional research is essential to unpack these processes of drone warfare.

Assemblages are more than the sum of their parts (DeLanda, 2006: 10-11). Each party in the assemblage framed the instability in the Sahel in such a way, that it seemed as if terrorism was the largest challenge the Sahel had to face. If not every party engaging in drone warfare had adopted this terrorism discourse, other concerns would probably be less

overshadowed than it is today. Serious issues that the drone assemblage in the Sahel "successfully" obscures are the human rights violations committed by the assemblage itself. Military drone operations in the Sahel, as well as other parts of the world, are unlikely to decrease in the future. By researching the complex relationships between actors in military operations, these issues can be (re)illuminated and exposed.

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Annex 1.

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(course module GKMV 16028)

I hereby declare:

- that the content of this submission is entirely my own work, except for quotations from published and unpublished sources. These are clearly indicated and acknowledged as such, with a reference to their sources provided in the thesis text, and a full reference provided in the bibliography;
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- that this Master of Arts thesis in Conflict Studies & Human Rights does not contain material from unreferenced external sources (including the work of other students, academic personnel, or professional agencies);
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