

# France's clever little war

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Chad's bully little war seems right out of a Victorian adventure novel like *Beau Geste* or *Four Feathers*. A dizzying array of Chadian tribal factions, French soldiers, and Libyans have been battling for the past 10 years over this vast, empty, and aching poor Saharan wilderness of sand, rock and scrub.

In the past two weeks, three Libyan armored columns were ambushed in the narrow defile of the wild Tibesti Mountains. Here, in an area so remote it has not even been mapped, ferocious Toubou tribesmen gave their former Libyan allies a sound beating. Last year, when allied to the Libyans, the Toubou had been equally busy fighting French Foreign Legionnaires and the pro-French faction of Hisseine Habre.

Why anyone would fight over Africa's poorest nation seems a mystery until you look at the map. Before 1945, most of western Africa was ruled by Paris as French Equatorial Africa.

After decolonization, France created a host of new African nations that on the surface appeared independent but which were, in reality, almost totally under the political, economic and military control of Paris. Most remain so to this day.

France is very fond of its west African protectorates and derives much commercial advantage from them. To ensure that pro-French rulers stay in power, France has troops and aircraft stationed in Senegal, the Central African Republic and Chad.

Any local malefactors bold enough to try to overthrow a pro-French regime can be sure of facing a bunch of particularly nasty Foreign Legionnaires within 12 hours. So things stay pretty calm in west Africa — except for Chad.



The Libyans, who claim a slice of northern Chad, have been involved in its civil war from the beginning. Warring factions there have played off the French against the neighboring Libyans.

Now, most of the Chadians seem to be siding with the French — and the recently involved Americans — against their erstwhile Libyan friends. Washington wants to use Chad to attack Libya; the French merely want to keep the troublesome Khadafy out of Chad.

If Chad were to come under Libyan control, the French greatly fear that Khadafy's anti-colonial message could spread to France's other west African protectorates. Ghana and Bourkina Faso (ex-Upper Volta) are already aligned with Libya. The French are not about to let Khadafy have a go at mineral-rich Gabon or Cameroon. Nor at the jewel of French Africa, the Ivory Coast.

So France has been waging a deft and clever little war in Chad aimed at blocking the southward expansion of Libyan influence. A few thousand crack troops, a handful of aircraft and thoughtful aid to the pro-French Chadian factions have done the trick. This is precisely the type of politic-military rapier work at which the French excel and at which the Americans have proved so dreadfully inept in Central America.

Thanks to French patience and skill, the Libyans are now in serious trouble. Their main ally, Goukouni Oueddi, decided to realign himself with his ex-enemy, the pro-French Hisseine Habre. Goukouni, who unwisely chose to change sides while still in Libya, was somehow wounded in a shootout with his Libyan hosts. His Toubou tribesmen then switched sides and attacked the Libyans. Other Libyan allies in the poetically named GUNT coalition, including the mysterious Col. Kamaouge, have also joined the Habre forces.

Meanwhile, the French and Libyans have taken to dropping a few bombs on one another's airfields — except the French hit their targets while the Libyans don't. In fact, the Libyans have once again shown that they are far better as orators than soldiers, a legacy, perhaps, of their former Italian colonial rulers. As a result, not very many people have been killed in this war. Most of the battles, it seems, are replays of those old Hollywood Foreign Legion movies where little bands of soldiers and tribesmen fight for an oasis in the middle of nowhere.

There has lately been talk that France might have a bash at Libya but I don't think this will happen. Neither the French nor the Libyans seem ready to lose their tempers over flyblown Chad. Both France and Libya, who do a lot of trade, appear ready to wage the war with tact and good grace.

In short, a typical little 19th-century colonial war fought by gentlemanly rules. Everyone's having a good fun, the Foreign Legion is still holding the fort, and the besieging Arabs behind the dunes are decent enough to stop fighting for lunch, dinner and tea.