

HOW TO PREVENT MOTORBIKE ATTACKS IN THE SAHEL ?¹

Widely spread in the Sahelian zone because of its economic interest and the mobility it provides, motorcycles have become an element of social prestige for the youth. However, their use has been partially diverted for criminal purposes, thus leading to an increase of attacks of swarms of vehicles. Facing this danger, should we hinder these motorcycles or, on the contrary, counter them with an even greater mobility?

Motorcycles in Africa, a versatile and popular tool.

Fluid, concealable, popular and cheap, motorcycles have spread in Africa during the last thirty years. Their uses are multiple: 1,5 million motorcycles are used as taxis, transporting passengers and goods, particularly in rough terrains. On the other hand, the difficulty for farmers to move back and forth in order to irrigate their field urged them to innovate. A simple pump run by a motorcycle is the last innovation for those who wish to irrigate. Since the 1990s, a whole culture based on motorcycles has developed in the cities of North Nigeria and Cameroon. In a market, which was at first dominated by the Japanese motorcycles, every city marks its preferences. In Cameroon, the Honda CG125 is called "Bazooka", Suzuki A100 "Chagari" and Suzuki AS100, the "black cat". These Japanese motorcycles were very popular until the arrival of their Chinese competitors in 2004 with Nanfang, Lifan, Jingseng, Crankcase and, the fastest, TVS125. These motorcycles, equipped with a lengthened seat, can carry three to four people and six plastic cans of 60 liters each, when used for gasoline smuggling. Their consumption is low, but the real advantage is the purchase price: 50% less than the Japanese vehicles. Young people can acquire a motorcycle by saving up, without help from their family. Giorgio Blundo studied the circuits of distribution of the Chinese motorcycle in Africa². The city of Cinkassé, in the North of Togo, appears to be a dry port for the import of Chinese motorcycles and the biggest market in western Africa. Situated on the Burkina Faso border, Cinkassé has become a center in which buyers from the whole Sahel concentrate. In Togo, Chinese motorcycles are delivered in spare parts before being assembled by African workers who have benefited from the assistance of Chinese technicians³. Because of the very moderate cost of the Chinese motorcycles, local production is almost impossible⁴. Motorcycles have become a tool of spontaneous development, before being used by criminals⁵.

The operating mode of motorcycle fight, a trio of fighters

Motorcycle banditry is quite whitespread in so far it rages from the Balkans⁶ to Afghanistan⁷. It consists in assaulting police⁸ or gendarmerie⁹ stations with a few armed men on

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³ Yishuang Liu et Wai Shan, "L'importation des motos chinoises a permis une circulation technologique au Sahel", French.people.cn, 7 octobre 2017.

⁴ Paul Starkey, *The Rapid Assessment of Rural Transport Service*, Mars 2006, p. 2.

⁵ Christian Seignobos, « Boko Haram : innovations guerrières depuis les monts Mandara », *Afrique contemporaine*, no. 252, Avril 2014, pp 149-169

⁶ Etude du professeur Alfredo Nunzi, 2018

⁷ Colonel Dufour, « Terrorisme en Essaim », in *Revue L'économiste*, n° 2981.

⁸ Studio Tamani, Aguel-hoc : les casques bleus visés par une attaque terroriste, 6 avril 2018

motorbikes, to surround villages in order to loot them¹⁰. Motorcycle assaults enable several AK-47 armed men to perform a kidnapping¹¹, to storm a marketplace¹² or to perform a suicide attack¹³. Sometimes, hundreds of fighters erupt on motorcycles, make a short assault and suddenly disappear¹⁴. This is the most frequent operating mode: the driver, seated on the fuel tank, holds the slightly enhanced handlebar, the passenger at the other extremity on the metal extension of the seat takes the role of the gunner, the third, in the midst, indicates the targets and provides new ammunitions. The « stuntmen » adapted their Chinese motorcycles to the mountain giving them double rear shock absorbers and protecting their inner tubes from the Balanites spines with a metallic ribbon¹⁵. In Burkina Faso, jihadism enables simple pastors to get access to weapons and to a motorcycle¹⁶. Two elements are favoured by Boko Haram in order to attract the youth into its ranks: the gift of a motorcycle, and the offer of one or several women. These two elements are far from trivial. In fact, obtaining a motorcycle is a condition of spatial mobility in these areas, in addition to a form of social recognition. Since the proclamation of the state of emergency and the prohibition of motorcycles in Diffa, it seems that the promise of a motorcycle is all the more a factor of attraction for the local youth. In the minds of these young enlisted, Boko Haram gives what the Nigerian state and society no longer offer¹⁷. The Chinese motorcycle is consubstantial with Boko Haram. It is in all of its actions: attacks, kidnappings, strikes, raids, open battle with the army. After the fighting, the press photographs always show the ground strewn with burnt motorcycle carcasses¹⁸. The whole logistic of Boko Haram is based on motorbikes. These motorbikes are used for small attacks, but also enable the quick concentration of hundreds of fighters, to encircle a village and enable a rapid dispersion. Attacks combining Chinese motorcycles, Kalashnikov and mobile phone prove particularly efficient¹⁹. All the actions of Boko Haram in Nigeria, as in Cameroon, were perpetrated thanks to them: Waza May 17, 2014, Izage soon after, Kolofata on July 26, 2014 and the same day Hile-Alifa, the capture of the big market of Banki in August 2014, Ngala in September 2014 ... The same is true for hostage-taking²⁰. In each motorized unit, you find theoretically a mechanic, a repairman and an artificer responsible for ammunition and explosives. The bike often belongs to the fighter or to the squad leader.

Making good use of the ancient swarming tactic

For millennia, swarming attacks had been conducted by nomads against entrenched farmers. It was one of the Scythian favorite tactics. Spitamenes, during the Samarkand besiege, used swarming against the relief army of Alexander the great. Small horsemen groups were coming, then were disappearing in order to resupply as another group was coming. Alexander the great split his army and attacked the logistic of Spitamenes, thanks to a network of fortified outposts in order to cut the enemy supply; in this way, Spitamenes had to fight in hand combat²¹. Later, Parthians crushed romans at the Carrhae battle using their mobility in order to fix the enemy and inhibit any

⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Abus commis par des islamistes armés et par des membres des forces de sécurité au Burkina Faso*, 21 mai 2018

¹⁰ C. Seignobos, *Boko Haram : innovations guerrières depuis les monts Mandara*, 2014, pp. 149-169.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, *Abus commis par des islamistes armés et par des membres des forces de sécurité au Burkina Faso*, 21 mai 2018

¹² Christian Seignobos, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-169.

¹³ Robert Johnson, « La campagne de contre-insurrection en Afghanistan », in *Revue Stratégique* n°103, 2013

¹⁴ The Guardian, *A swarm of motorbikes, then heavy fire: witnesses shed new light on Niger attack*, 15 Novembre 2017.

¹⁵ C. Seignobos, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-169.

¹⁶ Associated Press, « *In heart of West Africa, Burkina Faso faces rising extremism* », News 24, 15 août 2018

¹⁷ Mathieu Pellerin, *Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel*, Février 2017, p. 26.

¹⁸ Christian Seignobos, *op. cit.*, pp 149-169

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-169.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-169.

²¹ Sean J. A. Edwards, *Swarming and the Future of Warfare*, 2004, p.183.

movements²². Mongols invasions are another example of swarming attacks, but on a far larger scale. Indeed, the Mongolians were betting on the combination of mobility and intelligence, to gather quickly several armies. A large network of messengers capable of traveling quickly over great distances collected intelligence and enabled the Mongols to keep the initiative. The development of urban warfare in the twentieth century made swarming evolve. Thus, in the battles of Grozny between Russians and Chechens (1994, 1996, 1999), the insurgents defended the city by quickly infiltrating the enemy rear by means of tunnels, ruins and passages in order to brutally engage the enemy by surprise and at a short distance, before breaking the contact and retreating. The Russians lost many tanks destroyed by RPG, saw their positions threatened and were defeated during the 1st and 2nd battles of Grozny. They ended up setting up a "spider's web" made up of advanced outposts in order to limit the enemy mobility. Despite these efforts and the overwhelming Russian numerical superiority, the Chechens inflicted heavy losses on the Russian army, frequently encircling the outposts. Swarming was also used in terrorist attacks. For example, during the bombings of Bombay (2008, 179 dead), five teams of two men led simultaneous attacks against several objectives. It should be noted that the United States has been strategically preparing for enemy naval swarm attacks for two decades. Thus, *Exercise Millenium Challenge 2002* opposed an Iranian-style red force commanded by the American general van Riper and using a flotilla of small boats against a conventional blue naval force. This simulation resulted in the destruction of sixteen warships including an aircraft carrier, two helicopter carriers, and five troop transport vessels with 20,000 men on board. Today, Western armies are working on the formation of swarms of drones.²³

Fixing the enemy, or opposing a higher mobility to his assaults?

Facing a swarm of enemies, responses have been diversified. The first one consists in quashing the swarm thanks to a focus on its supply chain. So did Alexander during his siege of Samarcande. Some African states have tried to hinder biker gangs by forbidding the traffic of motorcycles at night. As far back as 2011, in Abuja, the Nigerian federal capital city, a ban to *mototaximen Okada* was decided, because they could have been used by Boko Haram in order to commit targeted murders²⁴. In Cameroun, since 2013 in response to the threat of Nigerian motorbikes, the government set up a curfew from 6 P.M to 6 A.M in the North of the Mandara, like in Am Chidé and Banki, near to the Nigerian border. Since then, this measure has been applied to all the regions in the North of Maroua²⁵. In Togo in 2014, the national army received the order to seize all the motorbikes which were not registered²⁶. September 2018, Burkina Faso, which is often targeted by jihadist attacks in the East of its territory, banned the two-wheels or three-wheels night traffic in this area: motorbikes are officially not allowed from 7 P.M to 5 A.M. The second response consists in copying the enemy and in outclassing it with a higher mobility. This is why the Iranian counter-riot policemen are equipped with motorbikes²⁷. On the other side, Lithuanian Special Forces in Afghanistan used powerful Yamaha motorbikes. They built a special training camp in Lithuania on uneven grounds. In motorbikes fights, Afghans were certainly slower, but also lighter²⁸. Considering the motorbikes fights, ambushes were displaced to 1.5 km away from the main roads²⁹. Due to the lack of discretion of motorbikes, DARPA is currently developing a new vehicle, called *Silent Hawk*, in order to meet the needs of the special forces³⁰.

²² Sean J. A. Edwards, *op. cit.*, p.185

²³ Scott Simonsen "How swarm intelligence is making simple tech much smarter", Singularity Hub, 2018, p.1-5.

²⁴ C. Seignobos, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-169.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 149-169.

²⁶ Mensah K., *L'Alternative-Togo*, 24 mai 2014

²⁷ Mohammad Javad Shafiei, « *Affronter les forces de l'ordre en Iran l'année 2009* », in *Revue Outre-Terre* n°28, 2011, pp 273-276

²⁸ Seth Robson, "Soldiers on motorcycles might be most effective in Afghanistan", 8 juin 2013

²⁹ "Why Aitvaras motorcycle soldiers cause fear for Taliban", in *Art of War*, 14 mai 2013

³⁰ Kelsey D. Atherton "Special forces are getting a stealth motorcycle that's silent and deadly", 26 mai 2017