

## ISLAMIC EXTREMISM AND URANIUM—THE WITCHES' BREW IN NIGER

By Amb. (ret.) George F. Ward

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Source: Map adapted from Stratfor.com.

George F. Ward is the editor of Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at IDA. He is a former U.S. Ambassador to Namibia.

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The government of Kenya has launched a multi-pronged attack contesting the legality of cases pending at the International Criminal Court (ICC) against President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto, both of whom have been charged with crimes against humanity for their alleged roles in the [2007-8 post-election violence](#). In early May, Macharia Kamau, Kenyan ambassador to the United Nations, requested that the UN intercede on Kenya's behalf to [terminate the ICC's cases](#) against Kenya's top politicians. After the UN declined Kamau's request, the government of Kenya [turned to the African Union \(AU\)](#) in an effort to have the charges dropped altogether or allow a regional tribunal to be established to investigate and try the alleged perpetrators of the 2007–8 post-election violence. The AU is threatening that its member states [will withdraw themselves from ICC jurisdiction](#) if the cases against the Kenyan accused proceed. [more...](#)



Uhuru Kenyatta (left) and William Ruto (right) at a campaign rally in March 2013. Source: AP Photo/Ben Curtis, File.

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Source: Map adapted from Stratfor.com.

Several Islamist groups active in the area had the capabilities needed for the attacks in Niger. The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (known variously as MUJWA and MUJAO), an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), was [quick to take credit](#). Separately, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the militant who [claimed responsibility](#) for the January attack against a natural gas installation in Algeria, stated that his brigade had organized the operation. The Nigerien official news agency, without citing sources, reported that the attacking militants had entered Niger from [southern Libya](#).

These claims of credit illustrate the lethal combination of factors conducive to extremist violence that exists in northwest Africa. First, there are the multiple groups that self-identify as Islamist and have long histories of planning and organizing attacks against political targets and criminal trafficking in drugs, arms, and people. AQIM, MUJWA, and Belmokhtar's organization all fall into that category. Second, the militants, despite defeats inflicted on them by French forces in Mali, still have access to the ample arms and munitions taken from the arsenals of the former Libyan regime. Third, the militants enjoy freedom of movement across borders that are for the most part unguarded. After the French intervention in Mali, Islamic extremist elements fled from that country into Niger, Libya, and perhaps other nearby countries. Finally, the mountainous regions of Libya and Niger could offer valuable sanctuaries to militant forces.

The attack itself exhibited both speed of movement (using infantry weapons mounted on pickup trucks) and suicide tactics. It appears that over 20 Nigerien soldiers were killed by the attackers at the army base in Agadez. At the Somaïr open-pit uranium [mine at Arlit](#), personnel losses were smaller—[one person killed and 14 injured](#). Although not confirmed by the French nuclear power concern Areva, the operator of the mine, Niger government officials stated that [one crushing and grinding unit](#) at the mine by been badly damaged.

Reliable uranium oxide supplies are undeniably of strategic importance to France, a country that derives [75 percent of its electricity](#) from nuclear power. Areva's two mines in Niger are the source of about [one-third of the uranium](#) used by France's nuclear power stations. The Somaïr mine is Areva's largest operation in Niger. Given these facts, it is not surprising that France has made a commitment to the security of the mining operations. Last February, the BBC reported that Nigerien and French sources had confirmed the deployment of a small force of French special operations personnel to Niger for the purpose of protecting [Areva's mines](#).



Despite the success of the attacks, Niger is not at imminent risk of the same sort of destabilization that took place in Mali. In the latter, a successful Tuareg rebellion set the scene for the eventual takeover by Islamist extremists of northern Mali. There is little support among the Tuareg in Niger for violent action. In fact, [Nigerien government efforts](#) to reach out to the Tuareg provide a basis for building goodwill.

Nevertheless, the success of the Islamist attackers in Niger indicates that additional attention to security, both of the mines themselves and of uranium-oxide transport routes, is necessary. Although these tasks are responsibilities of the French and Niger governments, they also may be a cautionary indicator for the United States, which is increasing its [military cooperation with Niger](#).

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Uhuru Kenyatta (left) and William Ruto (right) at a campaign rally in March 2013. Source: AP Photo/Ben Curtis, File.

The Kenyan government's most recent attempts to stop the ICC trials are only the latest in a series of attempts by the country's political elites to avoid prosecution for crimes related to the 2007–8 crisis in which more than 1,500 Kenyan died and 600,000 were displaced in the span of one month's time. The Waki Commission, a three-member panel established by the government of Kenya to investigate the causes and major actors of the 2007–8 post-election violence, released its findings in October 2008 and recommended that a local tribunal be created to try the primary instigators of the violence. Recommendations made by other official commissions of inquiry in Kenya have historically been ignored. For example, in 2007, the African Center for Open Governance conducted an [audit of previous official commissions of inquiry](#) and found that major recommendations were rarely and selectively implemented. With this record in mind, the Waki Commission built a fail-safe provision into its official report: if the government of Kenya failed to empanel a special tribunal within 60 days of the report's release, the names of the alleged perpetrators of the violence would be handed over to the ICC.

In July 2009, after giving Kenya several extensions, [Kofi Annan, who led the previous negotiations that ended the 2007-8 conflict, handed over an envelope](#) to the ICC containing a list of the names of the accused. Many Kenyan politicians complained at the time of the unfairness of involving the ICC in Kenya's domestic politics. Nevertheless, despite the explicit backing of then President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga, [Parliament defeated a bill](#) in February 2009 that would have established a special tribunal in Kenya. Both Deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta and Minister for Agriculture William Ruto publicly supported the ICC as preferable to a local tribunal and helped defeat the bill. Ruto went so far as to coin the phrase "[Don't Be Vague. Let's Go to the Hague.](#)" They seemed to believe that the process of bringing a case to trial at the ICC would take so long that it would eventually become politically irrelevant or impossible to try.

In March 2010, ICC special prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo initiated proceedings to try the six men accused of playing the largest roles in organizing the 2007–8 violence, including Kenyatta and Ruto. Once it became apparent that the trial was in fact moving forward, a bill was introduced in the Kenyan parliament in December 2010 to [withdraw Kenya from the ICC](#). Although the bill did not pass, in March 2011 the government of [Kenya filed suit challenging the ICC's](#) suitability to hear these cases, arguing that the new constitution now gave Kenya the legal standing to establish a special tribunal. The ICC ruled that because the government of Kenya had made no effort to even investigate the suspects up until that point, the cases would move forward.

While the pending ICC trials against the recently elected president and deputy president of Kenya pose several serious logistical and diplomatic problems, these trials must proceed. It cannot be forgotten that these trials have been years in the making—scheduled long before Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto announced their intentions to run for president and deputy president. Both were ICC indictees at the time their candidacies were approved by the High Court, and the looming ICC trials played a significant role in the March 2013 election in which the Kenyan electorate voted them into office with only a slight majority of the vote (50.08 percent).



The Kenyan government has shown time and time again that it is unwilling to impose consequences upon its own political elite. The [just-released Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission report](#) details how each of Kenya's post-colonial governments (under Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel arap Moi, and Mwai Kibaki) have been responsible for gross human rights violations, political assassinations, and forced displacements. The report also emphasizes that while many of these crimes were widely known, there have been few, if any, punitive repercussions. The ICC cases against Kenyatta and Ruto will have far-reaching and long-lasting effects on the conduct of future Kenyan elections. If there are no consequences for the 2007–8 post-election violence—and thus far there have been none—expect more of the same in Kenya's 2018 election. The gains that were made in the 2013 election—which was [still violent](#), although not as violent as the 2007–8 election—could easily be reversed if Kenyan politicians once again evade prosecution.

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