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Policy Analysis

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Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik
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Terrorism in the Sahel Developments, Consequences of French Involvement and Options for European Security and Defence Policy

Naomi Moreno-Cosgrove



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Executive Summary:

On August 15, 2022, the final contingent of Operation Barkhane crossed the border into Niger putting an end to almost a decade of French military intervention in Mali. The security void left by France in the country has now become the main means of competition between jihadist groups particularly in the tri-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Violent extremism together with community conflict over the access of natural resources, inter-ethnic violence, and the increasing number of internally displaced persons (IDP) continues to spill over towards the Gulf of Guinea, through the northern areas of Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast, and Ghana. While the number of fatalities show no sign of lowering, it seems unsuitable for France and its European counterparts to entirely desist their efforts in West Africa. At a time when the withdrawal of French forces from Mali has brought upon a new spin in the region's conflict dynamics, this paper offers insights into the future of European engagement in the Sahel. It will do so by addressing the evolution of French intervention since 2013, assessing the current developments of the Sahel crisis after French involvement in Mali, and aiming at providing several entry points whereby the shift in paradigm could turn into an opportunity for French and European security and defence policies in the region.

Keywords:

Sahel, Operation Barkhane, EU, Counterterrorism, Instability.

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Introduction

From Serval to Barkhane: A Gradual Process of Disintegration

For almost a decade, Mali had been the focus of French counterterrorism involvement in the Sahel. The mission originated from Operation Serval in 2013 which followed Mali's request to oust the jihadists who used the Tuareg rebellion as a Trojan horse to take over the northern territories of Mali.¹ In the months that followed Operation Serval, the French army completed its victory against the jihadists, pushed to the gates of Algeria. As gathered in the *Mali-Mètre* opinion poll in 2013, Malians welcomed the return of the former colonial power as such an operation proved effective in the eyes of the population. Almost all respondents —97%— were in favour of French military intervention, 79% of which considered the intervention as “indispensable”.² Nonetheless, such a favourable sentiment towards French engagement was short-lived. Following Serval's success, the operation was further enlarged across the region —spreading to Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad— in what came to be known as Operation Barkhane. As was widely set forth by the French government, Barkhane took action “for the benefit of local populations”.³ Its promoted aims consisted in the direct fight against terrorism and the provision of support to partner and

international forces, all actions being “in favour of the local population” and as means to allow for a “gradual return to normality in the zones where state authority was questioned”.⁴ However, as the tactical achievements of the mission did not translate into its overall success⁵, the initially strategic partnership fell apart due to the continuous friction between France and Mali —which underwent two coups d'état in less than a year. Such a strife led to the expulsion of the French ambassador to the country in early 2022 after the military junta announced the transitory period would last until 2025 and was further exasperated by a letter issued to the United Nations where Mali's Foreign Affairs Minister accused France of supporting terrorist groups in the Sahel; a claim that was insulting to Paris.⁶ This happened at a time when the ruling junta had already begun privileging its relations with Russia and the Wagner Group, a public-private paramilitary company that is —as was recently admitted— run within Putin's oligarchic circle.⁷ Although it was projected to last only few weeks, —and as opposed to its predecessor mission— Barkhane has been bogged in a marked context by increasing public scrutiny that fuelled the debate on the role the former colonial power plays in a region traditionally under its influence.⁸ Yesterday welcomed as liberators in Mali, French

¹ Moreno-Cosgrove, N (2022). France's unattainable counterterrorism mission in the Sahel. *Elcano Royal Institute*. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/commentaries/frances-unattainable-counterterrorism-mission-in-the-sahel/> (Accessed: 17 August 2022).

² Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2013). *Enquête d'opinion. Que pensent les Maliens(ne)s?* Mali-Mètre, no. 2, Bamako. 13-20 February, 2013. p. 27.

³ Ministère des Armées (2020). Operation Barkhane [Press Release]. February 2020. Accessed: 10 February 2022. P. 12.

⁴ Ministère des Armées (2020). Operation Barkhane [Press Release]. February 2020. Accessed: 10 February 2022. P. 7.

⁵ Moreno-Cosgrove, N (2022). France's unattainable counterterrorism mission in the Sahel. *Elcano Royal*

Institute. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/commentaries/frances-unattainable-counterterrorism-mission-in-the-sahel/> (Accessed: 17 August 2022).

⁶ Risemberg, A. (2022). Mali Accuses France of Supporting Islamist Militants. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/mali-accuses-france-of-supporting-islamist-militants-/6706877.html>. 18 August 2022.

⁷ Sauer, P. (2022). Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin admits founding Wagner mercenary group. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/26/putin-ally-yevgeny-prigozhin-admits-founding-wagner-mercenary-group>. 26 September 2022.

⁸ Tull, D. M. (2021). Contesting France: Rumors, Intervention, and the Politics of Truth in Mali. *Critique Internationale*, 90(1). P. 1.

soldiers left the country on August 15, 2022, being perceived as invaders by a significant portion of the local population.

French Re-Positioning in the Region

The time has now come for France to rethink its strategy in the region. As explained by Elie Tenenbaum, director of the Security Studies Center at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), France is moving towards a real reduction of its military footprint.⁹ This August Paris announced its 4,000 troops in the region would be halved to 2,500 by the end of 2022, but that it rests committed to working with its partners in the Sahel, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Lake Chad region to fight against terrorism and attain stability. Its new strategy will aim at strengthening the capabilities of West African states, namely the Ivory Coast, Togo, and Benin in preparing them to counter the escalating jihadist threat that is unfolding in their northern frontiers.¹⁰ Moreover, an air base in Niamey, Niger, will continue to provide 250 soldiers for military operations on the Malian border and French presence will remain in the Chadian capital of N'Djamena.¹¹ Although holding a light-footed operation in Niamey that is less fixed on a few large bases was meant to appear less politically involved and avoid local unrest¹², local opposition against French counterterrorism involvement in the region continues to intensify. Several hundred people held a protest on Sunday September 18 in Niamey, as well as Dosso in the south-west of Niger, demanding the immediate departure of French military forces from Niger

with some present waving Russian flags and chanting "Long live Putin and Russia".¹³ Moreover, while Paris hopes to maintain a contingent of special forces in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, the September 30 coup questions the future of France in a country that has undergone two military takeovers in the brief span of 9 months. The tumult came when the now appointed president, Army Captain Ibrahim Traoré, accused France of harbouring Damiba while he plotted a counteroffensive. Although Paris issued a statement denying such rumours, protesters set fire along the barriers of the French embassy in Ouagadougou and attacked a French institute in Bobo-Dioulasso, western Burkina Faso.¹⁴ Having announced that new partnerships will be sought, such developments fuel speculation that Traoré will try to divorce Burkina Faso from France and forge stronger ties with Russia.

Current Developments

The Sahel: A Hotspot Where Jihadi Groups Continue to Thrive

The military led governments in Mali and Burkina Faso have pledged to bring stability to the region. However, suffice is to say this is far from reality as 2022 continues to constitute the highest level of bloodshed throughout the crisis. The security void left by France in the country has now become the main means of competition between the Al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), particularly in the tri-

⁹ Tenenbaum, E. (2022). Interview by Morgane Le Cam. French withdrawal from Mali: 'The closing of a 30-year cycle of French external operations in Africa'. 21 August 2022.

¹⁰ Powell, N. (2022). Why France Failed in Mali. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/> (Accessed: 9 September 2022).

¹¹ AfricaNews. (2022). Mali: Last French Forces have left Bamako after nine years. <https://www.africanews.com/2022/08/15/mali-last-french-forces-have-left-bamako-after-nine-years/#:~:text=Niger%20has%20agreed%20to%20maintain,the%20capital%20of%20Burkina%20Faso.> 20 August 2020.

¹² Tenenbaum, E. (2022). Interview by Morgane Le Cam. French withdrawal from Mali: 'The closing of a 30-year cycle of French external operations in Africa'. 21 August 2022.

¹³ Girard, H. (2022). Niger: hundreds of people demonstrate against the French military presence. *France24*. 20 September 2022.

¹⁴ Booty, N. (2022). Burkina Faso coup: Gunshots in capital and roads blocked. BBC. 2 October 2022. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63081706>. (Accessed: 2 October 2022).

state border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, also known as Liptako-Gourma.

By omitting the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, jihadist groups, Malian and Burkinabe state forces, and the Russian Wagner mercenaries are raising the number of atrocities committed against civilians to an unprecedented peak. As of mid-2022, Burkina Faso had experienced a surge in armed violence of up to 90% of the 2021 recorded death toll.¹⁵ On March 8 this year, at least 335 civilians were killed in an ISGS attack against the Movement for Azawad Salvation (MSA) and the Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defense Group (GATIA) –ironically signatories to the 2015 peace agreement– throughout the Malian regions of Menaka and Gao¹⁶, near the Nigerian border. That same month, the Wagner group executed more than 300 civilians that were accused of jihadist complicity or membership despite the lack of evidence in the central Malian city of Moura.¹⁷ The surge in violence, heightened by Russia’s input to the conflict, is now predicted to aggravate the instability in the region, undermine the legitimacy of the local security forces, and boost population support towards JNIM and ISGS rather than effectively countering the movements.¹⁸ For instance, JNIM has tried to exploit

Wagner-linked atrocities and display itself as the defender of local Muslims in confronting “corrupt Malian authorities that have ties with foreign mercenaries”.¹⁹

According to ACLED, JNIM remains the most active and deadly actor across the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso and Mali.²⁰ The group has made a qualitative leap in their strategy of harassing the authorities and have launched an offensive in the quest to alienate the main cities and hit the capitals of the two countries.²¹ In central Mali, JNIM militants have conducted a brutal campaign to impede the planting season by coercing the population into breaking away from the Dan Na Ambassagou and other Dozo (traditional hunters in southeast Mali) for these to lose influence²², thus adding further fuel to the already dire food crisis. In the words of Tenenbaum, the south of Mali is where JNIM has made the most dramatic progress, “something that would have been unimaginable two years ago”. If such advances continue to grow and the group succeeds in expanding its reach through recruit-

¹⁵ Carbone, G., et al. (2022). Sahel: 10 Years of Instability. Local, Regional and International Dynamics. Milan – Italy. ISPI. First Edition. 2022. P.18. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/sahel-10-years-instability-local-regional-and-international-dynamics-36174>. (Accessed: 5 October 2022).

¹⁶ Nsaibia, H. (2022). Persistent, Expanding, and Escalating Instability. ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/mid-year-update/>. (Accessed: 27 September 2022).

¹⁷ France24 (2022). *Monitoring group says civilians targeted in Wagner operations in Mali*. [Online Video]. Available from: <https://www.france24.com/en/video/20220901-monitoring-group-says-civilians-targeted-in-wagner-operations-in-mali>. (Accessed: 1 September 2022).

¹⁸ D’Amato, S. & Baldaro, E. (2022). Counter-Terrorism in the Sahel: Increased Instability and Political Tensions. ICCT. [https://icct.nl/publication/the-politics-of-](https://icct.nl/publication/the-politics-of-counter-terrorism-in-the-sahel-how-political-tensions-are-impacting-the-fight-against-terrorism/)

[counter-terrorism-in-the-sahel-how-political-tensions-are-impacting-the-fight-against-terrorism/](https://icct.nl/publication/the-politics-of-counter-terrorism-in-the-sahel-how-political-tensions-are-impacting-the-fight-against-terrorism/). (Accessed: 18 July 2022).

¹⁹ M. Schierer. (2022). Russian Paramilitary Wagner Group Activities in Mali, the Sahel Risk Bolstering Jihadist Groups as the Company’s Abuses Against Civilians Compound. MEMRI. <https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-paramilitary-wagner-group-activities-mali-sahel-risk-bolstering-jihadi-groups>. 31 August 2022.

²⁰ Nsaibia, H. (2022). Persistent, Expanding, and Escalating Instability. ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/mid-year-update/>. (Accessed: 27 September 2022).

²¹ Naranjo, J. (2022). Jihadists suffocate the Sahel and threaten to attack the capitals of Mali and Burkina Faso. *El País*. 5 August 2022.

²² Nsaibia, H. (2022). Persistent, Expanding, and Escalating Instability. ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/mid-year-update/>. (Accessed: 27 September 2022).

ing more Mandinka people, it will reach an unprecedented scope of influence. “This demographic melting pot is extremely worrying”, he added.²³

As detailed by data analyst José Luengo-Cabrera, the number of deaths in Central Sahel has now reached its highest level, at 52% more than in 2021, with 3,031 civilians killed so far this year, 58% of which have been attributed to jihadist groups, followed by 34% attributed to state security forces.²⁴ What’s more, the fact that only between July 1 and August 28 there had been a total of 538 fatalities, 127 injuries and 159 assaults across West Africa symbolizes the crisis upheaval towards the broader region. Ghanian Minister of National Security, Albert Kan-Dapaah, underscored how countries such as Togo and Benin, “which one thought would not be attacked”, were now under imminent threat.²⁵ As a result of the conflict, a total of 11,100 schools are now closed in the areas of the central Sahel and the Lake Chad basin.²⁶ While numbers are predicted to increase, according to UNICEF and child protection NGOs, hundreds of thousands of children are estimated to be deprived from their education.

The Political Turmoil Between Foreign and Regional Actors

With the Malian military junta having agreed to stay in power until 2025²⁷—hence having the clientelist and predatory security actors reinforced—the political reconfiguration of Mali is far from probable. Beyond relations with France, such a dynamic further aggravated and conditioned European, and more broadly, Western presence in the region—an example of the latter being how German and Danish operations in the country have been jeopardized²⁸. Russia and Turkey are becoming increasingly active in the region and are now the means for Sahelian actors to diversify their sources of support, thus lowering the likelihood of a security backlash when dispensing with Europe’s backing. Since France’s withdrawal from Mali, MINUSMA—United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali—has been subject to almost 50 attacks by JNIM, including the deaths of 20 peacekeepers, along with the impediment of movement and the ability to investigate human rights abuses by Malian authorities.²⁹ This has particularly affected the German contribution to the mission, which was in part meant to make up for the loss of French soldiers, leading it to suspend its reconnaissance patrols in eastern Mali for a second time in less than

²³ Tenenbaum, E. (2022). Interview by Morgane Le Cam. French withdrawal from Mali: 'The closing of a 30-year cycle of French external operations in Africa'. 21 August 2022.

²⁴ Luengo-Cabrera. (2022). [Twitter]. 26 September. Available at: https://twitter.com/j_luengocabrera/status/1574490828135079937?s=21&t=O4bGsCW4HehNfjrViFPTFg.

²⁵ Asare, Kingsley. (2022). West Africa: Terrorists Attacks in Sahel, West Africa - 538 Die, 127 Injured in 159 Assaults ... in One Month by Extremists. *AllAfrica*. 23 September 2022.

²⁶ RFI. (2022). Over 11,000 schools closed in the Central Sahel and Lake Chad Basin due to Conflict. 9 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220909-plus-de-11-000-%C3%A9coles-ferme%C3%A9es-dans-le-sahel-central-et-le-bassin-du-lac-tchad-%C3%A0-cause-des-conflits>.

(Accessed 27 September 2022).

²⁷ Aljazeera. (2022). Mali parliament approves five-year democratic transition plan. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/21/mali-parliament-approves-five-year-democratic-transition-plan>. 21 February 2022.

²⁸ DW. (2022). Mali: Denmark to Withdraw troops amid dispute with junta. 27 January 2022. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/mali-denmark-to-withdraw-troops-amid-dispute-with-junta/a-60581050>. (Accessed: 20 September 2022).

²⁹ Nsaibia, H. (2022). Persistent, Expanding, and Escalating Instability. ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/mid-year-update/>. (Accessed: 27 September 2022).

one month.³⁰ Whilst the Bundestag extended MINUSMA's mandate until April next year, such developments are testing Germany's patience. As has been widely voiced by Berlin, the future of Germany's most important mandate abroad will render absurd if Malian authorities continue to show signs of inhibiting –rather than supporting– the Bundeswehr's presence.

Regionally, political animosity among G5 Sahel – the organization for the coordination of poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, agriculture and security formed by Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger– further fuels the quarrel. Angered at its counterparts' refusal to allow the Malian junta to take on the rotating presidency and denouncing "regional isolating manoeuvres"³¹ after ECOWAS issued economy sanctions on Bamako³²– Mali withdrew from the organization on May 15 this year. On September 22 the Ministers of National Defence of the –now four– G5 Sahel nations expressed their concern regarding the security situation in the Liptako-Gourma area. As stated by Chadian Minister of National Defence, Mali's absence in the security cooperation nexus will intensify the violence across Central Sahel.³³

Suggestions for Future European Engagement

The consequences of foreign involvement and the current spillover³⁴ of violence in the Sahel come as a sign that mere counterterrorism is not the sole means of stability in the Sahel. Whilst the different dimension of the crisis has been understood, the problem persists to be the policy direction to take. At a time when EU Task Force Takuba –which was aimed to advise, assist, and accompany Malian Armed Forces– has also left Mali, a review of the key presumptions that have underlined Europe's response up until now is vital. Despite having endeavoured to take on the Western leadership in the continent, the failure in Mali has put French involvement in Africa into question. Yet, the current situation could come as a fresh start for France in continuing its stance as the lead to internationalize –or rather Europeanize– the engagement. This could serve as a steppingstone for European countries, who are rather reluctant to entirely drop their efforts in the region³⁵, to have a bigger say in designing European policy towards the Sahel and West Africa.

With Wagner aggravating the crisis, the Russian threat to European geopolitics has risen the stakes for Europe to tackle the menace from all sides –including its southern shores– and prove they are loyal allies when turning collective security into a reality.³⁶ However, although this was expressly mentioned in NATO's agreed Strategic

³⁰ Risemberg, A. (2022). Germany Suspends Elements of Military Mission in Mali. *VOA*. 12 August 2022.

³¹ Ben Ahmed, L. (2022). G5 Sahel: fears of a "deterioration" of the security situation in the "three-border area". *Anadolu Agency*. 22 September 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/monde/g5-sahel-craintes-dune-d%C3%A9t%C3%A9rioration-de-la-situation-s%C3%A9curitaire-dans-la-zone-des-trois-fronti%C3%A8res/2692536>. (Accessed: 22 September).

³² Kofi Aubyn, F. (2022). ECOWAS Sanctions Against Mali Necessary but may be counter-productive. IPI. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/02/ecowas-sanctions-against-mali-necessary-but-may-be-counter-productive/>. (Accessed: 20 September 2022).

³³ Ben Ahmed, L. (2022). G5 Sahel: fears of a "deterioration" of the security situation in the "three-border area". *Anadolu Agency*. 22 September 2022.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/monde/g5-sahel-craintes-dune-d%C3%A9t%C3%A9rioration-de-la-situation-s%C3%A9curitaire-dans-la-zone-des-trois-fronti%C3%A8res/2692536>. (Accessed: 22 September).

³⁴ Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2022). Five Zones of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/five-zones-militant-islamist-violence-sahel/>. 26 September 2022. (Accessed: 28 September 2022).

³⁵ Borrell, J. (2022). EU Ambassadors Annual Conference 2022: Opening speech by High Representative Josep Borrell. 10 October, 2022. Brussels, Belgium.

³⁶ Carbone, G., et al. (2022). Sahel: 10 Years of Instability. Local, Regional and International Dynamics. Milan – Italy. ISPI. First Edition. 2022. P.115. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/sahel->

Concept in the summit in Madrid this summer, current developments point to the fact that European countries are disinclined to continue dedicating long-term efforts to counterterrorism in aiding political elites with no political willingness. As a result, the possibility of a “geopolitical new deal”³⁷, whereby Europe would seek to establish balance relations with the continent has now been raised. French research currently suggests that, rather than waging war, and similar to its strategy towards the war in Ukraine, France and its European counterparts could deliver equipment at a competitive price and train in niche intelligence.³⁸ In moving its efforts towards the Gulf of Guinea, for instance, France should aim at establishing trust among leaders and the population. However, as history has shown, conflict driven regions are a hotspot for predatory state authorities and France would have to hope that its assistance to such states is effectively being delivered into their –now under immediate threat– northern areas. Otherwise, such efforts would once more be in vain.

For the time being –and eyeing the Spring 2023 horizon when EU27 will sit down to examine its military and civil strategy in Mali– Brussels is likely to agree on a maximum reduction of the mission and limit it to military advisory.³⁹ Such a move is aimed at avoiding further clashes that could threaten the mission and leave a door open to reinforce European presence if the political conditions EU demands from Mali come to pass. This way Europe’s footprint in West Africa could become more bearable in the local eye and thus a

more efficient way to address Europe’s main geopolitical threats through their various fronts.

Conclusion

As predicted by several observers from the outset of Operation Barkhane, the opposition that brewed towards French presence in Mali had finally materialized. One year after the notorious Afghan exit, the French withdrawal from Mali has shed light on the main constraints of counterterrorism. Far from being eradicated, violent actors in the Sahel seem to have thrived in the presence of foreign military operations. This suggests that solely fighting cross-border terrorism and reconstructing ‘failed states’, while failing to efficiently tackle issues related to local grievances, the absence of basic services and predatory security forces, renders such operations ineffective. While the number of fatalities show no sign of lowering and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine is transforming European geopolitical priorities, the end of French military presence in Mali is now being viewed as an opportunity to revise the engagement of France and Europe in Africa.⁴⁰ However, only if a more moderate and invigorating policy towards the region is undertaken, will the shift in paradigm come as a steppingstone for French and European involvement in the region and a means to tackle European geopolitics via all flanks.

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³⁷ Bansept, L. & Tenenbaum, E. (2022). After Barkhane: Rethinking the French strategic posture in West Africa. *IFRI*. Focus stratégique, n°109. (Accessed: 5 September 2022).

³⁸ Tenenbaum, E. (2022). Interview by Morgane Le Cam. French withdrawal from Mali: 'The closing of a 30-year cycle of French external operations in Africa'. 21 August 2022.

³⁹ EuropaPress. (2022). Albares reaffirms Spain’s political will of continuing in Mali but circumstances must be given. <https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-albares-reafirma-voluntad-politica-espana-seguir-mali-deben-darse-circunstancias-20220926140542.html>. 26 September 2022.

⁴⁰ Bansept, L. & Tenenbaum, E. (2022). After Barkhane: Rethinking the French strategic posture in West Africa. *IFRI*. Focus stratégique, n°109. (Accessed: 5 September 2022).