



# The Boiling Sahel

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## Introduction

The fight against radical Islamic terrorism is known world-wide. For 19 years, the United States and its NATO allies have been embroiled in a bloody war in Afghanistan, despite an agreement which was signed on February 19, 2020, to end the longest war in U.S. history, the end is nowhere in sight.<sup>1</sup> France and its allies have also been entangled in a pointless war for eight years, frustrated from total failure in Mali and the Sahel region of Africa.<sup>2</sup> It seems that Western countries, while trying to build a country, are doomed to failure since building a country involves, in addition to the military efforts, political, economic and governance efforts as well. Western countries actually wage 'lost wars', i.e., Algeria, Vietnam, Afghanistan, just to name a few.

This article deals with the war in the Sahel, an area that should be seen as 'the backyard' of France. Why? Because what's happening in Mali has a direct impact on France. Political and economic instability in the region, along with the flourishing of Radical Islamic Jihad organizations fuel the refugee crisis while the regional instability threatens to overthrow the regimes in some states in the Sahel.<sup>3</sup> In addition, France has economic interests in the region, as well as a large number of citizens living in these countries - since most of them took part in the French colonial empire. In reality, France is dealing with, and fighting terrorism at home and abroad (Mali and the Sahel).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Afghan conflict: US and Taliban sign deal to end 18-year war *BBC* (29.2.2020).

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51689443>

<sup>2</sup> The Sahel countries today include Senegal, Cape Verde, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan and Eritrea.

<sup>3</sup> The Islamist rebel forces in Mali are made up of a mob that managed to seize most of the weapons that leaked out of Libya during the revolution to overthrow Gaddafi's regime. The rebels' allies are al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, al-Qaeda's arm in northwestern Africa also known as AQIM, which operates not only in Mali but also in the corridor that stretches along most of the northern Sahel.

<sup>4</sup> France is home to the largest Muslim community in Europe, numbering about eight million people. France is aware of the great risk posed by radical Islam in its territory and the consequences of military intervention in a foreign country.

Simultaneously with the military involvement of France (5,100 fighters), the United Nations Minusma (Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) is operating in Mali. The force was established by Security Council Resolution 2100 in April 25, 2013 to support political processes in the country and to carry out a number of security missions including security and peace for the citizens, to promote national reconciliation, and to give assistance to the re-establishment of state institutions according to the roadmap designed for that purpose.<sup>5</sup>

The bottom line is that France and its allies are fighting the Sahel to prevent great danger in the form of establishing a jihadist state - just as Afghanistan was under Taliban rule<sup>6</sup>.

What does the future hold?

First, the G5 Sahel Summit in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, took place from February 15 – 17, 2021 with the participation of the presidents of the five countries participating in the G5 Sahel (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad).<sup>7</sup> French President Emmanuel Macron took part via video conferencing.

Eight years after the successful deployment of French forces in Mali in 2013 as part of Operation Serval, France and its allies met to reassess the situation on the ground and the effectiveness of military operations taking place under Operation Barkhane, which reflects France's strategy in the Sahel. A strategy that strives for partner countries to acquire the ability to ensure their security and sovereignty independently. The strategy is based on a holistic approach (political, security and infrastructure and economic development) whose military component is carried out through

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<sup>5</sup> For more information, see: Security Council Establishes Peacekeeping Force for Mali Effective 1 July, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2100.

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc10987.doc.htm> (2013).

<sup>6</sup> French involvement in Mali has been legitimized by UN Security Council resolutions approving foreign intervention in Mali to assist military forces against the rebels and to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi's regime.

<sup>7</sup> The N'Djamena summit is a continuation of the Pau summit in France from a year ago, which dealt with the flourishing of the Islamic State in the region that led to military reinforcements in the area known as the 'Three Borders' (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) and the deployment of additional 600 French troops, from 4,500 to 5,100 fighters.

Operation Barkhane under the French command.<sup>8</sup> The military alliance appears to be on the verge of disintegration due to differences in state interests and a lack of national consensus in the states involved regarding the depth and course of action against the many Islamist terrorist organizations operating in the Mali territory and threatening Allied state and regional stability. The continuation of the status quo is out of the question for either party involved. The heads of the Sahel's states hope that the French force will remain and not be reduced. France is showing 'fatigue' from the war, and hopes that the Sahel's countries will begin leading military moves and rehabilitate the ruins of their countries.

This ongoing conflict kills soldiers and civilians, uproots entire populations, fills refugee camps and fuels internal conflicts, destroying old and precious sites like Timbuktu<sup>9</sup> (designed as UNESCO World Heritage Site), collapses already shaky state infrastructure and is replete with demagoguery.<sup>10</sup> The atmosphere in the area serves as a 'petri plate' for Islamic Jihad organizations, mainly al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) and the al-Qaeda branch in

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<sup>8</sup> The French forces, in cooperation with military forces from the Sahel, are operating as part of Operation Barkhane, an ongoing operation from August 1, 2014. The purpose of the operation, according to French Defense Minister Jean Yves Le Drian: "To prevent the formation of an 'highway' for all types of trade, to become a permanent transit point where jihadist groups between Libya and the Atlantic can rebuild themselves, leading to dire consequences for our security."

The main role of the French forces, in addition to combat, is to train, equip and coordinate Sahel forces in anti-subversive combat (COIN). See: France sets up anti-Islamist force in Africa's Sahel BBC (14.7.2014).

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28298230>; For more information, see: Operation Barkhane-Press Kit, (10.2.2021).

<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/afrique/bande-sahelo-saharienne/barkhane/dossier-de-reference/operation-barkhane>

<sup>9</sup> Home of the prestigious Koranic Sankore University and other madrasas, Timbuktu was an intellectual and spiritual capital and a centre for the propagation of Islam throughout Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries. Its three great mosques, Djingareyber, Sankore and Sidi Yahia, recall Timbuktu's golden age. Although continuously restored, these monuments are today under threat from desertification.

<sup>10</sup> Hardly a day goes by in the three main affected countries (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) without an attack on what is left of the countries. Above all, civilians are the main victims of the conflict. The two million displaced threshold was crossed in January 2021. For more information, see: <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/sahel/>

JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin). From local subversion it expanded to a general fighting front far beyond regional boundaries. As we learned from recent history, the longer the conflict lasts, it produces a dynamic of multiplicity of external factors whose presence does not necessarily facilitate the resolution of the conflict, as can be seen and learned from what is happening in the civil war in Libya, the raging war in the Central African Republic and Mali in Africa or Syria in the middle east.<sup>11</sup>

For those involved at the political level, agendas are sometimes in contradiction. External factors involved, knowingly or unknowingly, contribute to the perpetuation of the crisis that seemingly came to help resolve it. Their calls for 'coordination and harmony of priority actions' often remain a wish and perhaps cheap demagoguery. In front of them are the jihad organizations whose message on the agenda is uniform, clear and firm: "all or nothing."

The question arises after eight years of vague messages, what should the Summit of Presidents in N'Djamena offer as a way out of the crisis or from the status quo?

The answer to the question is very complex. However, there is a need to reaffirm the unity of the Allies, their solidarity and commitment to finding solutions to the end of the conflict. Interstate solidarity and the military success of the Allies in the Joint Forces first involve a renewal of the national and regional security environment. For many years this environment has served as a widespread field for intervention by regional powers and criminal activities related to mafia and various tribes, often, more dangerous and less reported in the media.

In other words, in order to advance and reach an agreement, the parties involved must stop their hidden contacts and leaning on 'war barons' from the area related to drug trafficking, arms

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<sup>11</sup> JNIM - In March 2017, 3 al-Qaeda affiliates across the Sahel (Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, Al-Mourabitoun and the Saharan branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) joined together under Iyad Ag Ghaly Leader Anser-Edin. It is also headed by Amadou Koufa, leader of the Macina Liberation Front.

smuggling, human trafficking and terrorism supporters.<sup>12</sup> Removing them, will clean up a polluted environment with pervasive corruption that paralyzes all good national and international intentions. The war against them should end with the strengthening of the image of the G 5 Sahel and France that should help find a way out of the crisis.

The war in the Sahel region is being waged on two fronts: 1) a military front that includes terrorist groups and their international allies, some of which are surprisingly close to several governments; 2) The second, more damaging and a more deeply rooted front in the civil society in the Sahel is the corruption front.

The above fronts require investment of various kinds of efforts and determination on the part of all involved.

In parallel, there is another front that France has to deal with, in the context of the prices of the war in the Sahel, the internal front: dealing with the victims of the French war- Casualty Aversion – which impacted all western forces in all combat in the last century.<sup>13</sup>

Since the beginning of military involvement in 2013, about 50 French fighters, in various ranks, have been killed. Victims of war are flooding French public opinion with questions about the necessity of that involvement, the price of war (in casualties and funding) and the need to end it.<sup>14</sup> On the political and military side, the military escalation on the ground, with the number of fighters killed, raises the inevitable question of how the French fighters can be protected, how France can minimize the death toll without losing the public internal legitimacy related to this war. The French president's

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<sup>12</sup> In the Sahel these people, tribal chiefs and gangs, are known as "those who steal with thieves and police investigators".

<sup>13</sup> A casualty-averse society can have a strong impact on the political calculus to intervene or not, and might also influence the choice concerning the use of force in regard to the objectives to be fulfilled.

<sup>14</sup> A public opinion poll conducted on January 12, 2021 in France shows that 51% of French people oppose military involvement in the Sahel. See: French and military intervention in Mali, 8 years after the launch of Operation Serval. <https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-francais-et-lintervention-militaire-au-mali-8-ans-apres-le-declenchement-de-loperation-serval/>

promises to 'decapitate' the heads of the terrorist organizations are not sufficient and do not comfort the public's opinion, even if the French forces on the ground have succeeded in eliminating, by targeting killing, a number of senior members of the various organizations.<sup>15</sup>

The French strategy that was at the center of Operation Barkhane actually failed. The aim of the operation was to eradicate Islamic Jihad forces in the Sahel and Sahara. Today, apart from a few occasional and local successes there is no real success. The strategy, which was based solely on military force, did not prevent the spread of Salafi jihadists and other armed groups throughout the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and Mozambique)

### Strategy Changes

According to the developments that are taking place in the field, the French strategy is changing and it is moving in two axes: 1) increasing use of gliders and UAVs, along with the use of special forces and targeted airstrikes; 2) 'Sahélisation' to the local state armies (which will receive support for training and equipping) - in other words, France is interested that fewer French fighters will be exposed to the dangers of war on the ground and expect that they'll take themselves in their own hands.<sup>16</sup>

To gain the support for the local forces, France is building on the foundation of the 'Takuba' force, a force of elite European fighters from different countries (French - 500, Estonians - 40, Czechs - 60,

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<sup>15</sup> As part of the Battle of Talahandak in Mali on June 3, 2020, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel was killed by French special forces on the ground. He was replaced by Yazid Mebarek, aka Abu Ubayda Yusef al-Annabi.

<sup>16</sup> The Sahélisation is a consequence that an effective Counter-insurgency (COIN) requires putting boots on the ground.

Swedes -150, Italians - 200).<sup>17</sup> The intention is to reach 2000 fighters who will move in 4X4 SUVs and motorcycles and accompany the local forces on their missions.<sup>18</sup>

As it is with most bloody world conflicts, the solution to the ongoing battle even in the Sahel, is political. French army forces can eliminate by targeted killing, the head of an organization, but this does not eliminate the organization and the ideology that drives it; it will immediately find a replacement who will strive for revenge to prove himself.

French forces in the Sahel region, such as the Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan, and other forces elsewhere, feel that they are not wanted and welcomed by the residents. This is due to physical damage to them by aerial bombardment (like in Douentza one kilometer north of the village of Bounti)<sup>19</sup> and their inability to ensure their safety and security. Therefore it is better for them, for the locals, for purely survival reasons, to join the rebel forces that also manage to provide them with livelihoods, a matter that the central government has failed to do, due to the corruption that prevents it from reaching the real needy on the ground.

The wind blowing from the French presidency is to reduce military involvement in the Sahel. It is estimated that the implementation of the new strategy, in two heads as outlined earlier, will allow France to 'fold' most of its military force within two years. Blessed are the believers.

As a result from the fight against Radical Islamic terrorist groups, the question that arises is whether fighting in the Sahel contributes to the prevention and reduction of domestic terrorism in France.

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<sup>17</sup> Several other European countries have expressed a desire to send fighters to the Takuba force such as Greece, Hungary and Serbia.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on the subject, see: In French: BARKHANE: Task Force Takuba - The first Franco-Estonian trainings have started State-major of armies (26.8.2020).

<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/afrique/bande-sahelo-saharienne/barkhane/breves/barkhane-task-force-takuba-les-premiers-entrainements-franco-estoniens-ont-debute>

<sup>19</sup> A dozen people lost their lives in that air strike of Jan. 3 led by the French military in Mali

See: Douentza: the raid of the French army in question *DW*

<https://www.dw.com/fr/douentza-le-raid-de-larm%C3%A9e-fran%C3%A7aise-en-question/a-56162777>



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The answer is clearly, no. The perpetrators of the latest terrorist attacks in France were not from the Sahel. The last attack on the head of French teacher Samuel Paty was carried out by a Russian from Chechnya on 16.10.2020 and the attack on the Church of Notre-Dame in Nice was carried out by a Tunisian terrorist on 29.10.2020.

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