

IN THE SHACKLES OF INSTABILITY: CHALLENGES OF OPERATION BARKHANE IN THE G5 SAHEL COUNTRIES

JUDIT GODÓ

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS EXPERT (MA), CORVINUS UNIVERSITY OF BUDAPEST

DESK OFFICER FOR TRADE POLICY, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE OF HUNGARY

JUDIT.GODO8@GMAIL.COM

Abstract

Suffering from a multidimensional crisis, the Sahel has morphed into the new center of terror. In the past few years, it has become one of the most hazardous places in the world, which has negatively transformed the fragile states of the Western-African region. Emerging as a novel security policy challenge, the G5 Sahel countries – namely Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – have found themselves stuck in a quagmire of different deep-rooted human security issues, which have placed their populations in a vicious circle of closely intertwined problems. Various influences threaten not just the security of residents and foreign actors but also the security of neighboring states. Different regional and international actors are trying to solve this complex crisis with varying levels of success. In this environment, in the shackles of instability, the presence of jihadist terrorist organizations and the operations of different rebel armed forces independent from governments pose a growing threat by making Sahelian life a living hell. This paper aims to discuss the challenges and effectiveness of Operation Barkhane, the terminating counter-terrorism operation led by the French, which has started its strategical transformation by merging into the European initiative known as the Takuba Task Force. Under President Emmanuel Macron, France remains the most important actor in the international community. In close alliance and cooperation with the African leaders and military forces of the five countries involved, they have been fighting terrorism within the confines of Operation Barkhane since 2014. Until recently 5,100 French soldiers have been deployed. They risk their lives every day in an incredibly hostile and constantly changing field where either they or the jihadists are under fire. Even though this operation has become an essential part of providing security in these countries, French participation remains controversial: despite their willingness to help, heavily armed French soldiers are not the most popular throughout the region. The importance of the topic speaks for itself because the transformation of the operation and the withdrawal of half of the French troops may have a drastic impact on the future of the Sahel.

Keywords

G5Sahel, instability, France, Barkhane, Takuba Task Force, counterterrorism, jihadist terrorism, security policy

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to evaluate the French military presence in the G5 Sahel countries focusing on the counter-terrorism operations within the confines of Operation Barkhane. As a framework, the first four sections provide key background information that one should be familiar with before discussing Operation Barkhane. After the introduction, the second section discusses the hostile field in which the operations work including the different human security issues. The third section presents the active jihadist groups in the region while the fourth section discusses the legitimacy of the French military presence. The fifth section focuses on Operation Barkhane and the last section concludes with the findings and a prognosis on the future of the Sahel region.

In terms of spatial and temporal delimitation, I assess the French military presence in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – the countries that are participating in the G5 Sahel cooperation – from May 2017 to September 2021. In my research methodology, I look at complex interpretations of the security regime by processing primary and secondary sources. My research questions include the following: To what extent does the French military presence contribute to ensuring security in the G5 Sahel countries? Could Operation Barkhane be the “cure” for the crisis in these nations? The argument of this paper is that although the French military presence contributes significantly to ensuring security in the G5 Sahel countries, as the study of Operation Barkhane illustrates, they cannot ensure it alone due to the instability of the region. Operation Barkhane cannot constitute the solution because a military response by itself is not enough to solve the ongoing crisis.

The area where the operation is taking place is in the territory of the G5 Sahel (G5S) countries - Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Despite all good intentions, the African regional organizations such as the African Union and the ECOWAS have failed to solve these complex security issues on their own. Because they lack the requisite will, financial sources, and operational support to intervene, it became necessary to establish a regional cooperation instrument (Çonkar, 2020; Erforth, 2020a). Founded in 2014, the G5S came into being with the commitments of the five Sahel states. It would not have become reality without the support of the then French administration of President Hollande. According to the diverse and ambitious mandate of the group, its aim is not only to eliminate organized crime networks and jihadist terrorist groups but also to create a more secure and livable Sahel with the help of development programs in the fields of infrastructure, education, and food security. Today, the G5 Sahel cooperation aspires to become a well-functioning regional mechanism for enhancing the security of its member countries. Its challenge, however, is that in the sea of pressing security threats, the capacity for cooperation is not aligned with the objectives (Çonkar, 2020: 8-9; Bak, 2020; G5 Sahel, 2020). Nevertheless, in the coming decades and under pressure from Paris, this cooperation will stand. In the meantime, the G5S countries will continue to count on financial support from various donor countries to cope with their weak statehood coupled with economic and military shortcomings. Without development

aid from external donors and foreign military assistance, their cooperation is worthless (Bak, 2020; Çonkar, 2020).

2. The Different Dimensions of the Sahel Crisis

Understanding the challenges of the region remains crucial because, without this information, one cannot fully evaluate the hazards and causes related to Barkhane. To put an end to these issues, a solution must be found at the local and regional levels. Operation Barkhane has been providing extensive assistance in achieving this objective. Failure to address these challenges could result in global security implications (Varga, 2016; Douce, 2021a; Çonkar, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Thus, in this section nine human security challenges are discussed briefly: demographic and food security crises, weak statehood and corruption, ethnic conflicts, ongoing migration crisis, organized crime networks including child trafficking, human rights abuses, and last but not least, mental health issues.

According to the World Bank’s population estimates of 2019, there are 15 million residents in Chad, 23 million in Niger, 4.5 million in Mauritania, 10 million in Mali, and 20 million in Burkina Faso (World Bank, 2019). In a region where more than half the population lives under the poverty line, these numbers may double by 2050 if the demographic trend does not change soon, which will probably further aggravate the current food security crisis. Surveys conducted by the World Food Program show that more than five million people are starving daily in the Liptako-Gourma region – known as the “tri-border” or “three-borders” zone – which has become one of the most critically affected areas of the Sahel crisis. In the shadow of the pandemic, the health care systems of the conflict-torn region are among the most severely under-



^ Figure 1. French President Emmanuel Macron and the leaders of the G5S in a meeting at Château de la Celle Saint-Cloud in 2017 (Source: Cold-Ravnkilde, S.M., 2018:3)

developed. The majority of these institutions lack essential supplies such as clean water or soap, which would be integral tools to prevent epidemics like malaria or coronavirus. Poor governance has exacerbated those fundamental structural reforms that constitute key elements to tackle these alarming challenges. Furthermore, the long-term effects of the current pandemic may deepen not only the economic but the social problems these countries face (OCHA, 2020; Çonkar, 2020:1-15; Varga, 2016:72; World Health Organization, n.d.; World Bank, 2019).

Upon examination, the latest Fragile States Index shows that Chad ranks as the 7th, Mali as the 16th, Niger as the 19th, Mauritania as the 33rd, and Burkina Faso as the 37th most vulnerable states to collapse out of 178 countries. By comparison, Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria are in the top four, and unfortunately, in terms of fragility, the G5 Sahel countries are not very far from these states with extremely weak public frameworks. In many cases, local tribal leaders, international aid organizations, and NGOs play the role of governments, so it is often difficult to distinguish between local and foreign political actors (World Bank, 2019; Çonkar, 2020:1-5; Varga, 2016:72; Fragile States Index, 2020).

Another significant root cause of instability in these weak states is widespread corruption. According to Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index, the G5 Sahel countries are among the most corrupt states in the world. Out of the 180 surveyed countries, Chad is the most corrupt and Burkina Faso is the least corrupt. Chad has 160 points on this scale while Burkina Faso has 86 points on the scale where the first country is the least corrupt.¹ In light of this statistic, it is no wonder that public confidence in state institutions has been shaken and the legitimacy of states is quite questionable (Transparency International, 2020; Çonkar, 2020:1-5).

All these factors play a substantial role in disputes and conflicts generated between the local communities and the different ethnic or tribal groups, especially because the Sahel serves as a sort of dividing line between the Christian and Muslim religious groups and between the North-African and Sub-Saharan tribes. After decolonization, when most of the colonies became independent, social groups structured essentially on a tribal basis found themselves within a kind of state framework that completely ignored territorial and national unity, designated by the great powers and their former colonial leaders. The newly drawn borders cared nothing for the traditional tribal areas, nor for the nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life of those who lived there. Dozens of conflicts and crises have been unfolding ever since during frequent changes of power, military coups, and dictatorial regimes (Varga, 2016; Palkovics, 2020; Michailof, 2016).

Nowadays the region is experiencing an era of one of the most dynamically deteriorating internal refugee crises. In the G5 Sahel countries, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has risen to almost 2.5 million. The majority seek safety in the refugee camps in the Liptako-Gourma region where national resources are overburdened, and international assistance is more committed to security assistance. Those members of society are most at risk who seek refuge in overcrowded refugee camps where neither the hygienic conditions nor practicing social distancing can

be fulfilled; moreover, different armed conflicts affect the security of IDP families grievously. In this fragile region, the turmoil and mistrust of local communities are intensifying, which increases the success of extremist armed groups' efforts to radicalize and recruit personnel (Çonkar, 2020; R4Sahel, n.d.; UNHCR, 2020:1-15; World Bank, 2019). At this point, it must be highlighted that the majority of African refugees are intracontinental. In most cases, they flee to a more secure corner of their country or move to a neighboring one. In case of danger, they choose to move to the closest safe havens. It is worth emphasizing that for a significant part of nomadic or semi-nomadic ethnic groups, due to their way of life, continuous migration is a naturally inherited characteristic. In that respect, a scenario of an influx of African refugees flooding Europe may occur to some extent, but one must be aware that from such poor areas like Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger, it remains unlikely that millions would flee to Europe in search of a better life since these people do not have the necessary financial resources (Tarrósy, 2019:148-152; UNHCR, 2020). Currently, as a consequence of climate change, local families striving to ensure their livelihoods need to migrate because most of them work in the agricultural sector. More and more conflicts sprung up due to the scarcity of arable lands, which are depleted natural resources or part of the illegal arms trade (Varga, 2016; Palkovics, 2020; Michailof, 2016).

The Sahel has become the “gold mine” of organized crime including human, arms, and drug trafficking. Since most families live under the poverty line it is not a coincidence that more and more people work in the informal sector, not to mention that the current pandemic has aggravated the matter of mass unemployment as well. In many cases, illegal work is the only chance for families to survive: for local communities, these jobs serve as sources of income and the key to their livelihood. On the other hand, it is alarming that these illegal enterprises are usually supported by influential state actors, which is why it has become rather difficult to identify the perpetrators. Furthermore, different rebel and jihadist groups usually turn out to be members or even masterminds behind these cruel and illegal activities that increase instability in the region. Using illegally acquired weapons, the formation of local self-defense militias is now increasingly common among the traumatized populations, which only exacerbates ethnic divisions. In the most terror-affected countries of the G5S including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, eliminating these illegal activities is not a top priority because the capacities and border control units concentrate on holding up and eliminating jihadist groups. It is important to understand that a link exists between these two phenomena (Çonkar, 2020:1-6; Mangan and Nowak, 2019:20-21).

The issues of child trafficking and child soldiers are also serious problems requiring a resolution. In this region, children live in extreme danger. Many become victims of human trafficking, sexual abuse, or slavery. Mali suffers the most from this situation, especially near refugee camps where children are easy targets for kidnapping. In Mali and Niger, the institution of child militia still exists, constituting another challenge to security policies in the region. These innocent children are forced to

wield weapons either by their starving families or jihadist groups. These children are usually used as tools to achieve the goals of jihadists: they are easy to replace, so they are not just used to spy or to give birth to new generations of warriors, but they are used for suicide attacks as well. Jihadist groups prefer to put young children into combat because they are easy to manipulate and they possess a less developed sense of responsibility and fear. During the different missions of Barkhane, the French soldiers usually encounter these young militias. They always attempt to spare their lives, but due to the complexity of the Sahel crisis, it is not always possible (Palkovics, 2020; France24 English, 2013; UN News, 2020).

Members of local communities became victims of human rights abuses like extrajudicial executions or arbitrary arrests on a regular basis. These abuses have been aggravating and “widening the abyss between Sahelian states and their citizens” (Çonkar, 2020:7). These abuses are usually counted as war crimes; furthermore, besides extremist groups, local security forces (for instance the Malian militia) are also perpetrators. In 2020 almost 200 cases were reported in the Liptako-Gourma region. As long as the affected population suffers from these nightmarish traumas, citizens will never trust the armed forces and it will not matter if the soldiers have a patch of the Malian, Nigerien, or French flag on their uniforms (Amnesty International, 2020; International Criminal Court, 2019; Çonkar, 2020:3-6).

The Sahelian people witness brutality or experience violence every day. Next to the physical wounds they endure, there are invisible ones as well. It is important to note that Africans suffering from mental illnesses usually end up marginalized, since African belief systems often interpret these cases as curses. In this chaos, these countries lack the adequate capacities to treat these patients; therefore, NGOs like Doctors Without Borders are trying to fill this gap with varying degrees of success (Douce, 2021b).

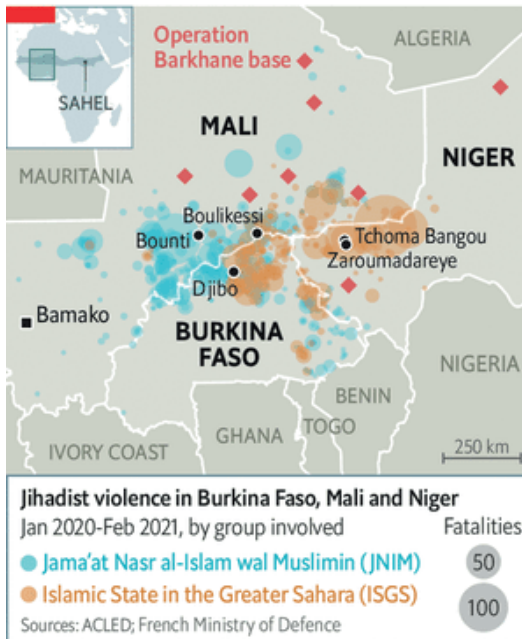
3. In the Shadow of Terror: Jihadist Groups in the G5 Sahel Region

Since the rise of extremist terrorist networks plays a huge role in exacerbating the instability of the region, until recently, Operation Barkhane has been functioning primarily as a counter-terrorism mission (László, 2021; Varga, 2016). Momentarily, it is challenging to identify the different jihadist groups because one day they are fighting each other, then the next day, they become allies. Since the increase in the French military presence, they have been keen to carry out attacks in less visible, rural, and more isolated areas, targeting local communities, foreign legions, and rebel armed groups. Here I present two groups who are responsible for most of the lethal attacks in the “tri-border” zone, thus they have become the top targets of Operation Barkhane. One of the most active actors, which has been operating in the region since 2015, is the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara² (ISGS), which is the African cell of the Islamic State. The other group is Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which is a member of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims umbrella organization (GSIM)³ (Çonkar, 2020; Marsai and Treszkai, 2019; Bencherif, Campana and Stockemer, 2020:15-16).

In the Liptako-Gourma region, France's biggest enemy is the ISGS. This group is famous for its ruthlessness, and it does not spare the civilian population either. They were responsible for more than 2,100 deaths in 2020. While al-Qaeda's local cells are very popular, the Islamic State's African troops are less appealing among the civilian population, with much lower support for understandable reasons. The group focuses mainly on controlling lucrative activities in the "tri-border" region, whether in gold mining communities or communities living near illegal smuggling routes. Expanding revenue from these activities is essential to their success. They make good use of the region's harsh natural conditions, often seeking refuge from counter-terrorism forces in national parks (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020).

The delta of the Niger River has become the citadel of the GSIM in recent years. The group was created in 2017 by the alliance of four terrorist groups and has become the most dangerous group that swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Their cooperation serves as a great example: foreign allied military action is not enough to win this war. Islamist groups have intimate knowledge of the terrain and, in several cases, the support of a part of the local community. In 2019, thanks to American and Mali aid, members of the French Foreign Legion eliminated the leader of the group (Châtelot, 2021; Çonkar, 2020; Marsai and Treszkai, 2019; Varga, 2016).

As an Islamist militant organization, the AQIM has already named France as its nemesis. They are not only responsible for launching attacks against skilled soldiers



The Economist

^ Figure 2. Spheres of influence of the GSIM and the ISGS in the Liptako-Gourma region (Source: The Economist, 2021b)

but for many attacks where innocent civilians have lost their lives. The current emir is Abu Obaida al-Annabi, who replaced the previous leader Abdelmalek Droukdel after he was killed during a mission of Operation Barkhane. AQIM's strategy differs in cities and rural areas: in the larger cities and central locations, they target various government buildings or military bases by blowing up or kidnapping people; on the periphery in rural areas, they try to infiltrate society. The latter can be achieved mainly through two methods: members of terrorist organizations prefer to marry into local communities or offer well-paid jobs within terrorist networks (Varga, 2016; France24, 2020).

As highlighted previously, the inhabitants of the region feel disillusioned with governments and democratic state institutions and that is why they become perfect subjects for terrorist organizations. These groups recruit new members by taking advantage of the frustrations and poor living conditions of these people (Varga, 2016; Marsai and Treszkai, 2019): "The gap between the broad needs of ever more fragile Sahelian societies and states incapable of offering hope for the future has opened a door for violent extremists to entrench themselves into the fabric of Sahelian societies" (Çonkar, 2020:7).

At this point one must see that in many cases these hopeless masses do not join a radical terrorist organization because of their beliefs; they see this option as a means of making a living. It is important to stress that this crisis knows no territorial borders: terrorist organizations operating in the G5S countries are responsible for what has happened in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Libya. What jihadist militants in the region have in common is their geographical proximity, ideology, operational strategies, and illegal finance methods. To make the complex situation more complicated, the G5 Sahel countries are swarmed with regular and irregular armed actors: national armies, international forces, UN peacekeepers, insurgent groups, community-based local armed groups, smugglers, and members of criminal organizations. In light of this, one might understand why it is extremely problematic to differentiate between the different armed actors (UNHCR, 2020; Varga, 2016; Marsai and Treszkai, 2019).

As Viktor Marsai emphasized in an interview, the Sahel crisis has its roots in the 1970s when demographic expansion, problems caused by climate change, and weak states aggravated the fragility of the area (László, 2021). As a consequence, the rise of jihadist ideologies has dramatically increased over the past 10 years, with 15 African countries becoming terror-infected (László, 2021). In the G5 Sahel countries during the past few years, the attacks of the jihadist groups demanded 600% more victims than before: "Even though there are five thousand French troops there, for five million square kilometers, that is a pittance. The weak statehood makes the local forces worthless. The Burkina Faso army, for example, has never been involved in an armed conflict, and it is they who should be fighting the embattled jihadists. (...) These [terrorist] organizations grow out of local society; they can operate very effectively at a very low cost. To give you an example: if they can take a sick child of a tribal leader to a hospital, they have already won a group. All it takes is a ride, a can of gasoline, a few hundred dollars"²⁴ (László, 2021).

Concerning extreme Islamism and Jihadism in the Sahel, it is very important to highlight that terrorism never exists by itself. It is always a consequence of local political, economic, social crises; acting against these problems first can be a solution. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the dimensions of the Sahel crisis described in the third section: if these challenges do not improve or disappear soon, the Sahel will remain a hotbed of extremism and jihadist terrorism for many years to come (Külügyi és Külgazdasági Intézet, 2020).

4. Legitimacy of the French Military Presence: History, Interests, and Foreign Policy Strategies

The dynamics of Franco-African relations are deeply rooted in their common history. Today, the French military presence is understood in the context of the global fight against terrorism. Alongside the US, France has become the most important actor in counter-terrorism and security in Sub-Saharan Africa: between 2000 and 2020, nine military operations were conducted. Based on the 2013 White Paper, the Sahel region constitutes a top priority of the French defense strategy because of the common language, history, economic links, and the presence of French citizens. This strategy is becoming increasingly important under President Macron since France has a long history with the G5 Sahel countries that became independent from the mainland in 1960, known as the “Year of Africa”. These five countries and most Francophone African countries became bonded to the former colonial power, which has produced various military, economic, and political agreements. Critics argue that these moves gave France a sort of legitimacy to continue their operation in the territories of their former colonies (Charbonneau, 2017:322-326; Gazdag, 2019; Csizmadia, 2007; Ministère des Armées, 2013; Erforth, 2020a; Erforth, 2020b).

All the presidents in power in France’s history have been aware of the importance of the African continent in international relations. In 21st century rhetoric, France acts no longer as a gendarme, but rather as a comrade and a partner, especially in Francophone Africa. During the Cold War years, the West acknowledged France as a guarantor of security and stability in Africa, which is why the French presence became the result of a series of “invisible” agreements signed by other Western countries. African elites have always sought to remain on good terms with France. Apart from patronizing policies, personal ties have also strengthened their relationship. The tip of the iceberg, as Erforth puts it, was the notorious *Françafrique* network, whereby the French did have a separate foreign policy in Africa for a long time (Charbonneau, 2017:322-326; Chafer, Cumming and van der Velde, 2020:20-22; Gazdag, 2019; Csizmadia, 2007; Ministère des Armées, 2013; Erforth, 2020a; Erforth, 2020b).

Except for the notion of being a great power and the ideal of the French *grandeur*, Emmanuel Macron “received a rather mixed legacy” from the presidents of the Fifth Republic (Gazdag, 2019:9). Macron sees the presidency of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in the 1970s-80s as a model: he wants to turn the country back into a great power. French policymakers who embrace the concept of *grandeur* believe in the

integrity of their nation and in the extraordinary role that France must play, not only in Europe but in the world – a belief that Macron holds sacred. To this end, the aim is to gain economic, cultural, and political influence across the borders of France, which is why France is fighting for human rights and democracy on the international stage today. As a means to achieve this goal, as part of providing global security, since the 1990s, France has mainly turned to the EU and various African regional organizations to solve the continent's problems in a multilateral framework. Despite this strategy, they failed to reduce or eliminate their military presence in Africa. Although they conducted numerous negotiations on African-French military agreements, ultimately, French troops had to be deployed again during the 2011 crisis in Libya and the 2013 crisis in the Central African Republic and Mali (Erforth, 2020a; Erforth, 2020b:5; Charbonneau, 2017:330-331; Gazdag, 2019:9-14).

Global challenges of our time require a stable international system, in which France is a key player. Given the significant commitment of the French military at the national level and on the international stage, the French Armed Forces are facing more complex military challenges than ever before. In terms of its military capabilities, it is doing very well internationally while ranking third in NATO with 209,000 troops. In terms of defense spending, France is in 7th place worldwide with an annual budget of 59 billion USD. In response to external and internal threats to the country, the French Defense Council has increased the budget by 34 billion USD. The French Armed Forces serve as a directly deployed instrument of French foreign policy. As an EU member state, it plays a dominant role in European foreign and security policy. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), it is committed to various peacekeeping operations, therefore, French soldiers are often deployed in various EU, OSCE, and NATO operations, notably in the Middle East and on the African continent (Gazdag, 2019:16; Szűcs, 2019; Fregán, 2019:87; Ministère des Armées, 2013). Although this paper does not focus on the French development aids, it is worth mentioning that France as a donor has been playing an active role in this field as well. For instance, in 2017 France proposed in the UNSC that the G5S Joint Force should receive a permanent financial contribution under a Security Council resolution, but this proposal was voted down. Since then, in many cases, funds from foreign donors have not arrived on time, and if they do, they often end up in the wrong place. Due to the late arrival of the equipment needed to maintain security training is also delayed⁵ (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2018).

When it comes to military engagement abroad, it is important to note that the French president is the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces; therefore, he has the last word in the event of a foreign intervention without having to ask permission from any constitutional body. This kind of dominance in matters of (national) defense is a de Gaullean legacy. The idea of the *domaine réservé*, or “territory reserved for the President of the Republic”, is based on customary law: it is not found in the French constitution and has no legal basis, yet, as a source of pride, it has become a key, almost inseparable element of French leadership, which distinguishes the French from most European states (Erforth, 2021:35-38; Fejérdy, 2019).

Today, French security and defense policy is defined by two main strategic documents. The first document is the *Livre Blanc*, a White Paper on Defense and National Security, which was renewed and published under the François Hollande's presidency, setting out strategic guidelines up to 2025. The second document to be followed is the military planning law currently in force (*La Loi de programmation militaire 2019-2025*), which sets out the budgetary framework for the forces and means necessary for its implementation (Ministère des Armées, 2013; Ministère des Armées, 2021d; Fregán, 2019:87). As these documents declare, France's future and prosperity depend on its activities on the international stage, and it can do so by being present across all oceans and most continents with overseas territories and a large francophone community. In terms of strategic preferences, it is important

to stress that the protection of French national territory and French citizens abroad is an absolute priority, in case France or French citizens are threatened.⁶ The stabilization of the immediate European environment and the fight against jihadist terrorism remains a priority, including operations in the Sahel, especially as France is personally involved in the fight on its mainland (Ministère des Armées, 2017; Ministère des Armées, 2013; Fregán, 2019:85).

In terms of capacities of foreign operational participation, the French military has more than 30,000 personnel, about half of the total of 61,372 conscripts. French soldiers in EU operations total 140, but with the transformation of Barkhane this number is expected to increase. Under the aegis of the UN, 720 French soldiers are currently deployed in more than five countries, including Mali. Furthermore, the French army has one of the most capable and effective mobile forces globally. Thanks to continuous improvements and NATO principles, their military presence is legitimate around the world (Ministère des Armées, 2020:6-30; Fregán, 2019).

Under the Macron Presidency, French decision-makers want to guarantee the security of the African continent as a collective European effort. Both the "global war on terror" narrative and the 2015 migration crisis are beginning to make the EU Member States think about getting involved in what the French forces started doing: for example, Angela Merkel, during her tenure as Chancellor, made more visits to African countries. According to European discourse, France is seen as a mediator and a guarantor of peace in Africa, driven mainly by the fear that if stability in the region did not restore, the various jihadist groups would take power. As

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a consequence, jihadist terrorism could strike Europe not just as a minor downpour but as a devastating storm, as we have seen in recent decades (Erforth, 2020b:14-17). In Macron's vision, France is also seeking strategic independence as a founding member of NATO and the EU. A stronger, more cooperative Europe is still a long way off. Already, the *Strategic Review of Defence and National Security*, published in 2017, highlighted that MINUSMA and EU alliances are more important than ever, alongside Operation Barkhane. At several points, the White Paper also points out that Africa's security should be a greater priority for European partners in the future, and that is what one sees today by reforming and strengthening the Takuba Task Force (Ministère des Armées, 2017; Ministère des Armées, 2021a).

The threat of jihadist terrorism is a common theme between France and the G5 Sahel countries, which may explain and legitimate French participation in counter-terrorism missions. Although no attack in France has yet been officially linked to armed conflicts in the Sahel, this may not necessarily remain the case. After the tragic terror attacks of the autumn of 2020, Emmanuel Macron stressed in an official letter published on the Élysée website that his administration was fighting Islamic separatism or radical Islam, never Islam. This is an important distinction. According to the president, the French state is never against religion, but against fanaticism and violent extremism. He confirmed that the French authorities are doing their utmost to ensure that churches, mosques, and synagogues are protected to the highest possible degree. At this point, he quotes Averroes: "Ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hatred, and hatred leads to violence" (Macron, 2020). Macron also emphasized that the laws of the French Republic cannot be challenged by hostile and extremist ideologies. The religious neutrality of the state against its citizens remains inviolable. However, it will be a major challenge to conduct counter-terrorism operations in a way that does not deepen the divisions between locals and immigrants, and between Christians and Muslims (Martens Centre, 2020).

5. The Forever War of France? Operation Barkhane

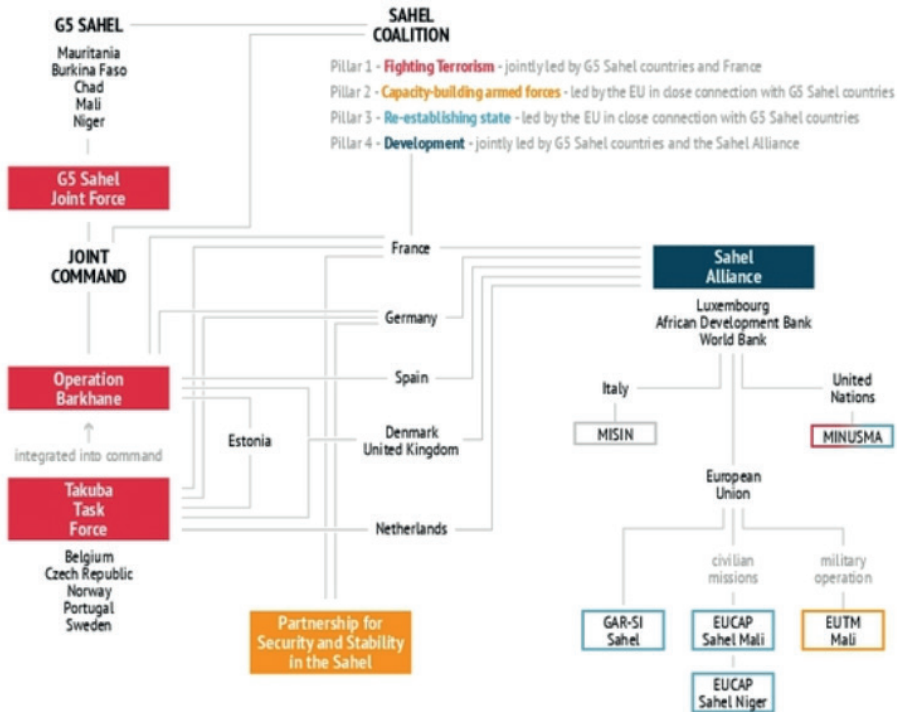
The maze of coalitions and alliances

As highlighted before, the "cure" for the Sahel crisis must be found locally, but without foreign aid it is unimaginable. Therefore, a "regional recipe" must be developed where "international ingredients" are essential parts. The complexity of the challenges facing the region would be impossible to address without multinational cooperation. Because of the sea of complex and often confusing initiatives, I named this phenomenon the "Sahel Confusion", thus this section aims to navigate through the maze of coalitions and alliances that provide a framework for the different missions and initiatives. Understanding the role of these foreign assistance programs is crucial before one analyzes Operation Barkhane (Faleg and Palleschi, 2020:8; Bak, 2020).

The Pau summit of 2020 is a significant landmark in French-African relations because the idea of the Sahel Coalition (*Coalition pour la Sahel*) originated here. French President Emmanuel Macron, who has long been trying to draw the atten-

tion of the international community to share the burden of the Sahel crisis, played a key role in its creation. The summit was attended by the Heads of State of the G5 Sahel countries and also by key representatives of the UN, the EU, and the African Union. The coalition was created to find a more collective solution to the Sahel crisis through international cooperation. The aim is to enable the various international actors to work together more effectively and transparently under the Sahel Coalition (Varga, 2014).

As the infographic presents, different missions are based on four complementary strategic pillars in which France plays an active role. The first pillar is fighting terrorism jointly, led by France and the G5 Sahel countries including the missions of Operation Barkhane, Takuba Task Force, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. This very first pillar will be in the spotlight and elaborated on later. Constituting the second pillar, the capacity-building of armed forces includes the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel coalition, which looks good on paper but lacks a concrete structure, strategies, and a secretary-general. Its other element is the EUTM Mali, a military training program that aims to give up-to-date and professional training to the Mali army with its 5th mandate. The goal of the third pillar is to re-establish or



^ Figure 3. “The architecture of foreign assistance in the G5 Sahel and the role of European States” (Source: Faleg and Palleschi, 2020:8.)

restore the necessary state relations in the G5S countries with EU assistance. This includes the peacekeeping mission of the UN, the MINUSMA, and the two ongoing civilian capacity-building missions initiated by the EU: EUCAP Sahel Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Niger. To stabilize the region, the last pillar is based on crucial development programs. They are coordinated by a donor coordination team known as the Sahel Alliance masterminded by Macron. Without financial aid and foreign donors, neither the military nor the civilian missions can work. Sahel Alliance was established in Mauritania in 2017 by France, Germany, and the G5 Sahel countries. The planned projects seem promising but so far, the Coalition suffers from organizational and communication defects (Lebovich, 2020:12,23-24; Faleg and Palleschi, 2020:8; Bak,2020; Varga, 2014: 349; Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2020; EUTM Mali, 2021).

Operation Serval – A model to follow?

Operation Serval served as a forerunner of Operation Barkhane and the French military presence in the Sahel. Emmanuel Macron inherited Barkhane from the former French administration at the beginning of his presidency. The events that took place in Mali in 2012 raised eyebrows around the world: “Two decades after the Rwandan genocide, French soldiers were once again entrenched in a civil war where frontlines were blurred and the distinction between perpetrators and victims not always clear” (Erforth, 2020a:2). The Tuareg population in the north of the country launched an uprising attempting to create an independent state. Seeing the inadequate response from the Malian government, the military took over the rebellion, and Amadou Haya Sanogo seized power from President Amound Toumani Touré in a coup d'état. In January 2013, at the request of Touré and due to the AQIM threatening Paris, two Gazelle helicopters landed in Burkina Faso, and four Mirage fighters and additional special forces arrived in N'Djamena. France launched its war in the Sahel with the life-saving Operation Serval, which ended the French non-interventionist policy in Africa. Thanks to François Hollande's military campaign (to save Mali and preserve its sovereignty), a few weeks later the French administration deployed 4,500 French troops in war-torn Mali, the largest deployment since the Algerian war. According to the French perspective, without their intervention, Mali would have ended up in the arms of terrorists (Erforth, 2020a:54-60; Vecsey, 2014:206; Erforth, 2021b:8-14). In the eyes of the local population, Serval had a strong pragmatic legitimacy, as they intervened in a critical situation in a timely and effective manner. However, as France was a former colonial country, there was little ideological legitimacy⁷ (Sabrow, 2016:19-20).

Most experts considered Serval as a model to follow in the history of French military policy since it was a strategically successful operation, and it did not cost astronomical sums of money. French participation in the fight against terrorism has once again become legitimate in West African countries. The UNSC also hailed Serval as a success, nevertheless, in response to the ongoing crisis, MINUSMA's blue helmets invaded Mali. Despite the failures in Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda, the

French under Hollande embarked on a new pro-interventionist policy across Africa, centered on crisis-ridden Mali. In the fall of 2014, during the third phase of Serval, the French began to play an expanding counter-terrorism role, increasingly working with MINUSMA, local Malian forces, and EUTM Mali. By July, Operation Epervier and Serval merged. The last mission of this joint operation was to “search for Algerian flight AH5017, which crashed on 24 July 2014, bringing to an end a year and a half of operations in Mali and giving way to the next”⁸ (Vecsey, 2014:210). Although the French saw the operation as mission accomplished, it was only partially completed and reorganized in the summer of 2014, running under the name Barkhane (Vecsey, 2014:210; Charbonneau, 2017:323-324,338).

Operation Barkhane - The Sahel’s “life insurance”

Barkhane began on 1 August 2014 with the mission to strengthen the coordination of international military units, to launch a pre-emptive strike against jihadist forces before they establish new sanctuaries, and to assist the armed forces of the G5 Sahel countries. It was designed to operate on a wider territorial scale, with the justification that regional actors should be able to participate in their security, as best illustrated by the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. The headquarters were deployed in N’Djamena, Chad and in Gao, Mali, supplemented by temporary forward bases which the commander could use to assemble occasional combat formations when needed. In 2017, Emmanuel Macron said that Operation Barkhane was subordinate to and complementary to the UN’s MINUSMA. The French President, hand-in-hand with a broad section of French society, believes that Mali’s sovereignty can guarantee Europe’s security (Erforth, 2020b:11-12; Vecsey, 2014: 211; Ministère des Armées, 2021c). Until recently 5,100 French troops have been fighting and have been working together closely with the participants of the Takuba Task Force. Momentarily, Barkhane has started its strategic transformation by merging into the Takuba Task Force. Up until fall 2021, the G5S Joint Force worked under a joint command (Ministère des Armées, 2021a; Ministère des Armées, 2021c:8-10; Armée française - Opérations militaires, 2020a; Buzna, 2020).

In the G5S countries, Operation Barkhane has been ensuring the security of the region. Since the Pau summit, multilateral cooperation is based on coordination, concentration, and continuous effort. A major criticism of the French presence is that they support authoritarian regimes in the region, which is one of the main causes of the rampant instability. Despite the historic French-African relations dating back many years, Barkhane, through its military operation, will simply not be able to create the state frameworks and regional governance structures that are urgently needed. The main task of the operation is counter-terrorism, so Barkhane’s troops cannot be expected to address all the challenges of the region, including the deeply rooted political problems of weak statehood that undermine not only Barkhane’s operations but also its covert participation and civilian missions (Ministère des Armées, 2021c:8-10; Charbonneau, 2017:337-340).

The limits of the G5S Joint Force

To date, both the missions of the G5S Joint Force (G5SJF) and the operations of the Takuba Task Force were integrated into Barkhane, operating under a Joint Command Mechanism since the Pau summit. Operating since 2017 and supported with French assistance, a 5,000-strong contingent of the G5S Joint Force is made up of soldiers from the G5S countries with the main aim of enforcing peace. Compared to the size of the territory and the French forces, its strength is limited. The G5SJF has not yet made the expected progress, but it is an excellent complement to the other integrated missions because the local African soldiers have better knowledge of the place and culture than legionnaires ever could have. Furthermore, according to experts' projections, this corps will be able to take over the role of the Barkhane in ten years in the best-case scenario (Boserup and Martinez, 2018:44; *The Economist*, 2021a; Bak, 2020:42-57;62; Çonkar, 2020; Ministère des Armées, 2020).

Alarmingly, there is concern that in recent years there have been several allegations of human rights abuses committed by G5SJF soldiers. In 2019, there were more than 600 cases of unlawful security incidents committed by African security forces in the region. To determine how many of these soldiers have been involved in unlawful arrests and killings, further investigations are needed, which these weak states cannot provide. Since the G5S Joint Force is virtually integrated into Operation Barkhane, this means that the French military presence is heavily influenced by these worrying factors. Assessments show that both Barkhane and MINUSMA serve as deterrents to prevent these human rights violations from happening. If they do occur, these operations also help to bring such cases to the surface, and the families of the victims receive answers and, in some cases, compensation (Human Rights Watch, 2021; *The Economist*, 2021b).

Compared to its limited capacities, the mandate of the G5SJF is over-ambitious. In sync with the five countries' cooperation objectives, the aim is not only to stop organized crime, human trafficking, and jihadist terrorism but also to help with humanitarian and development projects and the return of internally displaced persons. Under pressure from Western countries, particularly the USA and France, involvement in development projects was relegated to the background and the emphasis was placed on security cooperation. This has created a sort of deadlock: without development programs, military responses alone cannot solve the region's problems, and at the same time, armed operations are less likely to perform effectively without adequate resources and assets (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2018). Today the distrust of local communities remains an obstacle as well. As emphasized in the previous sections, violence and arbitrary arrests result in disillusioned crowds who can fall straight into the web of jihadist terrorist networks. In the long run, to prevent these violations and to properly control the local army corps of soldiers, a sustained political and financial commitment will be needed from both the G5S countries and international partners supporting the joint force (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2018).

European beacon of hope: The Takuba Task Force

Engaging in the Liptako-Gourma region, Takuba Task Force is the new ray of hope for France, especially because after consulting with Malian authorities, the French President has once again played a major role in setting it up. Launched in 2020, an operational team of around 600 special forces troops reinforces the first pillar of the Sahel Coalition. The corps consists of troops from EU member states including Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Germany, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and Estonia. Besides, Norway and the UK have joined this initiative as well. In the future, Hungarian participation can be expected as the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade earlier declared engagement. The participants of Barkhane are committed to working with the European Takuba Task Force of a few hundred people. The EU Task Force has been operating under Barkhane's command since the summer of 2020, but from September 2021, Barkhane started merging into the Takuba Task Force. Until the Malian soldiers can secure their area on their own, the Task Force will assist them in the field and provide technical advice. This EU operation is a milestone in the Sahel crisis, the importance of which Emmanuel Macron has long stressed (Ministère des Armées, 2021a; Ministère des Armées, 2021c:23; France24, 2021; Faleg and Palleschi, 2020: 37; Campbell, 2020; László and Dócza, 2021).

The capacities and the strategic lines of effort

As for the key strategic guidelines, Operation Barkhane's main goal is to ensure that the troops in the Sahel can one day provide their security through a coordinated, effective, and collective strategy. The first strategic pillar focuses on defeating jihadist terrorist groups and eliminating other armed groups, which includes the threat of firefights as well as the search and destruction of communication assets, weapons, and vehicles (i.e., Kalashnikovs, motorbikes, or improvised explosive devices). The second strategic pillar is support for Sahelian troops, which involves training programs and armed assistance in the field. Serving as the third pillar, it is also a goal to encourage local communities to turn with confidence to their fellow Africans if they notice anything out of the ordinary or if they require assistance. These components make up Barkhane's area-based crisis management strategy, which is currently focused on the "tri-border" zone, but it can also respond in other parts of the region if necessary (Ministère des Armées, 2021b:8-10; Armée française - Opérations militaires, 2020a; Buzna, 2020).

In the last few years, the neutralization of cadres of terrorist groups has become a priority. Barkhane has achieved success in

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this area: in the fall of 2019, the number two religious leader of the GSIM, Abou Abderrahman al Maghrebi, was killed near Timbuktu. Subsequently, in the spring and summer of 2020, Barkhane soldiers, with the help of their partners, also neutralized the AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel and a key ISGS figure, Mohamed el Mrabat. In the fall of 2020, they also managed to neutralize a key GSIM military leader, Bah ag Moussa, in the Menaka region, and last summer they successfully took out the emir of the ISGS (Ministère des Armées, 2021a, Ministère des Armées, 2021b:8-10; Tull, 2021:1).

In line with the second strategic principle and in addition to providing the necessary equipment, since the beginning of Barkhane more than 18,000 local soldiers have been trained from the G5 Sahel countries. In 2020, 5,100 soldiers participated in professional training programs from Niger, Chad, and Mali. Intending to deepen their professional skills, these theoretical and practical training sessions included international human rights lectures, joint patrols, joint operations, training, and shooting exercises. The French troops have provided training for 3,700 personnel in the Malian army, including 127 joint operations and 71 pre-deployment training sessions. The French Ministry of Defense is providing its dedicated support to carry on these training sessions to make the Sahelian armies as operational and deployable as possible (Ministère des Armées, 2021b:12-13,30-31).

A crucial element is that, under Barkhane, French soldiers increasingly involve their Malian counterparts in counter-terrorism operations. For example, they have recently developed an updated attack strategy to track down jihadist groups. This new strategy is based on mobilizing local soldiers to move around in desert terrain as quickly as possible. That is why they use the same equipment as terrorist groups, including motorcycles and smaller trucks that are easier to handle than armored fighting vehicles. The usage of these more common vehicles can also be advantageous because spare parts can be easily found almost anywhere in the region. Dozens of motorcycles, pick-up trucks, machine guns, signaling equipment, and radio equipment have been added to the Sahelian stockpile, in line with the creation of new and modern rapid reaction and intelligence units (Ministère des Armées, 2021b:14-15; Armée française- Opérations militaires, 2020a).

Serving as a counter-insurgency operation and in line with the third strategic pillar, protecting civilians and building trust with locals is a significant part of the mission. Within their capacity, they provide free medical care to local communities if they are injured during an operation, which is a common scenario. It is important to see that French soldiers also serve in civilian missions, whether it is to provide water supplies or to conduct educational and infrastructure projects. Barkhane may be primarily engaged in armed missions targeting jihadist terrorist networks, but French soldiers also regularly work with local regional bodies, international organizations, NGOs, and aid workers of civilian missions assisting with development projects (Ministère des Armées, 2021c:15-18).

Currently there are 280 armored vehicles, 400 reconnaissance and logistics vehicles, and 220 light armored combat vehicles at their disposal (Ministère des

Armées, 2021b:24-30). Air assets play a key role in counter-terrorism operations, as they can cover long distances in a short time in the event of an alert or attack, which is particularly useful in desert areas. Most of the assets are located at air bases in Chad including 20 helicopters, seven Mirage 200s, eight strategic transport aircraft, and three Reaper unmanned fighter aircraft. These unmanned aerial vehicles are used frequently during Barkhane, some of which have been equipped with bombs that enabled them to be used not only for intelligence but also during combat. Moreover, modern military technology has resulted in 40% of their airstrikes being carried out by three drones available (Tull, 2021; Ministère des Armées, 2021b:24-30). Today, the French forces are much more skilled and have more combat experience than local African troops. It appears that the armed rebel groups, criminal groups, and jihadist groups fear the Barkhane's troops more than the G5S Joint Force. However, the local military units in Burkina Faso and Mali still face fundamental structural problems. It is precisely for this reason that Emmanuel Macron decided to increase the number of Barkhane troops by another 600 after the 2020 summit. However, with the ongoing reorganization process the size of the French troops and the number of assets may be reduced soon (Goya, 2021; Bak, 2020:58).

Such a huge area demands an extremely precise, professional logistics team. The climate in the Sahel is often challenging and the desert areas are not always easy to navigate by land vehicles. Yet, given the situation, Barkhane's forces are rapidly deployable, very flexible, and able to operate for quite some time in areas far from central bases, thanks to the 14 different bases on which logistical support is built across Africa. In terms of logistics and aerial equipment, it is important to note that Spain, the United States of America, Germany, and Canada provide the greatest support (Ministère des Armées, 2021b:28-29).

French soldiers and their fellow missionaries have been daily subjected to deadly attacks in this highly complex terrain. Under Barkhane, until September 2021, 51 French citizens have lost their lives. Worryingly, almost 30 of these casualties occurred in the last two years (Tull, 2021:3; Ministère des Armées, 2021b:32-33). Footage and photos published by the online press and on the official online platforms of the French army provide insight into the difficulties French and African soldiers face in the field, and an understanding of the complexity of the situation. One may see that there are human beings beneath the military uniforms, bulletproof vests, and helmets. Being on a military mission in the Sahel is a man-trying task, which involves sacrifice and courage. Serving in the French Foreign Legion requires a great deal of discipline and ability: "Every legionnaire is your brother-in-arms, whatever his nationality, (...) or religion," one soldier sums up (France 24 English, 2018, 2:10. min.; Armée française - Opérations militaires, 2020b).

Evaluation and the road to transformation

Until the fall of 2021, the French Defense Ministry evaluated the operation as a huge success. According to French Defense Minister Florence Parly and her predecessor Jean-Yves Le Drian, serving as the current Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs,

Operation Barkhane was working excellently. To support this conclusion, between 2014 and 2017 French forces neutralized more than 400 terrorists and destroyed 22 tonnes of weapons (Ministère des Armées, 2021c; Boserup and Martinez, 2018:40). However, at the moment the success and effectiveness of the operation are being re-evaluated by Paris. In mid-September, the most up-to-date press kit of Barkhane was published, with amendments in-sync with Macron's summer announcement on terminating the operation. Starting from the observation that the format of Operation Barkhane was no longer adapted to the reality and situation in the Sahel, Macron announced the transformation of the military system for the benefit of their Sahelian partners. According to the plans supported by the leaders of the G5 Sahel countries, the French troops will be halved. Barkhane will undergo a reorganization process and will contribute to the missions of the Takuba Task Force. The new structure has two main axes: fight against terrorism and promote the powerful rise of partner armies. It is in this spirit that the French military system began a transformation in the Sahel starting in September 2021, which will continue throughout 2022 (Ministère des Armées, 2021b:4; Ministère des Armées, 2021a; Campbell, 2021). In addition, in August, the interim leadership of Chad announced that as "an act of strategic redeployment" they would reduce and redeploy its troops from the G5S Joint Force in the "three-borders" zone (Africa News, 2021).

In August 2021, Adnan Abou Walid al Sahraoui, leader of the ISGS, was neutralized. The terrorist died of injuries from an air strike by the Barkhane forces. He was neutralized as part of a large-scale operation targeting ten additional terrorists. In mid-September during an official press conference, the Minister of the Armed Forces, Florence Parly, and the chief executive of the DGSE⁹ made a declaration. They confirmed that the neutralization of the leader of the jihadist group was a huge success and a decisive blow to the organization. In the future, the priority is that French troops will continue the fight against terrorism, but the counter-terrorism operations will change significantly, especially with the European special forces. The main goal has not changed: they still want to prevent the local wings of ISIS and Al-Qaeda from using the region as their rear. Parly highlighted that this success illustrates efficient cooperation with the intelligence services, the French soldiers, and the hard work of the Sahelian troops. "This is teamwork", she said (Ministère des Armées, 2021a; Amiel, 2021), adding the following: "We, Europeans, have a collective responsibility to secure the southern flank of Europe. It is essential not to allow the Sahel and more broadly Africa to become a shelter and expansion area for these terrorist groups" (Amiel, 2021). Unfortunately, "recent attacks in Burkina Faso and Niger have sparked concern that France's reduced presence will create a vacuum that will benefit jihadist groups" (Amiel, 2021).

Caroline Roussy, a researcher at the Institute of International and Strategic Relations, told Euronews that "despite the upcoming end of Barkhane, French forces in Mali 'oddly' seemed to be currently 'very active' with the French Army issuing daily communications on its operations. (...) Is it the last big push before the end?" she wondered, noting that the French government probably wants to showcase results in

Mali ahead of the 2022 presidential election” (Amiel, 2021). According to Roussy, the steps the French have taken could be “a message to other world powers tempted to expand their influence in the Sahel as Paris scales down its troops” (Amiel, 2021). One thing is certain: Macron’s administration is striving to convince more European partners to be committed to the G5 Sahel countries.

When it comes to criticism, the operation led by Macron’s France has wittingly or unwittingly become entangled in the internal politics of Mali and it is still too focused on the fight against terrorism, even though this is not the only cause of instability in the region (Tull, 2021:3-4). At the G5S summit in February 2021, Macron admitted that radical Islamist groups had not yet been neutralized, but he credits Paris with having curbed their expansion in the “tri-border” area. Macron has stressed that there can be no talk of victory until the states of the Liptoko-Gourma region regain their sovereignty, a difficult task according to French discourse because historically there has never been full sovereignty in these territories (Châtelot, 2021; Présidence de la République, 2021; Roussy, 2021). During the winter summit of 2021, the French President also drew attention to the limits of French intervention because there are often unspoken expectations from the French that they have not accepted. According to Barkhane’s new strategy, the current aim is not to fight all the armed forces in the region, as that would be a never-ending war. Yet this is often the very reason why the French presence is criticized (Le Monde, 2021; Présidence de la République, 2021).

In this “chaotic mess”, it is no wonder that some of the missions are failing. In the G5 Sahel countries, the enemy is different for each party. Determining whether an individual is a jihadist terrorist, an insurgent gunman or an ordinary civilian is very difficult based on external characteristics. In any case, the Sahelian terrain is a high-risk factor, but without risk, these countries may forever remain in the shackles of instability. As with all international interventions, the French military presence has had its side effects. France and the G5 Sahel countries have developed a kind of security partnership that creates a sense of security for African countries (Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen, 2020:872-874). Over the past few months, Macron and his top advisers have begun to see that it is not necessarily the case that Paris should continue to prevent the Sahelian political leadership from negotiating with jihadist groups if it avoids putting an end to the ongoing attacks. The Macron administration has previously stated that they would never deal with terrorist troops. For France, negotiating with members of extremist networks would be a total political and strategic failure. On the contrary, hoping to reduce casualties, Burkina Faso and Mali have already achieved small success from negotiations with the enemy. Macron’s policy on Africa continues to emphasize the sovereignty of the G5 Sahel states, so it is not sure that the Sahelian elites will heed French advice (Tull, 2021:2).

6. Conclusion and Prognosis

In light of the discussion above, the argument in this study has support: although the French military presence contributes significantly to ensure security in the G5 Sahel countries, they cannot ensure it alone due to the instability of the region. Operation

Barkhane alone cannot constitute the “cure” for the ongoing crisis because a military response alone will not suffice. As Campbell posits, “In hindsight, the French military presence has been too small in a vast region to be transformative” (2021).

One must understand the limits of the French forces who cannot be expected to be stationed in the Sahel forever. Despite Barkhane’s tactical successes and its major contribution to the stabilization of the region, no major progress has been made. The G5 Sahel countries continue to be incapable of enforcing either the law or providing security, which makes it easy for jihadists to manipulate segments of the population. Hardly a day goes by without armed attacks and atrocities against civilians. Total withdrawal is not an option since that would mean the jihadists have won the battle and Barkhane has given up the fight. If the new transformation and reorganization plans of the operation are not implemented efficiently, there is a fear that the troubling situation in the region could escalate further (Le Monde, 2021; Tull, 2021:3-4).

Today, the French public opposes the French military presence in the Sahel, and Macron must listen to these voices since elections are coming up in the spring of 2022. For the future, what Macron and the French Ministry of Defense envisage for French foreign engagements could be crucial since Barkhane has been placing huge financial burdens on France. As for the expenses of Barkhane, it cost €695 million in 2019 and nearly €1 billion in 2020, representing 76% of foreign defense spending. The president will have to consider the extent of the French participation if he wants to keep his title as the president of France (Tull, 2021:3; Le Monde, 2021).



^ Figure 4. Unity in strength: Training of partner armed forces in Mali (Source: Armée française - Opérations militaires, 2021)

At this point, the question arises: can Jihadism be defeated at all if the French reduce their military capacity? Experience illustrates the opposite: “The French strategy has been to hold off the jihadists to allow the states in the region to develop the capacity to see to their defense. The longer they stayed, the French sought to ‘internationalize’ their involvement, seeking the participation of other EU states—the motivation behind Takuba—to complement Barkhane and MINUSMA, (...) and emphasizing that the lead should be taken by the African governments under threat” (Campbell, 2021). In the Sahel, there is no doubt that the French surge has been successful in neutralizing key figures from AQIM and ISGS and winning clashes, but the operation failed to make a major difference. No matter how much money is invested in Operation Barkhane, the military response will not be sufficient to eradicate Jihadism in the Sahel because local communities have been unable to rely on local governments for decades; these weak states have been undermining the operations of Barkhane all along. Although Paris is involved in several development programs, clear successes are yet to be seen. France’s ray of hope is the Takuba Task Force, still in its infancy, which would lead the counter-terrorism operations in the future, while the local G5S Joint Force is not ready to fight all the security challenges in the region (Boserup and Martinez, 2018:43-44; The Economist, 2021a; The Economist, 2021b; Aimel, 2021).

Overall, the French military presence with Barkhane in all its dimensions has been serving as life insurance for the G5 Sahel countries. Until the ongoing human security challenges improve and the other three pillars of the Sahel Coalition are emphasized, the French counter-terrorism operations cannot succeed completely. Experts say that, ultimately, this conflict must be resolved by the governments of the region. The training of African soldiers to take up the fight against the various armed groups in the region is becoming more and more important, but it should be remembered that making local forces more effective and rapidly mobilizable does not mean that the poor governance and dubious security institutions of weak states will reform themselves overnight and will rise from their ashes like phoenixes. One of the most critical tasks now is to restore local governments, which frequently fail to reach out to the periphery, to positively influence the distrustful and disillusioned classes that often opt for the violent alternative offered by jihadist groups instead. Macron’s France cannot carry this burden alone forever. Ultimately, the G5 Sahel countries cannot become France’s “Afghanistan”. In support of my argument, I believe that the multilateral framework with an effective and larger-scale global coalition can work in the future. Operation Barkhane could not and will not be able to implement this dangerous and challenging task alone. However, as long as the G5 Sahel countries face such diverse challenges, military solutions alone will not be sufficient (Matisek, 2020:110; Powell 2016; The Economist, 2021a; Tull, 2021; Erforth, 2020; Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen, 2020:872-874). ☀

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Notes

- ¹ Mauritania has 134, Mali has 129, and Niger has 123 points.
- ² État islamique dans le Grand Sahara (EIGS) in French
- ³ Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in Arabic
- ⁴ Author's translation. Original Hungarian quote by Viktor Marsai: "Hiába van ott ötezer francia katona, ötmillió négyzetkilométerre ez édeskevés. A gyenge államiság miatt a helyi erők mit sem érnek. A Burkina Fasó-i hadsereg például még sosem vett részt fegyveres konfliktusban, nekik kellene a harcedzett dzsihadistákkal felvenniük a harcot. (...) ezek [a terrorista] a szervezetek a helyi társadalomból nőnek ki, nagyon alacsony költségekkel tudnak nagyon hatékonyan működni. Mondok egy példát: ha valamelyik törzsi vezető beteg gyereket el tudják vinni egy kórházba, máris megnyertek maguknak egy csoportot. Elég hozzá egy fuvar, egy kanna benzin, néhány száz dollár" (László, 2021).
- ⁵ At present, Operation MINUSMA provides logistical assistance to the G5S Joint Force, but does not provide them with human resources, even though Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad together provide almost 4,000 troops to the UN peacekeeping mission.
- ⁶ Since the French Revolution defense consciousness is an important element of the French national identity.
- ⁷ Despite its short lifetime AFISMA received more positive support from local communities, which was replaced by MINUSMA in 2013 July.
- ⁸ Author's translation. Original Hungarian quote: "Az Operation Serval utolsó műveleteként a 2014. július 24-én lezuhant algériai AH5017-es járat felkutatását aposztrofálták, amellyel egy másfél éve tartó korszak zárult le Maliban és adta át a helyét egy következőnek" (Vecsey, 2014:210).
- ⁹ Directorate-General for External Security, France' foreign intelligence agency.

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