

RESEARCH ARTICLE

French Operation Barkhane in Africa – success or failure?

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Abstract

Operation Barkhane began in August 2014 and was a continuation of Operation Serval, targeting Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) structures. The main objective of the French armed presence was to support the local military forces in the fight against terrorism, coordinate the international coalition and support the humanitarian action for the benefit of the local population. The aim of the article is to systematize knowledge and investigate the activities of French entities, also within the EU missions, obliged to fight against terrorism in the Sahel, carrying out the largest antiterrorism operation in Sub-Saharan Africa. France's strategic objective was to help the Sahel countries achieve military self-reliance so that they could provide security and stability in the region without the assistance of foreign forces. Ultimately, France decided to withdraw its soldiers from Mali and Burkina Faso at the beginning of 2022 and had terminated its mission earlier. It was the end of Barkhane and the French antiterrorism involvement on a high scale level in the Sahel. The decision to withdraw has a number of implications for international involvement in the region and will greatly weaken the level of security in the region. This would be very dangerous for Europe, which is not ready for another wave of migration, as well as the international threat of terrorism. It must be indicated that France have maintained a relatively secure situation in the Sahel region.

Keywords

Operation Barkhane, antiterrorism, Sahel, France, Africa, Russia

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Introduction

There has been a long history of the French Republic's involvement in Africa. It has entailed many aspects in which Paris has pursued objectives of a political, military, economic, but also social character. One of the largest military missions, both in terms of the number of French soldiers involved and the area in which they operated, is Operation Barkhane (French: *l'Opération Barkhane*), which officially came to an end on 9th November 2022, according to a statement made by French President Emmanuel Macron. Barkhane began in mid-2014, being a continuation of Operation Serval, targeting Al-Qaeda structures in the Islamic Maghreb. As far back as 2013, at the request of the Malian government, France decided on a military intervention aimed at neutralising the terrorist environment present in the Sahel region.

The main objective of the French military deployment was to support local military forces in the fight against terrorism, coordinate the international coalition and support humanitarian action in favour of the local population.¹ After almost a decade, France withdrew from the Sahel and its military presence in Mali and Burkina Faso became illegal. In addition, currently French forces are struggling with the military regimes in Niger, Guinea, Chad and Sudan.²

The aim of the article is to systematize knowledge and investigate the activities of French entities, also within the EU missions, obliged to fight against terrorism in the Sahel, carrying out the largest antiterrorism operation in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the author's opinion, some actions and projects were incorrectly planned and not adjusted to the scale of the challenge. France, after almost 10 years, was not only forced to withdraw all soldiers from the most vulnerable regions, but also was not able to secure and stabilise peaceful and democratic governments, *e.g.* in Niger. Furthermore, based on the conducted research, it is also possible to develop a concept for organizing future antiterrorist missions on the African continent.

This article is a comprehensive account of French activities as part of the Barkhane mission, which will be a signpost for further research on military operations in the Sahel, especially in the context of the military coup in this region between 2022 and 2023, *i.e.* in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, Chad and Sudan. The mission carried out by France, that can be perceived as both success and failure, serves also as a very valuable lesson for other superpowers (USA, Russia, China, UK) and international organisations (EU, North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], United Nations [UN]) should they plan any military involvement in the Sahel.

¹ A. Olech, *Zagraniczna aktywność militarna Republiki Francuskiej* (Poznań: Kontekst, 2022).

² W. Repetowicz, "Afryka płonie. Prorosyjski efekt domina w Sahelu," accessed July 20, 2023, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/afryka-plonie-prorosyjski-efekt-domina-w-sahelu>.

Methods

Conducting research on the French mission in the Sahel requires appropriate organization, planning and verification. The study's objective was to develop scientific understanding of the French armed forces in the Sahel region and to compare theories with facts regarding the perception of success or failure of the Barkhane mission. The following research questions were formulated: 1) What was the aim of the mission and was it achieved? 2) Is it possible to carry out missions on the territory of five different states? 3) Why did France decide to end the Barkhane mission? 4) Is it likely that any other country will carry out an analogous mission against terrorism in the Sahel?

In order to organize the considerations, reach the goal presented above, and clarify the research problem, the following research hypotheses have been adopted:

1) Analysis of the most crucial solutions applied by France in the Sahel will enable to adjust future antiterrorism operation in Africa;

2) Basing on the methods applied by the French and the EU forces may significantly increase the ability and effectiveness of counterterrorist activities in Sub-Saharan Africa especially in the context of cooperation with authoritarian regimes;

3) The ineffectiveness in eliminating terrorists for several years proves the lack of tools to fight them and is the basis for terminating the military operation;

4) French public opinion was very negative towards French involvement in Barkhane, which despite huge expenses, exposed France to constant losses, both financial and image-wise.³

The given scientific hypotheses have been set on the basis of research conducted on official documents, reports, press reports, expert statements, articles, analyses, and other published documents and are related to the state of knowledge on French military engagement in the Sahel. Moreover, research was conducted in the France in the years 2019–2023, where it was possible to participate in conferences, round tables and debates, as well as conduct conversations and interviews (within the previous book of the author) with leading French specialists in the field of international security and Africa.⁴

Due to the fact that Barkhane has ended at the end of 2023 and some French soldiers are still on the African continent, many reports and summaries have not yet been published. Hence, one of the key elements were the descriptions provided by the French Armed Forces and international media. The query limited searches to individual missions carried out by France or to specific dates of

³ D. Doukhan, "The End of Operation Barkhane," accessed July 20, 2023, https://ict.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Doukhan_End-of-Operation-Barkhane_2022_11_27.pdf.

⁴ A. Olech, *French and Polish fight against terrorism* (Poznan: Kontekst, 2022).

maintaining the Barkhane mission. It was crucial to verify the actual effectiveness of the fight against jihadists – through the increasing control of African governments over their own territory, as well as the reduced activity of terrorists in the Sahel.

The French involvement in Barkhane presented in this article has not been deeply described in the scientific matter before. Most analyses are concentrated on a superficial and general view of the number of French troops involved in the mission. There is a lack of studies focused on French foreign military involvement in Barkhane. No detailed study of challenges for France during mission in the Sahel has been conducted to date in English, Polish or Russian. Although numerous studies have addressed the issue of terrorism in Europe⁵ or Africa, hardly any have been published on how France has gradually minimised its presence in the Sahel so far. It is therefore necessary to comprehensively verify and identify the most relevant solutions employed by France during Barkhane mission, which have proven to be effective, as well as to highlight the emerging threats facing the Sahel, which are of fundamental importance for carrying out military operations in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Concentrating on the Barkhane mission there are many elements that should be pillars of research article, including *e.g.*, details of the military presence, cooperation with the EU and the UN, reasons for the end of the mission, and lessons learnt on how to conduct similar operations in the future. It must be emphasised that all activities in Africa bearing the hallmarks of antiterrorism are fundamental to maintaining security not only in the country and on the continent but also have an impact on Europe, especially with regard to the huge influx of migrants to the European Union (EU), mainly to France. In the grand scheme of things, French forces are working to neutralise terrorist threats before they reach the EU territory.

Functioning of the mission

The French army carried out operations in partnership with the countries of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel), which comprises: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The strategic objective of France was to help the Sahel countries achieve military independence so that they could ensure security and stability in the region without the assistance of foreign forces. Humanitarian support missions were closely linked to the military aspect of the operation, as favourability shown by the local population towards the international coalition preventing the creation of new locations where terrorists could find refuge. The French operation against terrorism in the Sahel was a difficult and demanding mission due to the vast area of activity. French troops had to operate on the territory of five countries, the total area of which is comparable to that of the EU countries. Until the beginning of June 2021, around 5100 French soldiers were involved in the operation, mainly in

⁵ A. Olech, *Walka z terroryzmem. Polskie rozwiązania a francuskie doświadczenia* (Warszawa: Difin, 2021).

Mali, Niger and Chad (with the command headquarters located in the capital of Chad, N'Djamena), supporting and training the forces of the G5 Sahel countries. The UK and Estonia also participated in the operation since 2018, with Denmark joining in December 2019. American, Italian and Spanish forces were also present in the region.⁶

In addition to French forces, around 3000 troops from the G5 countries took part in Operation Barkhane, depending on the actions taken. The costs of the mission after eight years were estimated to be quite extensive, ranging between EUR 650 million and EUR 1 billion per year.⁷ Another important aspect was support for the local population. Thanks to such initiatives, they were more likely to refuse to cooperate with terrorists. In 2020, more than 130 combat and 100 civil-military operations were carried out, which improved, among others: access to water, energy and education in the region.⁸ In addition to theoretical and tactical knowledge, France also supported the troops of the Sahel countries materially, offering vehicles and broadcasting stations that significantly improved the effectiveness of African armies. French bases (permanent and temporary presence) were located in Mali, Niger and Chad.

The French army cooperated with the Group of Five countries for the Sahel. Soldiers from these countries took part in French-led operations. The active policy of the French towards their former colonies is an important element of local security structures, as the above-mentioned countries are among the poorest in the world and without external support their armed forces are unable to provide security for the civilian population.

As part of European cooperation with the Malian military, France organised a special group called Task Force Takuba to support operations in the Liptako-Gourma region, where the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (Arabian: *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin*, JNIM)⁹ pose the greatest threat. This counter-terrorism structure aimed at expanding the anti-terrorist activities already underway in the region at that time. It consisted of a command centre, two tactical groups (French-Czech and French-Estonian) and a Swedish rapid response force stationed in the city of Gao and Ménaka. Task Force Takuba was characterised by a high degree of autonomy, which greatly

⁶ J. Deveaux, "G5-Sahel: quatre pays d'Europe montent à bord," FranceInfo, January 18, 2018, accessed July 20, 2022, London supported the G5 operations by supplying them with Chinook helicopters, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/politique-africaine/g5-sahel-quatre-pays-d-europe-montent-a-bord_3055657.html.

⁷ L. Larcher, "Opération Barkhane: quelles conséquences en cas de retrait français du Sahel?," La Croix, February 15, 2021, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Operation-Barkhane-queelles-consequences-cas-retrait-francais-Sahel-2021-02-15-1201140760>.

⁸ Ministère des Armées, "Opération Barkhane," accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/bande-sahelo-saharienne/operation-barkhane>.

⁹ Bah Ag Moussa, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/bah-ag-moussa>.

enhanced its operational activities. The establishment of that operational group was of particular importance for the G5 Sahel force, which, after restructuring and the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, numbered seven battalions (550 soldiers and 100 police officers or gendarmes), among which two each were fielded by Mali and Niger, and one each by Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. A total of 10 EU countries were part of the mission: France, Estonia, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Italy, Denmark, Portugal, Belgium, Greece and the Netherlands. However, only half of them committed to sending troops. France, Estonia, Sweden (although the Swedes later withdrew) and Italy sent personnel of 100, 40, 150 and 200 respectively. Operations were originally to be conducted 50 km from the border, but after the Pau Summit it was agreed that this area could be extended.¹⁰

One of the largest operations that French forces can boast of was the neutralisation of Bah ag Moussa, the military commander of the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) terrorist group. It is also worth mentioning operations Monclar or Bourrasque, carried out within the framework of Barkhane, which involved 5000 and 3000 troops respectively.¹¹ Operation Monclar, carried out in March 2020 and lasting three weeks, was aimed at neutralising the jihadists. Participating units found and destroyed numerous militant hideouts along with their military equipment.¹² Operation Bourrasque was launched a few months later, on 28th September. It ended on 1st November 2020. The operation was conducted in cooperation with the Malian and Nigerian armed forces, with the support of their English, American and Danish counterparts, and was intended to permanently weaken armed terrorist groups. The main tasks of the operation included the control of designated zones and their inhabitants, searches, and the prosecution of terrorists.¹³ Both Monclar and Bourrasque have contributed to weakening the military capabilities of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in North Africa.

Gradual French withdrawal

At the beginning of June 2021, President Emmanuel Macron announced a reduction in the number of French forces in the Sahel region, thereby initiating a paradigm shift in the Barkhane mission, resulting in losing its status as a foreign operation (French: *les opérations extérieures*, OPEX). In an initial phase, it was planned

¹⁰ K. Danielewicz, "Task Force Takuba – nowe siły w rejonie Sahelu," Security in practice, April 15, 2020, accessed July 20, 2023, https://securityinpractice.eu/task-force-takuba-nowe-sily-w-rejonie-sahelu/#_ftn6.

¹¹ Ministère des Armées, "Opération Barkhane," <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/bande-sahelo-saharienne/operation-barkhane>.

¹² "2020 Operation Monclar in the Sahel," Foreign Legion Info, April 4, 2020, accessed July 20, 2023, <http://foreignlegion.info/2020/04/04/2020-operation-monclar-in-the-sahel/>.

¹³ Ministère des Armées, "Barkhane: Opération BOURRASQUE, une operation d'ampleur dans le Liptako," accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/actualites2/barkhane-operation-bourrasque-une-operation-d-ampleur-dans-le-liptako>.

to gradually reduce the number of troops from 5100 to around 2500.¹⁴ The decision came about a year after the number of soldiers had been raised by an additional 600 and was timed to be announced just before the G7 Summit in Cornwall in June, during which Emmanuel Macron tackled the issue of security in the Sahel, seen by Western countries as a high-risk area.¹⁵ Ultimately, the withdrawal of French troops took place throughout 2022, and on 9th November 2023, Macron formally announced Operation Barkhane as fully completed. It should be noted that some French troops were to remain on the ground.

It was intended that the presence of the French armed forces would be based on the activity of the special forces, which were tasked with combating organised terrorist groups in the Sabre mission.¹⁶ France still planned its active involvement in the region, but the idea of the mission back then was transferred to a coalition of European troops within the framework of Operation Takuba comprising French, Estonian, Swedish and Czech troops. They were supported by Italian, Danish, Greek and Hungarian troops. The units were concentrated in the Gao region and in western Niger, where terrorist activity is greatest. The battle group was made up of 300–400 men, of which half were French, a small number of Czechs, Estonians, and nearly 140 Swedes. Italy and Denmark have each pledged up to 200 troops. However, this was still a long way from reaching the 2000 soldier ceiling announced by Emmanuel Macron at the end of the N'Djamena Summit in Chad in February 2021. Although the French president is credited with putting the Sahel on the European agenda, but concrete results had not been yet visible when the decision on French withdrawal was taken. The resistance of several nations, particularly Germany, made the situation more challenging. However, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell said in April 2021 that it was essential for Europe to understand that stability in the Sahel constituted one of the elements of European security, and that a greater commitment to achieving the said stability should gain a wider understanding.¹⁷ What stands in the face of these words is the lack of a quick reaction (or reaction at all) from European capitals to the French President's June 2021 announcement.

The deteriorating situation in the region and the impotence of the French military meant that the scenario of changing the operational model had been

¹⁴ “Le Pentagone maintiendra son soutien au Mali,” *La Presse*, June 11, 2021, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.lapresse.ca/international/afrique/2021-06-11/fin-de-l-operation-militaire-francaise/le-pentagone-maintiendra-son-soutien-au-mali.php>.

¹⁵ “No ‘immediate’ reduction of France’s Sahel force, says Macron,” *France 24*, February 16, 2021, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210216-france-will-step-up-anti-terror-efforts-in-the-sahel-says-macron>.

¹⁶ A special operation consisting of task forces with a staff of around 300–400 special operations soldiers based in Burkina Faso.

¹⁷ D. Goxho, “Pivoting Stabilisation in the Sahel: competing visions and implementation checkpoints,” Egmont, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/pivoting-stabilisation-in-the-sahel-competing-visions-and-implementation-checkpoints/>.

considered for a long time. The tactics and system used at that point to fight terrorists did not translate into increased stability in Mali, the country most affected by the activities of radical military organisations. This course of action forced Emmanuel Macron to act. The unstable political situation in Mali, which resulted, among other things, in a *coup d'état* in May, became an ideal pretext for changing the commitment of French forces in the Sahel, thereby leading to their reduction.¹⁸ Moreover, the upcoming presidential elections at the time also had a strong influence on the decision, as the majority of French society was opposed to Operation Barkhane due to the high financial outlay on the state budget and its low effectiveness. Another reason was the escalating discord between Paris and Bamako, provoked, among other things, by France's reluctance to enter into talks and negotiations with terrorists, pushed by the Malian government. The above-mentioned factors led Emmanuel Macron to decide that the Sahel states should take responsibility for their territory and citizens, forcing a reduction in the number of French soldiers.

In the end of 2022, the presence of the French military forces was banned in Burkina Faso and this country followed Mali's hard path. Moreover, both states agreed to host the Wagner Group (Russian Mercenaries – private military company) that clearly showed the strong relation between two Sahel countries and Russia.¹⁹ At that point, France was not able to carry out its military operation against jihadist being unable to fully operate on the territory of the G5 countries.

The change in the model of military presence revealed the true face of Operation Barkhane. The French government's narrative then maintained that it only brought benefits. In reality, this proved to be untrue. Another mistake was the increased spending on military operations, which were supposed to ensure stability. However, the resources were disproportionate to the effects of the mission. Such arguments repeated by those in power only created a nine-year illusion. The concentration of French efforts on military operations, while largely neglecting the political and social aspects, made any long-term and significant improvement difficult to discern, and any effects and successes were only temporary. France reorganised its army at the point when the military took over in Mali and the country was unable to ensure its security without external assistance and had no prospect of political stability in the future. Nevertheless, reduced French activity provided more opportunities for African states to propose their own solutions to the problem, including negotiations with terrorists (a form accepted in Africa and the Middle

¹⁸ T. Salaün, "Pressuring junta, France suspends joint military operations with Malian forces," *Reuters*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-suspends-joint-military-operations-with-malian-troops-2021-06-03>.

¹⁹ A. Olech *et al.*, "Militarne zaangażowanie Federacji Rosyjskiej w Afryce. Zawarte porozumienia i umowy," accessed July 10, 2023, <https://ine.org.pl/militarne-zaangazowanie-federacji-rosyjskiej-w-afryce-zawarte-porozumienia-i-umowy>.

East) and political dialogue. France has always been a firm opponent of such action, even despite the activities of the UN, which have led to the opening of 29 schools.²⁰

Any reduction in the number of French troops may have resulted in other countries making intensified attempts to increase their influence in the region under false pretences of stabilisation. Apart from France, the countries most involved in the area under discussion were then Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.²¹ In addition, there was intense competition for influence in the region, especially from China and Russia,²² and therefore after Emmanuel Macron's withdrawal there was little chance of any support for France from, for example, Poland.²³ At that point, the Sahel remained not only a region characterised by increased terrorist activity but also the Wagner Group. In view of the above, it must be said that the region gained very little from French and international assistance in terms of maintaining security.

French support for international missions

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was also supported by the French military. The mission was established under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100 (2013). In addition to the regular troops at the United Nations Command headquarters, France supported the mission with troops who stayed in the region as part of the Barkhane mission when needed. Around 14,000 personnels, consisting of soldiers and police officers, were involved in MINUSMA – the decade-long operation officially ended on 30th June 2023, with the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2690.

In addition, French forces were involved in EU operations in Africa. Established in 2013, under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085,²⁴ at the request of the Malian government, the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) was part of the security and development efforts of the EU in the Sahel region. It addressed the need to increase the capabilities of the Malian armed forces in

²⁰ M. Le Cam, "Fin de l'opération « Barkhane » : « Le sentiment anti-présence française monte au Mali ces derniers mois »," *Le Monde*, June 11, 2021, accessed July 10, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/live/2021/06/11/fin-progressive-de-l-operation-barkhane-au-sahel-posez-vos-questions_6083755_3212.html.

²¹ L. Lagneau, "Mali: La Russie va-t-elle profiter du dernier coup de force du colonel Goïta, désormais président par intérim?," *Zone Militaire*, May 29, 2021, accessed July 15, 2023, <http://www.opex360.com/2021/05/29/mali-la-russie-va-t-elle-profiter-du-dernier-coup-de-force-du-colonel-goita-desormais-president-par-interim/>.

²² "Mali: un consortium d'investisseurs contrôlés par des Russes veut financer le projet d'or Sanankoro," *Mines*, June 19, 2020, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.agenceecofin.com/investissement/1906-77678-mali-un-consortium-d-investisseurs-controles-par-des-russes-veut-financer-le-projet-d-or-sanankoro>.

²³ W. Repetowicz, "Ekspansja Rosji w Sahelu: Polska powinna wesprzeć Francję," accessed July 15, 2023, <https://www.defence24.pl/ekspansja-rosji-w-sahelu-polska-powinna-wesprzec-francje-opinia>.

²⁴ European Union External Action, "EU Training Mission in Mali," accessed July 10, 2023, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/csdp/missions-and-operations/eutm-mali/pdf/factsheet_eutm_mali_en.pdf.

order to ensure security there and to reduce the terrorist threat. The assistance provided by EUTM Mali consisted in developing the operational capabilities of Malian forces through military advice, training, education and mentoring. The mission activities were under the control of the legitimate civilian authorities of Mali and did not include combat operations. The mission was based in Bamako. In addition, there were two other civilian missions in the region: the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) and EUCAP Sahel. Ultimately, all foreign military missions were banned on the territory of Mali and Burkina Faso in 2023.

Challenges ahead

It must be stressed that after nine years of the Barkhane military operation, the balance of the French presence is negative. Although the French tactics can be called successful, the improvement and stabilisation in the region are hardly noticeable. Indeed, the assumptions were overly optimistic from the outset, and the idea of an apolitical mission, which stemmed from its anti-terrorist nature, and the subsequent creation of Task Force Takuba became a *de facto* shelter for the Bamako elite. This allowed them to pursue their own self-interested agendas rather than confronting the challenges in the region. It is worth noting precisely this fact, that Operation Barkhane was not associated with any political ambitions in general. The underlying assumption was indeed to stay out of Malian politics. It is visible, for instance, by the fact that the mission led by France stayed away from getting involved in politics and the violent impasse in Mali. Nevertheless, Barkhane's alleged apolitical nature was inconsistent and untrustworthy among Malians themselves, who failed to comprehend why separatist rebels instead of jihadists should have been used to liberate the northern cities. In this context, no one can deny Barkhane's involvement in domestic politics, and any attempt to suggest the opposite would only increase mistrust and rumours of France's covert (neo-colonialist) intentions.

Paris has made it clear that it does not intend to completely abandon the region, which is at risk of becoming even more destabilised and constitutes a strategic area for French interests. In fact, its full seizure by jihadists would be a manifestation of the failure of the Fifth Republic in the face of the measures it has taken since 2014. France is therefore keen on supporting the region, however it does not see itself as the only and main force. Several joint operations and partnership activities were carried out in the Sahel-Saharan strip in October 2021. These illustrate the good level of interoperability between Barkhane and partner forces such as the Desert Battle Group Tiger (French: *le groupement tactique désert Tigre*) or Auvergne Group (French: *le groupement tactique désert Auvergne*).²⁵ The

²⁵ Ministère des Armées, "Point de situation des opérations du vendredi 8 au jeudi 14 octobre 2021," accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/operations/points-de-situation/point-de-situation-des-operations-du-vendredi-8-au-jeudi-14-octobre-2021>.

reorganisation was aimed at concentrating the fight against terrorism in the three-border region and gradually transferring military command to African armies.

From May 2021 to July 2023, French forces struggled with military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, Chad, and Sudan. All French military engagement in the Sahel was significantly decreased, and Paris ceased to be the number one partner for the above-mentioned countries, both militarily and economically. After many years of trying to secure the Sahel region, the French forces had to withdraw due to the ability of terrorists to carry out constant attacks, and the commencement of the cooperation with Russia initiated by African juntas.

Conclusions

Barkhane represented a high priority foreign operation for the French Republic, which recognised the only chance to counter international terrorism through a military presence in West Africa. The optimism shown by Paris after the successes of Operation Serval, which turned into Barkhane, proved too premature. Despite nearly two decades of fighting in the Maghreb and Sahel regions following the Algerian civil war (1991–2002), as well as many minor conflicts, it does not appear that the French-led coalition will put an end to developing terrorist threats in the coming years. The multi-annual presence of international troops, the use of high-end military equipment and the training provided to the armies of the G5 Sahel countries have had a positive impact on the recapture of territory in Mali or Chad, however terrorists are moving into Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Nigeria, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. It is therefore necessary to consider how the operation should be conducted with the states of a potential alliance, whether it should not concentrate on operations within the borders of one state and, after its possible recapture, also cover other territories. After the Russian mercenaries were accepted by the governments of Mali and Burkina Faso, it is no longer possible to carry out any military operation in these two countries or in the region.

It must be underlined, that it is not possible to verify the extent to which Operation Barkhane minimised the risk of terrorists coming from Africa to Europe to carry out attacks. Admittedly, many extremists have been arrested or eliminated, however, one cannot assess how many of them would be used to carry out a terrorist attack in France. At the same time, the very expansive implementation of the French military mission is exacerbating the conflict between coalition troops and so-called rebels and terrorists. Thus, consideration should be given to creating, for example, a buffer zone between Africa and Europe where vetting of travellers would actually take place (*e.g.*, in Morocco or Algeria). However, if France's goal is to minimise the terrorist threat as much as possible in the G5 Sahel states, then operations must be intensified and the strategy changed, as this is one of the longest-running conflicts in the 21st century, and its prolongation only causes the mission area to expand into more states. At current effectiveness, the mission may take another few decades, as the war on terror will never end. There will always

be new groups emerging that expect the state order to change or fight in the name of their own political or religious beliefs.

In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in popular discontent towards the troops of the international coalition, including French forces. Despite their long-standing activities, terrorists are still present in the region, which makes accusations of French neo-colonialism increasingly common. According to the inhabitants of the Sahel, the French army wants to take control of the region under the pretext of fighting terrorism. These accusations are compounded by the colonial past in this very territory.²⁶ Protests recently broken out in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey, among other places, during which demonstrators have demanded the withdrawal of international troops from the Sahel.²⁷

A second and equally significant problem is the decline in support for Operation Barkhane among the French public. The French are increasingly opposed to spending money on military missions which, in their view, do not have a positive impact on France and result in loss of life.²⁸ After the coup and the evacuation from Niger in August 2023,²⁹ where 1500 French soldiers were deployed, the public support for the French military involvement in other African states will significantly decrease. It must be added that Paris moved its militaries from Mali and Burkina Faso to Niger as it seemed to be a safe, democratic harbour.

The third obstacle is the change in attitude of the Sahel countries towards terrorism. The fighting so far has had a major impact on society and political stability in the region. For this reason, local authorities are increasingly promoting a conciliatory approach aimed at negotiating with terrorist groups.³⁰ The main reason for the solution is the ineffective military action, which, despite the elimination of many terrorist group leaders, does not translate into increased security for the entire region. An additional argument of those in power is the fact that most of the militants are Malians, which significantly increases the likelihood of finding a consensus. Moreover, a system of communication and negotiation with radicals is

²⁶ R.A. Haddou; "Sahel la France perd le combat sur les réseaux sociaux," TV5 Monde, February 14, 2021, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/sahel-la-france-perd-le-combat-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux-395771>.

²⁷ "Niger: manifestation contre la présence de bases militaires étrangères à Niamey," *Jeune Afrique*, May 25, 2019, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/779936/politique/niger-manifestation-contre-la-presence-de-bases-militaires-etrangees-a-niamey/>.

²⁸ F. Tih, "51% of French oppose military presence in Mali," Anadolu Agency, January 12, 2021, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/51-of-french-oppose-military-presence-in-mali/2107534>.

²⁹ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Etrangères, Niger - Communiqué du ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères (1er août 2023), August 1, 2023, accessed August 17, 2023, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/niger/evenements/article/niger-communique-du-ministere-de-l-europe-et-des-affaires-etrangees-10-08-23>.

³⁰ S. Petite, "Au Sahel, négocier avec les djihadistes n'est plus tabou," *Le Temps*, February 7, 2021, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/sahel-negocier-djihadistes-nest-plus-tabou>.

already in place, as evidenced by the exchange of prisoners in 2020.³¹ Nevertheless, this approach is unacceptable to the international coalition and especially to France.

The decision to withdraw from Mali and then from the region—a move which France was *de facto* forced to make—has a number of implications for international involvement in the region.³² First of all, the future of Task Force Takuba is uncertain, as almost half of the personnel involved were French. Their absence will greatly weaken the entire international contingent. At the end 2022 French military activities in Mali and Burkina Faso were suspended and in Niger the situation was tense.

It must be stressed that France still intends to provide air and medical support to both UN and EU missions. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the decisions of the Élysée Palace are being scrutinised by other states and they are perhaps making their own actions dependent on its next steps withdrawing troops and leaving the Sahel.³³ This would be very dangerous for Europe, which is not ready for another wave of migration, as well as the international threat of terrorism. Moreover, all European investments in Africa would suffer. Despite the ineffectiveness of the French, they have maintained a relatively secure situation in the Sahel region.

In the future, if any mission is in operation in the Sahel, France will count on the support of other allied partners. It means that the burden of securitisation in the Sahel region will be shared with other states, possibly also with Poland. If European countries are not involved in Africa, then the Russian Federation and mercenaries, such as the Wagner Group,³⁴ will engage and impede any cooperation with Europe. The Sahel region is crucial as it constitutes a transit zone between the Maghreb region and Sub-Saharan Africa. French military forces will try to regain their position in the Sahel, but it will be very costly. Above all, the bigger the involvement of France in Africa, the smaller it is in Eastern Europe. If anyone expects support from France in Europe, it must also be more committed to working with France where necessary.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

³¹ N. Normand, “Négociier avec les djihadistes: une solution pour le Mali?,” *Le Point*, December 8, 2020, accessed July 12, 2023, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/negociier-avec-les-djihadistes-une-solution-pour-le-mali-08-12-2020-2404709_3826.php.

³² A. Olech, “Francja wycofuje się z Mali i idzie na zachód Afryki,” accessed May 15, 2023, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/francja-wycofuje-sie-z-mali-i-idzie-na-zachod-afryki-analiza>.

³³ D.M. Tull, “Operation Barkhane and the Future of Intervention in the Sahel,” SWP comment, no. 5 (January, 2021): 3, 4.

³⁴ R. Parens, “The Wagner Group’s playbook in Africa: Mali,” Foreign Policy Research Institute (March, 2022): 7–16, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/EzEdba>.