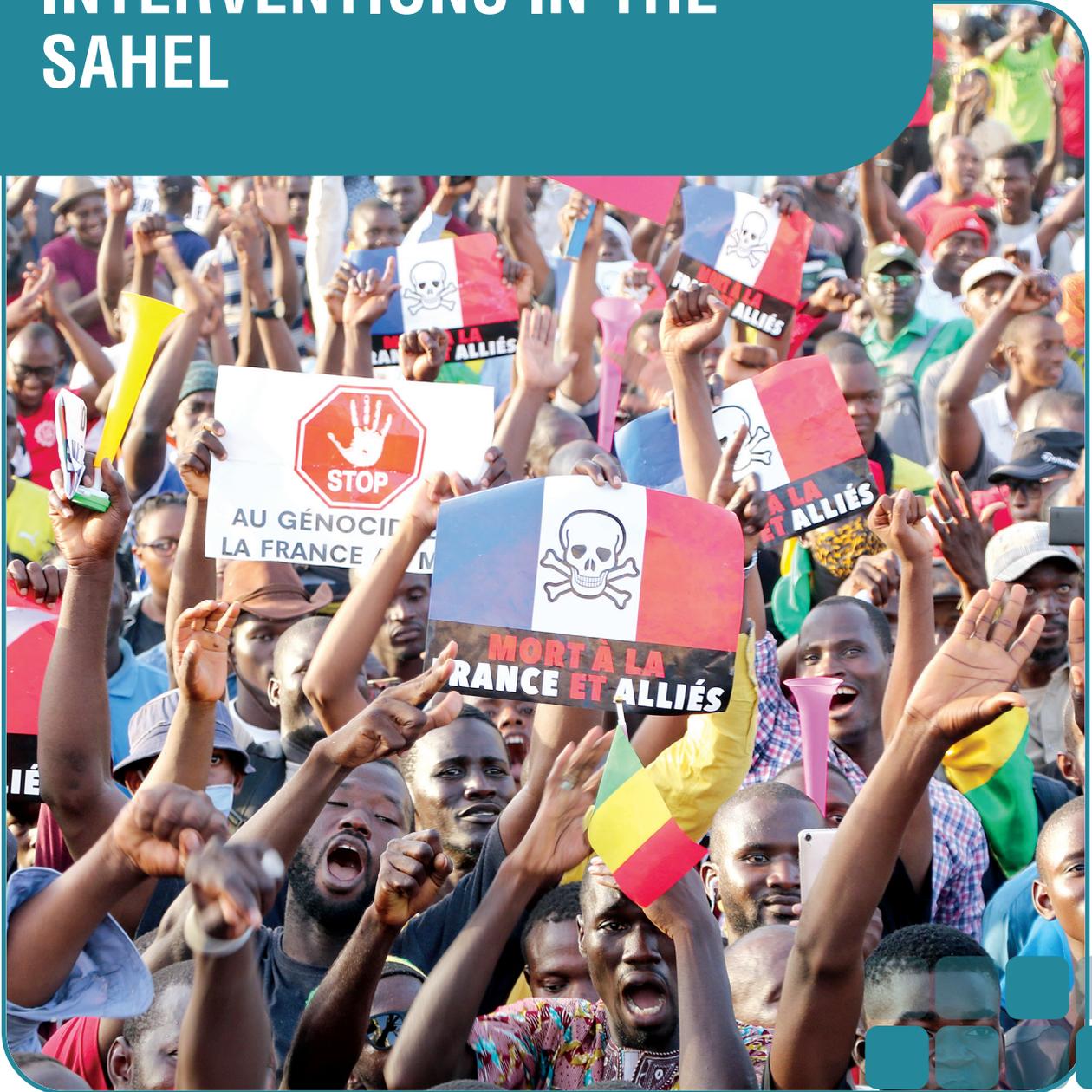


# RECENT FRENCH INTERVENTIONS IN THE SAHEL



ABDENNOUR TOUMI





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# RECENT FRENCH INTERVENTIONS IN THE SAHEL

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## Introduction

In an effort to establish law and order in Mali, President Macron, like his predecessor President Hollande, recently wore the military uniform and is acting as Commander-in-Chief. On his inaugural day in May 2017 he visited the French troops in Mali like his predecessor who ordered Operation Serval in January 2013, a bombing mission against armed terrorist groups based throughout the big Sahara. President Macron's first trip outside of Europe since the start of COVID-19 pandemic is a sign of solidarity with the region. According to the Elysée Palace, French President Emmanuel Macron and leaders from the G5 Sahel group of countries have met in Mauritania to discuss the ongoing fight against Islamic armed groups.

President Hollande's justification then for his act-of-war in Mali was, "freeing the Malian people from Al-Qae'eda." Didn't France go to Afghanistan decades ago to eradicate this supra-national organization? Until President Hollande brought his soldiers home, he realized it was a lost cause. If the mission in Afghanistan was impossible, how could it be possible in Mali? Didn't France and Algeria stand hand-in-hand on the question of eradicating terrorist groups? Why did they allow the Algerian Islamist radical groups (*GSPC*) to regroup in the Sahara and become AQIM in the Maghreb and Sahel.

Militarily, didn't President Hollande learn anything from Americans' "Shock and Awe" operation in Iraq seventeen years ago? That mission was accomplished, but its consequences are still boiling up even to this moment in Iraq and Syria.

To better understand one should go back to the source of this cobra. Why did then-French President François Mitterand turn his back on the legalist freedom fighters in Afghanistan like Ahmed Shah Massoud? Ahmed Shah Massoud warned him and his allies about the danger he faced after the Soviet Red Army withdrawal in the real Afghan political transition between 1992-1996.

This security vacuum left the country open to what the world discovered later to be the *Talban* (Taliban).

Militarily, didn't President Hollande learn anything from Americans' "Shock and Awe" operation in Iraq seventeen years ago? That mission was accomplished, but its consequences are still boiling up even to this moment in Iraq and Syria. Consider also the Libyan debacle, whose foreign forces' alibis are like the Malian war. According to news reports the Malian Islamists conquered a southern city despite heavy bombing of its bases and manpower. President Hollande was acting like a French neo-con ideologue, where foreign policy analysts were expecting a French *realpolitik* foreign policy in the region because of his political background. President Macron's foreign and defense policies in the Sahel and MENA in general are like his predecessor.

In spite of the initial success of the Serval operation in 2013, French intervention in the Sahel region has now reached an impasse. The already complex situation is further complicated by France's status as a former colonizer operating in the region, understanding how France's former colonial status translates into relationships between local communities, French troops, and armed terrorist groups will influence long term engagement.

Following the growing instability in Mali, north Niger, and Libya, the enduring presence of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the territorial loss of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in the year of 2019, France has increasingly turned to the Sahel as a crucial battleground in the fight against violent and radical non-state actors. As such, the significance of recent French operations in the region has increased in wake of the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015 and the Nice attack in 2016. In this way, French Prime Minister, Jean Castex did not hesitate to draw comparisons with the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris that shook the country. "It's very likely the same hatred, the same cowardice, the same inhumanity that was at work in Niger and at the Bataclan."

Unlike Serval, which fielded small, highly flexible forces that were tailored to the specific political goals of the intervention,<sup>2</sup> Barkhane reflects a much broader regional counterterrorist effort.

### Nov 2015, Paris Attacks (Bataclan) Shadow

However, time has revealed Serval's operational successes to be temporary. The operation did little to contribute to the overall stabilization and restoration of Malian state authority, with the security situation now widely accepted to have worsened since 2014.<sup>1</sup> The decision to launch Barkhane operation in 2014 confirmed that Serval, despite its strengths, had failed to address the underlying causes of the Malian conflict. Algeria as a pivotal state in the region,

however, did oppose France's counterterrorism mission, operation Barkhane, deploying 3,000 soldiers of the member states of G5 Sahel with the backing of the African Union (U.A.), called on the U.N.S.C to set up an international force to neutralize armed groups, help national reconciliation, and establish stable democratic institutions in Libya.

Unlike Serval, which fielded small, highly flexible forces that were tailored to the specific political goals of the intervention,<sup>2</sup> Barkhane reflects a much broader regional counterterrorist effort. The declared aims of the operation are carefully aligned to those countries of the G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) and emphasize the need for capacity building that enables local partners to secure their own safety independently. This close coordination with, and emphasis on, local state actors in the region signify a clear departure from the operational independence of the Serval operation.

The Barkhane operation has had some notable achievements in terms of both hard and soft power,<sup>3</sup> however, what constitutes success at a broader strategic level remains unclear. The wide-ranging aims of the current operation are ambiguous and ill-defined, ultimately rendering France's departure an uncertain prospect. This vagueness, when viewed alongside the complexity of the region, is a clear indicator of the impasse that lies immediately ahead of French forces.

Despite these apprehensive circumstances, there are numerous factors that have influenced France's decision to remain firmly engaged in the region. The initial framing of the Serval operation is in the context of the "War on Terror" or a war without an end! It is crucial to

understand continued involvement. Since Serval's launch in 2013, France suffered numerous domestic terrorist attacks. France's continued investment in tackling terrorism overseas thus represents not only an attempt to ensure regional stability within the Sahel, but a broader commitment to safeguarding its own citizens both abroad and at home.

This has changed in the aftermath of last winter's helicopter crash, which was the biggest single-day loss for the French military in nearly four decades, causing a further blow to troop morale in an operation that has already faced severe criticism from G5 Sahel members.<sup>4</sup> In August, eight aid workers and their guide were killed by armed men in a deadly attack in Niger, French humanitarian organization ACTED. The French government called it a terrorist attack, "the victims came to Niger to do good

and they met evil," Jean Castex said in a somber speech at an airport lounge of Orly airport, Paris transformed for the occasion into a funeral home. No group has yet claimed responsibility. Unidentified gunmen attacked the group August 9 in the Kouré region, around 50 kilometers from Niamey capital. Despite a French troop presence and a 13,000-strong U.N. peacekeeping force in Mali, the conflict that erupted in 2012 has engulfed the center of the country and spread to neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger.

News reports from Mali have highlighted that, in the aftermath of Serval operation, questions were raised about continued Malian dependence upon the French state that have followed the Barkhane operation and has left "many in the region to talk of neo-colonialism."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, reactions from recent protests, show the disdain



felt by certain portions of the Malian population joined by the (Nigerian) population, showing an anti-French sentiment.<sup>6</sup> The armed terrorist groups operating in the region could harness this acrimony and exploit such narratives to motivate, recruit and encourage others to commit acts of terrorism against the French troops, citizens and interests.

Although the overall contribution of the Barkhane operation to the stability of the Sahel is as yet unclear, France's military commitment remains steadfast. When viewed in the context of its historic engagement with the region, the implications of a permanent French presence are vast. As such, a nuanced understanding of the different narratives at play will be increasingly important in determining whether French intervention is ultimately regarded as a success or failure.

This was a great triumph for France. Ever since the inauguration of the first President of Mali, Modibo Keita, Mali had resisted the military aspects of the colonial pact. The last French soldier departed Mali in 1961. President Keita refused to sign the defense protocols, President Keita didn't allow French military bases or troops on Malian soil. Even after the French had him assassinated by Lt. Moussa Traoré, the Malians continued to refuse the defense pact. Lt. Traoré's successors Alpha Oumar Konare and Amadou Toumany Touré also refused, despite huge diplomatic and economic pressure. The most France could get in Mali was a 1985 military cooperation accord, which allowed France to give military training and technical assistance to Malian troops.

Now, after engaging French troops to fight Al-Qae'eda in the Maghreb (AQIM) in the North, France took over military control of Mali. After

having defeated the invader terrorist groups, and chasing them out of Timbuktu and other northern cities, and disarming factions of the rebellions, the French military banned the Malian army from Kidal, the central city of the northern Azawad region. The territory is claimed by different rebel groups, but it is under the de facto control of the mainly Touareg MNLA. (National Movement for Liberation of the Azawad) <sup>7</sup> France allowed the rebels to occupy the area, reorganize and later gain a place at the post-war negotiations table.

President's Macron administration wanted to be less Atlanticist such that the U.S. is capable of choosing its own enemies and, as in the time of General de Gaulle, the U.S. is not in the business of preserving French neo-colonial rule on the continent.

France has openly supported the MNLA for a long time and insisted that it be a party to the negotiations with the Malian government, who did not want to negotiate with the Touareg rebels. Then the French put on the agenda the division of Mali into two parts, despite the Malian refusal. There was a short interval of peace and then hostilities started again. The French realized that they could no longer afford the military costs of the Malian war and persuaded the U.N to send peacekeepers to Mali.

In December 2013 France announced a 60% reduction in its troops deployed in Mali to 1,000 by March 2014. Interim peace deals were agreed, but were quickly broken. By August 2016 there continued to be attacks on foreign

forces. More than 100 peacekeepers have died since the U.N mission's deployment in Mali in 2013, making it one of the deadliest places to serve for the U.N.

The same situation emerged in Niger and the Central African Republic. The French intervened militarily in domestic disputes which they created and then took over the control of the countries. Claiming that this was a battle against "terrorism" the French were able to pass on the costs of their reoccupation of their former colonies using European, U.N and, mainly, the U.S. Both African countries remain at war with domestic enemies in conflicts created by France and perpetuated by French policies towards reinstalling the rigors of *Françafrique* policy; all in the name of counter-terrorism. The U.N., the E.U. and the U.S. don't get a chance to decide who is the enemy in francophone Africa: this is decided by France. They only get to pay for it and use their military to train the soldiers who keep the *Françafrique* agenda<sup>8</sup> in place.

President's Macron administration wanted to be less Atlanticist such that the U.S. is capable of choosing its own enemies and, as in the time of General de Gaulle, the U.S. is not in the business of preserving French neo-colonial rule on the continent.<sup>9</sup>

Today, AQIM, ISO, Boko Haram, MOJWA, and Al-Shabab are just as senseless. The antidote is the dynamic of change that is taking place in the Muslim and Arab countries. If France and the U.S believe that they can stand alone in this endless war, the U.S. did not learn anything from the Afghan and Iraqi quagmires and the Vietnam quagmire before and so did France also not learn in its colonial wars in Vietnam and Algeria. At the end of the day France and

the U.S should know the Saharan Serval legs are long enough to run across the desert tirelessly, and not just by making some general statement like "colonialism was a big mistake." President Macron called the French colonialism as a grave mistake and fault of the French Republic during visit to Ivory Coast in 2019. He added "I belong to a generation which was not that of colonization era."

Yet France's presence and hegemony are still visible, President Macron made the comments during a press conference alongside the Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara, soon after the announcement that the CFA franc currency used by eight West African countries (almost all of them former French colonies) would be transformed into the 'eco and largely severed from French governance.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, President Macron, also during his election campaign in 2017, created a storm of controversy in France by calling the colonization of Algeria a "crime against the humanity." With an Algerian TV interview, he condemned French actions in Algeria.

## CFA Currency Becomes ECO

The West African Economic and Monetary Union also reached an agreement with France to make changes to the CFA franc, president of Côte d'Ivoire, Lassane Ouattara announced at a joint press conference. "This marks a historic shift away from the former colonial power." Under the agreement, the currency remains pegged to the euro and will be renamed the ECO. It also scraps a requirement for countries to keep 50% of reserves in the French treasury and the need for a French representative on the currency union's board.



The CFA franc has long been criticized as a vestige of French colonialism. It was first pegged to the French franc and later the euro. France also played an important role in governing the currency and required that 50 percent of reserves be held in the French treasury. The eco will reverse these policies but will be pegged to the euro.

### Call for Greater ‘Political Clarity’ From the G5 Sahel

In Abidjan, President Macron called for greater “political clarity” from Sahel countries hosting French troops fighting Islamist militants. Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast) is not part of the G5 Sahel, the group of countries cooperating in France’s anti-jihadist Barkhane operation, but hosts a separate French operation. “We need the political conditions to accompany the military work we do,” president Macron told troops from the 900-strong French contingent serving

“The leaders of the anti-jihadist G5 Sahel military alliance were due to attend a summit in France on last January, when President Macron said they would clarify the “political and strategic framework” of the operation after tensions emerged.

in the country. “I cannot ask our soldiers to take risks to fight against terrorism... and on the other hand have public opinions of these same countries believing in untruths.” He added “France is not there with imperial intentions,” president Macron said. “It doesn’t have an economic agenda, as is sometimes said.”

The leaders of the anti-jihadist G5 Sahel military alliance were due to attend a summit in France

on last January, when President Macron said they would clarify the “political and strategic framework” of the operation after tensions emerged. From Mali ex-President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita <sup>11</sup> told French Television TV5 Monde that the G5 leaders – Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania and Chad – will deliver a message demanding a “respectable and respectful” relationship with the former colonial power. “I hope we can give new depth, new commitments, a new force to this operation and win a fight that is key to the stability and security of the Sahel,” the French leader said addressing troops at Port-Bouet, Ivory Coast. “We will keep up the fight against jihadist terrorists, we will continue to do so with our African partners and with our European and international partners.” He said. “Because if we let the threat flourish, it will impact us too.”

Despite some 4,500 French troops in the Sahel region, alongside a 13,000-strong U.N. peace-keeping force in Mali, the conflict has engulfed the center of the country and spread to neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger.

Later President Macron payed a flying visit for talks with President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger, where jihadist attacks are frequent, as in both neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso. In sum, the colonial pact maintained the French control over the economies of the African states is as follows:

- It took possession of their foreign currency reserves.
- It controlled the strategic raw materials of the country.
- It stationed troops in the country with the right of free passage.

- It demanded that all military equipment be acquired from France.
- It took over the training of the police and army.
- It required that French businesses be allowed to maintain monopoly enterprises in key areas (water, electricity, ports, transport, energy, etc...).
- It required that in the award of government contracts in the African countries, French companies should be considered first; only after that could Africans look elsewhere. It didn't matter if Africans could obtain better value for money elsewhere, French companies came first, and most often got the contracts.

In June 1962, the first president of Mali, Modiba Keita, decreed that Mali was leaving the CFA zone and abandoning the Colonial Pact.<sup>12</sup> As in Togo the French paid an African ex-Legionnaire to kill the president. In November 1968 Lieutenant Moussa Traoré made a coup, killed Modiba Keita, and became President of Mali.

The French Serval operation was more about reviving that agreement and reframing the sub-regional lands into micro-states. The alibi of human rights and democracy, nonetheless, the majority of the Malians were in favor of this intervention, as were the Afghans, the Iraqis and the Libyans, but the West's military strategies, e.g., war, are seen as a continuation of politics by other means. Didn't France support a dictator for decades in Mali, President-General Moussa Traouré, whose human rights' credentials is the result of the Touareg autonomy and the dislocation of the Malian institutions today? And the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein in his war against the Mullah regime in Tehran.

## Conclusion

The Sahel is emblematic of a region suffering from multiple drivers of conflict. Here, threats to stability have diverse origins and take on many different forms. Radical armed and separatist groups, cross border smuggling and trafficking networks add to the challenges posed by extreme poverty and underdevelopment, rampant climate change and weak governance. The unfolding of instability takes place against the background of a troubling post-colonial legacy.

Sahelian territorial boundaries were drawn, as in many other African regions, to benefit the interests of colonizing countries rather than taking into account social and ethnic cohesion or the needs of the peoples concerned. Post-colonial borders in countries such as Mali, Niger, Libya, Chad and Sudan cut directly through clans and ethnic groups.

These ethnic ties across the region, however, contributed to the development of networks that now provide important economic opportunities, including the cross border smuggling of migrants in this context that the Sahel becomes increasingly a direct threat to neighboring countries' national security like Algeria that has become a transit hub of migrants crossing to Europe through the large scale of violence, cross-border illicit flows, and limited statehood, eventually failed states like Mali and Libya.

The E.U.'s interests in the Sahel are historically shaped by economic and security questions alike. Whereas most of the countries in the region are too small, or too poor to become important markets for the E.U., they do hold wealth in terms of natural resources. For instance, about 70% of Libya's oil production

used to flow to Europe, while three-quarters of France's energy comes from the uranium mines in northern Niger. France is indeed one of the most active E.U. countries in the Sahel by virtue of its historic, colonial ties to the region.

Between 1956-62 when these countries were granted independence, France crafted defense agreements and continued to maintain a reduced military presence charged with training the armies of former colonies. Moreover, the French military conducted multiple interventions in Chad, Mauritania and, most recently, in Mali to protect friendly regimes or to protect its own citizens.

Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, the fall of Libya's Al-Gaddafi regime, and the beginning of the Malian conflict in 2012, the Sahel is increasingly perceived by the international community as a focal area for activities of jihadist groups, such as Al-Qae'eda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), MOJWA, Ansar Eddine and Boko Haram.<sup>16</sup> Thus, from a security point of view, the Sahel has become a 'laboratory for experiments in "light-touch" counter-terrorism' for Western powers.

There are disparate strands of information out of which a number of observers, have read the potential threat of violent Islamic armed groups activity in the four Sahel countries covered by the Americans' Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI). There is some danger in this, but in this region, few things are exactly what they seem at first glance. Mauritania, which calls itself an Islamic republic, harshly suppresses Islamist activities of any kind, while Mali and Niger, star pupils of '90's neo-liberal "democratization", runs the greatest risk of any West African country other than Nigeria of violent Islamic group

(Boko Haram) activity. Those who believe poverty breeds religious fanaticism will be disappointed in Mali and Niger, the world's poorest countries, whose governments have maintained their tra-

dition of tolerant Sufi Islam throughout local zaouias (traditional Sufi meeting houses) by holding to an unambiguous line on separation of religion and state.

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### Main jihadist groups:

- **The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (abbreviated MOJWA)**
- **AQIM:** Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb
- **Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam oua al-Muslimin (JNIM)** - an alliance of jihadist groups, active throughout the Sahel region
- **The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)** - affiliated to IS, active in north-east Mali
- **Ansar Al-Islam** - active in northern Burkina Faso
- **Boko Haram** - present in north-eastern Nigeria, Niger, Chad and northern Cameroon

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