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# THE SPREAD OF INSECURITY FROM NORTH AFRICA TO THE SAHEL AND THE QUESTIONING OF FRENCH REGIONAL PRESENCE

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# THE SPREAD OF INSECURITY FROM NORTH AFRICA TO THE SAHEL AND THE QUESTIONING OF FRENCH REGIONAL PRESENCE

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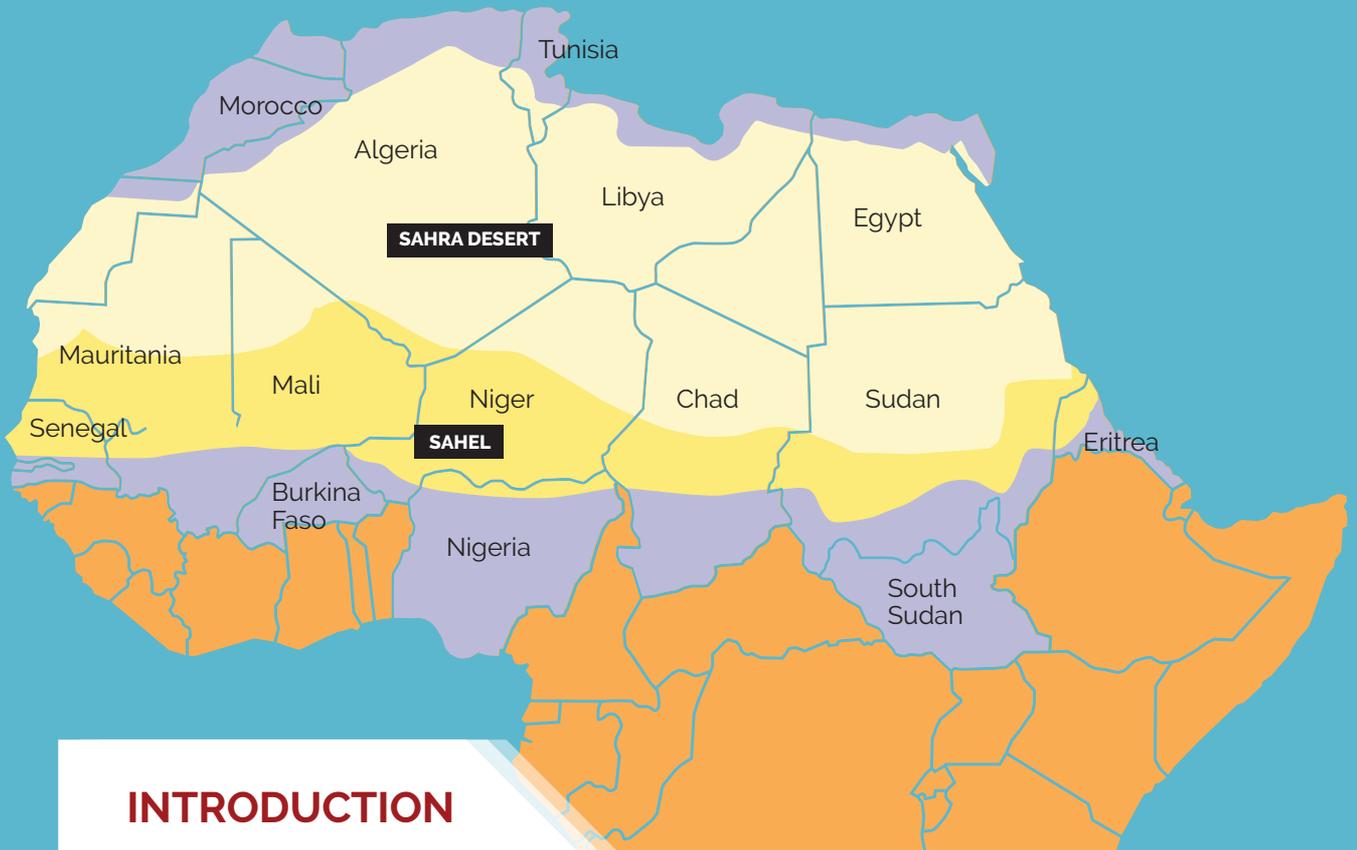
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# CONTENTS

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- 
- 3** INTRODUCTION
  
  - 5** THE ORIGINS OF INSECURITY SPREADING FROM NORTH AFRICA TO THE SAHEL
  
  - 7** THE EFFECTS OF THE LIBYAN CIVIL WAR ON REGIONAL SECURITY PERCEPTIONS
  
  - 9** TUAREG REBELLION AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS IN THE SAHEL
  
  - 11** TERRORIST MOVEMENTS IN THE SAHEL
  
  - 17** GEOPOLITICAL PRESENCE OF FRANCE IN THE SAHEL
  
  - 19** FRANCE'S MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE SAHEL AND THE GEOPOLITICAL STRUGGLE
  
  - 23** CONCLUSION



## INTRODUCTION

**T**oday, the global security agenda is concentrated on countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, especially within the context of non-state actors. This is also the case for some countries in the African region. Particularly, the developments in the region called the Sahel and the impact of global actors are worthy of attention. From a historical point of view, the environment of insecurity spreading from North Africa to Sub-Saharan countries has created a struggle for influence over countries such as Mauritania, Mali, Chad and Niger, in which actors such as the US, France, Russia and China are directly or indirectly involved.

Terrorist activities in the Sahel belt, which includes nine countries from Senegal to Eritrea, are generally concentrated on the borders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and in the north of Nigeria, in the region known as the Lake Chad basin. Countries in this region, most of which gained their independence from France and England, are still under the

influence of western countries today. However, they are also faced with the challenge of China, which took advantage of the trade vacuum created by western countries, as well as Russia, which has recently re-established military presence in the region after the collapse of the USSR.

The region west of the Sahel, extending from Mauritania to Chad, was one of the safest locations in the world until the early 2000s. The biggest threats faced by those living in this region were predators, drought and famine. Today, however, the region has turned into a breeding ground for terrorism. Terrorist movements gradually spread and became an integral part of the region in the period from the 1990s until the founding of ISIS in 2015. In the following period, terrorist incidents took place, especially on the borders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and the struggle of western and local forces against terrorist movements and inter-tribal conflicts continues under the leadership of France.

Following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2010, French military forces settled in the region in 2012 as part of the fight against extremist groups that spread to the north of Mali. In this context, France aimed to eliminate regional security gaps with Operation Serval in 2013, Operation Barkhan in 2014, and peacekeeping and maintenance operations of the European Union (Takuba), United Nations (MINUSMA) and African Union in the following period. The increasing US military presence in the region since 2001, has turned into intelligence support for the relevant operations with France's engagements. Having spread from the north of Mali to the countries west of the Sahel (especially Mali,

Niger and Burkina Faso), the origins of these movements date back to Algerian civil war and the demands of the Tuareg people living in these regions.

This study aims to evaluate the current interactions in the Sahel and the questions over France's presence in the region, following the spread of terrorist movements from North Africa to the Sahel in the historical process. In the study, the origins of the expansion of terrorism in the region will be discussed. The study will then examine the effects of the Libyan War on the mobilization in the Sahel. Finally, the increasing "terrorist movements" in the region and the questions over the French presence will be put into context.

## THE ORIGINS OF INSECURITY SPREADING FROM NORTH AFRICA TO THE SAHEL



Thousands of people attended the funeral ceremony of Abbasi Madani, leader of the Islamic Liberation Front (FIS), held in Algiers, Algeria in April 2019.

Terrorist events originating from all around Africa can be traced back to the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s. In 1992 elections in Algeria, the banning of Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut – FIS*) from elections ignited a civil war that would last until 1999. In the process, the fact that Islamist fighters infiltrated in the Algerian Intelligence (*Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité – DRS*) and the army chose Abdelaziz Bouteflika as the President lead to a chaotic period. On the other hand, the US also imposed sanctions on the military regime because of what happened in Algeria.<sup>1</sup> However, this attitude of the US has undergone a profound transformation after the September 11 (9/11) attacks. This remarkable change in the US security perception has made the concept of “war on terror” the determining factor in foreign policy-making.

Algeria, during Bouteflika's first term after the 9/11 attacks, fought against terrorism in

the Maghreb and Sahel regions together with the intelligence service DRS, which in cooperation with the US. In this period, DRS enjoyed both political and commercial power, and almost became a state within a state in Algeria.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the most important result of the DRS-US intelligence relations, which began to define the post-9/11 environment in Northwest Africa, was that the DRS's unique experience in both infiltrating and fighting the so-called Islamists has provided the US experience, information and access to terrorist networks. On the other hand, the West stopped controlling the trade of high-tech weapon systems, the exports of which it had forbidden in line with the sanctions it imposed against the Algerian military regime in the 1990s.

The main reason for the US-Algeria cooperation, at least in the beginning, was about the US energy policies. The US, which emerged victorious from the Cold War, aimed to control

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Kennan, “How terror came to the Sahel”, *New African Magazine*, 27 December 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A.g.m.

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foreign oil resources in order to reinforce its hegemony in the international system. As a matter of fact, Dick Cheney, Energy Advisor to the then US President George Bush prepared a report on 16 May 2011 (known as the Cheney Report) that dwelled on the issue. In the report, it was estimated that Africa would supply 25% of US oil imports by 2015.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the US needed to develop areas of cooperation with natural resource-rich African countries to secure the oil resources. Algeria was considered as a "useful" ally as it had hydrocarbon resources, was neighbor to the basin countries that have these resources, and was open to political, economic and military cooperation mechanisms with its domestic political conditions.

After September 11, human smuggling incidents emerged in the southern regions of Algeria and in the Sahel, and there was an increase in similar incidents in the period following the abduction of 32 European tourists in 2003. The security vacuum created by these events was filled by the US military forces. After the 9/11 attacks, the US started implementing its "war on terror" approach, which it put at the center of its foreign policy, in the Sahel states of Maurita-

nia, Mali, Niger and Chad, under the name of the "Pan Sahel Initiative" (PSI), and deployed approximately 1,000 military forces there. From then until the establishment of the African Military Command (AFRICOM) by the US in 2007, the Tuareg rebel group led by Iyad ag Ghaly increased its activities in the Sahel. AFRICOM became a single center from which the US coordinated military operations in all crisis regions in Africa, including the PSI.<sup>4</sup>

The US activity in the western and central regions of the Sahel, known as French Africa, was in the forefront until France launched an operation in Mali (Operation Serval) in January 2013 with 3,000 troops. Although France ended Serval in 2014, it increased its military presence with Operation Barkhan. However, at this point, it is seen that France, with its 5,100 troops, could not prevent terrorist attacks and inter-tribal conflicts in the region.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, French President Emanuel Macron realized the heavy cost of the military operations in the Sahel to the French economy and that the anticipated economic benefits could not be achieved, and came to the point of gradually stopping the current operations.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Dick Cheney, "National Energy Policy", *National Energy Policy Development Group*, 16 May 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Ploch, "Africa Command: US Strategic Interests and the Role of the US Military in Africa", *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 3 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Yaşar Demir, "Operation Barkhane: France's Afghanistan", *AA*, 17 June 2021.

<sup>6</sup> This topic will be analyzed in detail within the context of regional and global struggle in the following pages.

## THE EFFECTS OF THE LIBYAN CIVIL WAR ON REGIONAL SECURITY PERCEPTIONS



Public demonstrations against Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in February 2011 and the escalation of tension due to the ensuing conflicts adversely affected the whole region, especially the Sahel. Surrounded by Algeria and Tunisia in the west, Niger and Chad in the south, Sudan in the southeast, and Egypt in the east, Libya is one of the largest countries in Africa. Many tribal and militia-based armed elements that emerged with the "17 February Revolution" in Libya took advantage of the authority vacuum of the period, causing a serious security crisis both at the local and regional level.

The 2012 elections and the National Transitional Council (NTC) could not achieve a permanent reconciliation between revolutionary groups and different factions in Libya as two main opposing groups emerged in 2014. The conflicts that started between the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA) and the "Libya Dawn" forces led by Haftar in the east contin-

ued, after the establishment of UN-supported Government of National Accord (GNA) after 2015, and peaked in April 2019 as Haftar's forces attempted to invade the capital, Tripoli. During this period, a large number of foreign/mercenary soldiers flocked to Libya from the Sahel belt countries of Mali, Chad, Niger and Sudan, and these fighters were used in operations against the legitimate government, especially within the Haftar-affiliated LNA.<sup>7</sup>

The ceasefire established by the 5+5 Joint Military Committee in October 2020 resulted in the appointment of interim actors in March 2021 under the auspices of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF). However, almost all countries in the region share common concerns about the situation of foreign/mercenary soldiers in Libya and the process of evacuation of these militias from the country. In this context, the hate and violence discourses shared by Sudanese Janjavits on social media and the subsequent developments

<sup>7</sup> Serhat Orakçı, "Darfur ve Libya Krizinin Sahra Cephesi", İNSAMER, 6 July 2020.

on the border with Chad point to the potential security problems that the Libyan crisis may create in the Sahel belt. As is known, a group of militia members Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), fighting in the ranks of Haftar, aimed to overshadow the elections by illegally crossing the Chad border in convoys on the day of the Chad Presidential elections.<sup>8</sup> The death of President Idris Debi as a result of the clashes on the border constitutes an important clue about the severity of the crisis regarding foreign/mercenary soldiers.

In this context, the mercenary problem, which is one of the main priorities of the Government of National Unity (GNU) that took office in March, is closely related to almost the entire region. The Libyan ground, which has been a breeding ground for many armed groups since the crisis broke out in 2011, is turning into a remarkable crisis area for the countries in the region as mercenaries evacuate the country. The Tuareg tribe constitutes an important starting point in the chronological analysis of the developments.

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<sup>8</sup> F.Emir Şefkatli, "Libya'da Paralı Askerler Sorunu: Çad'da Değişim ve Uyum Cephesi (FACT)", *ORSAM*, 27 Nisan 2021.

## TUAREG REBELLION AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS IN THE SAHEL



Tuareg people traditional ceremony.

The Tuareg rebellion can be considered as an important development in understanding the way in which the Libyan Civil War concerns the Sahel. As an ethnic community, the Tuaregs were brought to Libya from neighboring countries such as Niger and Mali in the 1970s during the Gaddafi period. It is possible to describe the Tuaregs, who are the majority in the Fezzan region in the south of Libya, as the mercenaries of the period.<sup>9</sup> Tuareg troops, sent by Gaddafi in the 1980s to Chad and then to support the Lebanese civil war, were among the most loyal allies of the regime until 2011, when Gaddafi was overthrown. As the anti-Gaddafi protests that started in 2011 turned into hot conflicts across the country, the Tuaregs, who fought in the ranks of the regime, were heavily militarized by Gaddafi.<sup>10</sup> With the start of NATO-backed international air operations and the revolutionary groups

gaining the upper hand on the ground, armed Tuareg groups left Libya. In particular, the increasing pressure of the Zintan and Misrata brigades on the Tuaregs played a big part in this decision.

The Tuareg militias, which moved to Mali under the command of Mohamed Najem in August 2011, formed the backbone of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).<sup>11</sup> The Azawad separatist movement started a rebellion in January 2012 and took control of the cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal in the north of the country (Azawad region), which resulted in a political crisis in Mali and eventually led to the overthrow of President Amadou Toure with a coup. With the so-called Islamist groups such as Ansaruddin and al-Mourabitoun taking advantage of the conflicts and joining the ranks of the MNLA,

<sup>9</sup> Wolfram Lacher, Libya'nın Güneyi (Fizan) ve Bölgesel İstikrarsızlık, *ORDAF*, 25 Ağustos 2015.

<sup>10</sup> "Arms and men out of Libya fortify Mali rebellion", *Reuters*, 10 February 2012.

<sup>11</sup> "Tuaregler Azavad'ı kurdu", *Yeni Şafak*, 7 Nisan 2012.

the rebels seized two-thirds of Mali and began to advance towards the capital, Bamako.<sup>12</sup> During this time the so-called Islamist terrorist organizations, which differ from the Tuaregs in terms of ideology and activities, established autonomous entities in the regions they occupied, especially in the city of Azavah in the north of Mali. Against the strengthening rebel groups, the French army initiated the Operation Serval on 11 January 2013 and settled in the region, as per the UN resolution no. 2085 and the request of the interim government in Mali.

On the other hand, although Mali had taken measures against the negative impacts of the Libyan civil war, the existence of different social and ethnic groups implies that the situation in the region was already fragile before France's operations. Before 2012, there were 10 different ethnic groups in Mali, and radical ideas could spread among the public quite rapidly. During the Operation Serval, extremist groups such as Maghreb al-Qaeda (AQIM), al-Mourabitoun and Ansar al-Islam were dealt a serious blow, and most of the leaders of the

organizations were killed during the operations.<sup>13</sup>

Having been defeated in Mali, the radical groups quickly spread throughout the Sahara desert and the Sahel belt thanks to social support and environmental factors, and became a serious threat to other states in the region. Due to the Arab uprisings that started in 2011 and the power vacuum in the region, France's spreading the "fight against terrorism" discourse to a wider geography with the Operation Barkhan to prevent the Sahel region from becoming a new Afghanistan, made the region very attractive to non-state actors, given the local conditions such as weak border controls and complex demographic structure. On the other hand, the intense desert climate, chronic poverty and widespread acts of violence in the region countries offered terrorist groups the unique environment to recruit militias. In the Sahel, the conflict zone with the highest number of casualties according to the UN, a total of 4,000 people died since the French-led military intervention.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cem Savaş, Serval ve Barkhane Operasyonlarından G5 Sahel Grubuna: Fransa'nın Sahel Kuşağında Terörizmle Mücadele Politikaları. *Türkiye Siyaset Bilimi Dergisi*, September 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Cuesta Roca, From Operation Serval to Barkhane: Understanding France's Increased Involvement In Africa. *Journal of Political Inquiry*, April 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Alexandra Reza, Why Are French Soldiers In The Sahel? Protesters Have an Answer, February 2020.

## TERRORIST MOVEMENTS IN THE SAHEL



Despite the casualties in the peacekeeping and maintenance missions carried out in the Sahel region since 2013, the number of troops increased in the process and the counter-terrorism strategy, contrary to expectations, caused terrorist organizations to consolidate. Radical movements also increased and spread to many regions of the continent. In this context, the Sahel has become one of the most favorable regions for ISIS after Syria and Libya, as ideologically-affiliated subgroups continued their activities in the region. France's Operations Serval and Barkhan in the Sahel, which started in Mali, and which was against many large and small terrorist organizations, initially dealt a serious blow to these groups that acted independently of each other. However, the operations pushed the weakened extremist groups to form al-

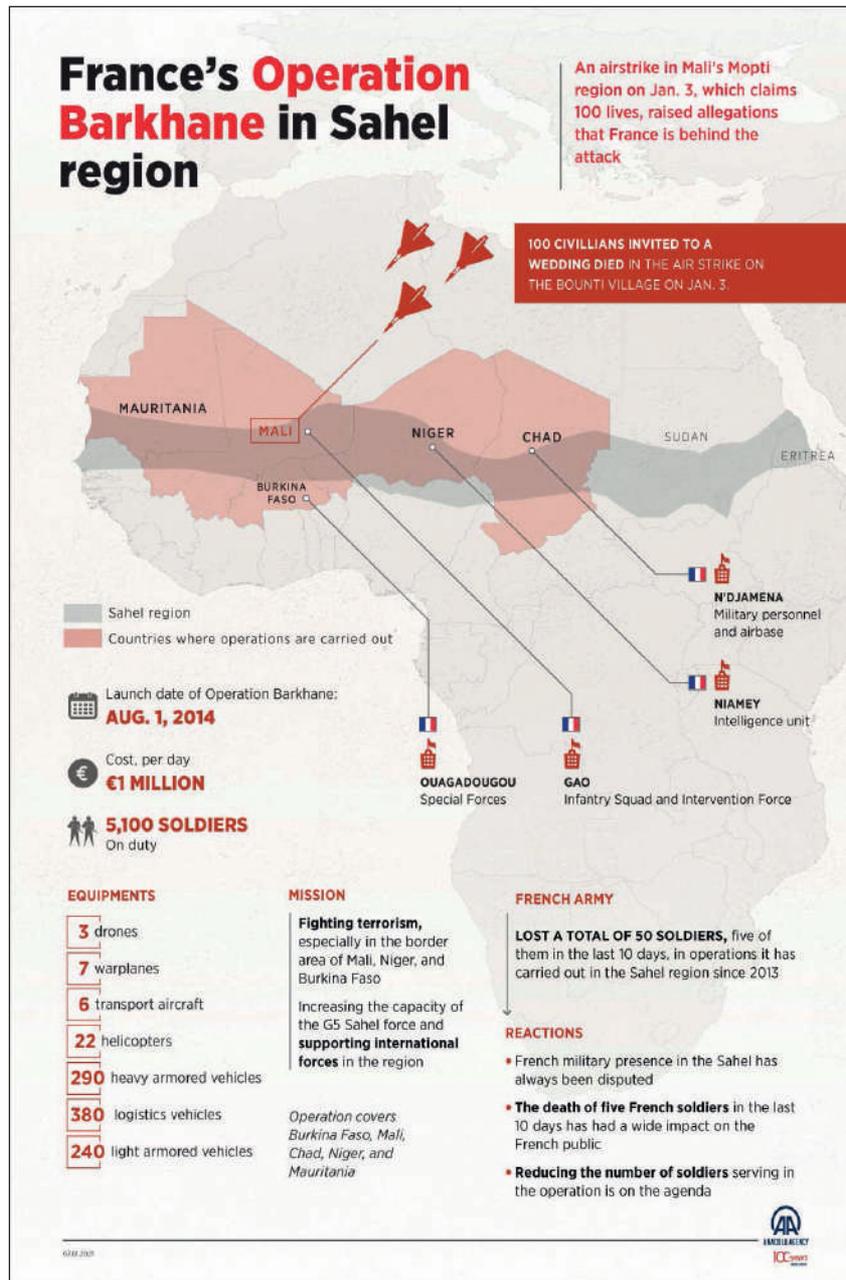
liances in the following process. Although there were many sectarian and ideological differences of opinion, the existence of France was perceived as the main threat in the eyes of these radical groups, allowing various groups to unite against France despite their differences.<sup>15</sup>

For example, extremist groups such as al-Mourabitoun, Ansaruddin and Ansaru'l-Islam, together with the Maghreb al-Qaeda (AQIM), which was relatively stronger and bigger in numbers in 2017 after the losses inflicted in the joint UN-France operations and the killing of its executive cadres, founded the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) group in<sup>16</sup> Niger, Chad, Mauritania, and especially Mali, as well as in the Fezzan region in the south of Libya.

<sup>15</sup> "The Sahel: Key Things to Know As Security Crisis Spirals", *Al Jazeera*, February 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Caleb Weiss and Heni Nsibia, *The End of Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict Between the Islamic State and al Qaida Finally Came to West Africa*. *CTC Sentinel*, July 2020.

Maghreb Al-Qaeda (AQIM) was founded by groups that broke up as a result of various disagreements after the Algerian civil war and expanded its activities in the following years.



Maghreb Al-Qaeda (AQIM) was founded by groups that broke up as a result of various disagreements after the Algerian civil war and expanded its activities in the following years. If one is to consider the historical formation process of the organi-

zation, the Algerian parliamentary elections that took place in 1991 come to the fore. The Algerian army made a coup against the Islamic Liberation Front (FIS), which had a significant success in the first round of the parliamentary elections, prompting

GROUP	LEADERS	ACTIVE YEARS	AFFILIATIONS
Maghreb al-Qaeda (AQIM)	Abdulmalek Droukdel (dead)	2007- present	Saharan branch of AL-Qaeda and founding group of JNIM
Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)	Ahmed Tilemsi (dead), Sultan Ulbadi, Hama da Ulkeri, Adnan Ebu Valid	2011-2013	Left AQIM in 2011 and merged with al-Moulatimin to form al-Mourabitoun
Al-Moulatimin	Mokhtar Belmokhtar	2012-2013	Left AQIM in 2012 and merged with MUJAO to form al-Mourabitoun
Al-Mourabitoun	Abu Bakr al-Misri (dead), Ahmed Tilemsi (dead), Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Muhammad Nunni (dead)	2013-2015	Joined the Saharan branch of AQIM in 2015, and a founding group of JNIM
Ansaruddin	Iyad Ag Gali	2011-2017	The jihadist Tuareg group, founded in northern Mali in 2011, and a founding group of JNIM
Islamic State of Greater Sahara (ISGS)	Adnan Abu Walid, Abdulhakim es-Sahravi	2015-present	Sahel branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) that was a part of al-Mourabitoun
Ansaru'l-Islam	İbrahim Dicko (died) Kafar Dicko	2016-present	A founding group of JNIM
Jamaat Nasrul-Islam wa'l-Muslimin (JNIM)	Iyad Ag Gali	2017-present	Established in 2017 with the participation of Ansaruddin, AQIM and al-Mourabitoun

Source: The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict Between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda Finally Came to West Africa, 2020

this political formation to go underground, and as a result, armed terrorist groups such as MIA (Armed Islamic Movement) and GIA (Armed Islamic Group) emerged within the FIS.<sup>17</sup>

Especially since 2014, many mass protests have taken place against the French presence in Mali. These protests have continued regularly and effectively from Operation Barkhan to the present and have fueled the growth of anti-French groups across the Sahel. By legit-

imizing their "causes" and wars with France's colonial past, these groups adopted the strategy of gaining the sympathy of the peoples of the region who were "radicalized". Therefore, it is possible to say that these groups have a significant number of people within the population as potential militias. The radical terrorist groups can easily blend in the public thanks to this situation. İbrahim Yayla describes this heterogeneous structure as: "You know you have been attacked by people in this area. You know that the people who attacked you

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Burgess, Military Intervention in Africa: French and US Approaches Compared. ASPJ AFRICA & FRANCOPHONIE, September 2019.

are in this area. And when you arrive looking for a fight, the only people you can find are civilians".<sup>18</sup> This situation, far from France's "fight against terrorism" discourse, complicates the issue. Because, the 2015 Paris and 2016 Nice attacks, which took place within the borders of France, were directly associated with the Sahel region by the then President of France, Hollande, and the military engagement and capacity for Operation Barkhan were increased. However, military interventions before reconciliation and other initiatives that ignored the local dynamics were enough to escalate the hatred and anger among the people. The "anti-Islam" and "radicalization of Islam" rhetoric, which is often brought to the agenda today by President Macron, seeks religious symbols in the origin of acts of terrorism and violence, thereby revealing a shallow counter-terrorism approach.

In this respect, it can be said that these so-called Islamist groups in Mali and throughout the region are more active and successful than the regional governments in reaching the young population and drawing them to their cause. There are various reasons for this situation. First, large countries with desert climate such as Mali, Niger and Chad, adopted a unitary state structure after gaining their independence. However, in countries with different ethnic, religious and sociological variables, it is very difficult for a unitary state to function properly. This state model, which was imposed on the region as a colonial legacy, is one of the main reasons behind most conflicts. It can also be said that one of the obstacles to the implementation of a decen-

tralized administration approach, which can be effective in issues such as the resolution of conflicts and the equal distribution of resources, is that this system is incompatible with the economic and political interests of France, the colonial power of the period.<sup>19</sup>

This system, which often causes serious problems in the distribution of revenues from natural resources in resource-rich countries, impoverishes the already-poor countries while the developed ones get even richer. Terrorist groups use this situation for their own interests and establish their own decentralized local mechanisms by providing services to regions where the states, seen by the public as the "puppets" of France, cannot reach.<sup>20</sup>

Second, extremist groups such as AQIM and JNIM, with their active use of public diplomacy tools in the Sahel region and Mali, increase their influence by contacting local actors in the region such as tribes and clans. By fueling the conflict between the peoples of the region and the anti-France/foreign power attitudes through local representatives, organizations like AQIM and al-Mourabitoun attract young people who are prone to radical ideas.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, although French is the official language, the language of educations in schools and madrasas in northern Mali is Arabic. So-called Islamist and radical terrorist organizations active in these regions are using such soft power elements and exacerbate the polarization between the north and the south. Apart from this, many local magazines and newspapers are controlled by groups such as AQIM and Ansaruddin or are sympathetic towards these organizations. In this context,

<sup>18</sup> Anna Schmauder & Anna van der Meulen, *The Fight Against Terrorism in the Sahel Revisited*, October 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Loïc Bisson, *Decentralisation and Inclusive Governance in Fragile Settings*. Clingendael Institute, May 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Schmauder & Anna van der Meulen, *The Fight Against Terrorism in the Sahel Revisited*, October 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Michele Bos and Jan Melissen, *Rebel diplomacy and digital communication: public diplomacy in the Sahel*. International Affairs, June 2019.

Ag Gali, the founder of JNIM, openly threatened France in an interview with one of these newspapers, reminding that France is a historical enemy, and accused countries such as Chad, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Niger for supporting France.<sup>22</sup>

France maintains its presence in the region as a neo-colonial power under the name of counter-terrorism, and prevents terrorist groups operating in the Sahel from negotiating with governments in Mali, Niger and Chad. JNIM and ISGS, the Saharan branch of ISIS, require French troops to leave the country to begin negotiation talks with the Mali government for a solution.<sup>23</sup> As a response, France

shows ISGS as the number one responsible for terrorist incidents in Europe and believes that the pressure on the organization should be increased across the Sahel. Likewise, France claims that ISGS militias took advantage of the chaos in Libya to enter Europe via the Mediterranean and engage in terrorist activities there.<sup>24</sup> The operations in June 2020 carried out within the scope of Barkhan in the regions where ISGS and AQIM are active are important for understanding the current stance of Macron and France. Therefore, France's insistence on armed struggle with these organizations hinders possible talks between radical groups and the state and delays the solution.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Caleb Weiss and Heni Nsibia, The End of Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict Between the Islamic State and al Qaida Finally Came to West Africa. CTC Sentinel, July 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Financial Times. Why Macron's Attempt to Reset French Ties to Africa Has Hit Trouble, October 2020.



## GEOPOLITICAL PRESENCE OF FRANCE IN THE SAHEL



Anti-France slogans during Mali's 60th Independence Anniversary.

The decolonization process after the Second World War also affected the Sahel countries. In this context, these countries under the French colonial rule, continued to be under the influence of France in political, economic and social areas even after gaining their independence. French companies have continued to be effective players in the economic infrastructure of these countries by operating in sectors such as hydrocarbon reserves, telecommunications, ports, airlines and railways, and retailing. However, the presence of France and other western actors in these countries has raised questions in every period. It is observed that this has recently been more and more the case for the societies living in the Sahel countries.

This situation can be explained based on various reasons, but the following words of the Senegalese Foreign Minister of the post-independence period, Doudou Thiam,

provides valuable insight; "Enough! The independence that cannot go beyond the form." Unless we try to gain our economic and social sovereignty rights, we cannot reach real independence."<sup>25</sup> It is seen that France still maintains its political, economic and military presence in the region. In this sense, one of the instruments used by France in its engagements with the region is the French Franc.

France also maintains its dominance in finance capital in the post-independence processes of the Sahel countries. France laid the groundwork for such engagements during the 1930s and 1940s and reinforced them with the Bretton Woods agreement signed in 1944 after the Second World War. In 1943, it ensured the circulation of capital by printing banknotes through the Central Fund for Free France (Caisse Centrale de la France Libre) in Algeria and made this currency convertible to the American dollar with the Bretton

<sup>25</sup> Kaan Devecioğlu, "Batı Afrika'da Nüfuz Kaybeden Fransa Yeni Taktikler Deniyor", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 24 January 2020.

Woods agreement.<sup>26</sup> As a result, French companies were able to expand their investments in these countries, and France maintained its geopolitical hegemony in the region.

The CFA (African Financial Community) franc is currently set at a fixed parity that can be set against the euro, the currency of the European Union. Also, in the context of the Sahel countries, there is also capital mobility between the Central Bank of West Africa (*Banque Centrale des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*) and the French Central Bank.<sup>27</sup> The structure of the financial capital in the Sahel countries, created within this framework, allows France to maintain its colonial rights today and provides access to raw material resources of these countries below their actual values. This structure, which facilitates France's access to raw materials in the belt of Sahel, has made

the countries in the region dependent on France and led to underdevelopment.

Although "pan-Africanist" movements emerged against this unjust practice that has been implemented throughout the history of Sahel countries colonized through the CFA system, France suppressed these movements through coups or other means. Recently, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which includes the Sahel countries, introduced a national currency, the "eco", against the colonial heritage CFA. However, the transition efforts have not been successful.<sup>28</sup> Countries that could not find a common denominator due to disagreements among ECOWAS member states finally announced that the CFA would be removed in 2027, and decided that the 2022-2026 period would be the transition phase.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Louise Lombard ve Tatiana Carayannis. "Making Sense of CAR: An Introduction." In Making Sense of the Central African Republic, Ed. Tatiana Carayannis and Louise Lombard, London: Zed Books, 2015. s. 1-16.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Claude Tchatchouang, "The CFA Franc Zone: A Biography", *The Oxford Handbook of Africa and Economics, Volume 2, Policies and Practices*, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Kaan Devecioğlu, "CFA: Fransa'nın Afrika'daki yeni sömürgecilik anlayışı", *Anadolu Ajansı Analiz*, 04.10.2019.

<sup>29</sup> "ECOWAS ülkeleri ortak para 'eco' kullanımını 2027'ye erteledi", *NTV*, 21.06.2021.

## FRANCE'S MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE SAHEL AND THE GEOPOLITICAL STRUGGLE



French commandos participating in operations in Mali.

For France, which has political, military and economic influence in the countries of this region, the fact that extremist movements spread over a wide geography from North Africa to Mali, in particular to the Sahel region, provided legitimacy to increasing the number of troops. As explained in detail in the previous sections, in this process, France deployed 5,100 troops to the Sahel countries, first with the Operation Serval and a year later with Barkhan, upon the invitation of the Mali state.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the military operations of France, peacekeeping operations with the participation of the soldiers of the United Nations, the US, Europe and the countries of the region known as the G5 Sahel Initiative continue. However, France has concerns about continuing its Sahel Operations, due to the lack of significant results from the operations carried out since 2013 and the lack of support from other European countries. In addition, the fact that the President of Chad, Idris Debi, who

provided significant support to France's Sahel Operations, lost his life in the conflict on the front line, lead to a deterioration in the relations with France. A second coup d'etat in Mali within a year, and had severe consequences for the French economy. President Emanuel Macron stated that military operations could not solve the governance crisis in the region and announced that he was planning to withdraw his troops.<sup>31</sup>

After the online summit with the leaders of the G5 Sahel countries, French President Emanuel Macron held a joint press conference with Niger President Mohammed Bazoum, who was in Paris for a visit. In this context, Macron, who announced on June 10 that France would complete the Operation Barkhan and would start gradually closing its military bases in Mali at the end of 2021, added that France would continue to keep nearly 3,000 soldiers in the Sahel.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Yaşar Demir, "Operation Barkhane: France's Afghanistan", AA, 17 June 2021

<sup>31</sup> Kizzi Asala, "French President Macron declares end of Barkhane Operation In Sahel", Africanews, 10.06.2021.

<sup>32</sup> "Fransa, Mali'deki askeri üsleri kapatacak", TRT Haber, 09.07.2021.

In addition to China's economic rise in the region as well as its efforts to be effective in the military bureaucracy of African countries, Russia's strengthening of its existing military training cooperation agreements to gain superiority by using the slightest opportunities may create a natural process.

Emanuel Macron announced that he would withdraw the French troops from the region after Asimo Goita, the commander of the soldiers who carried out a coup in Mali nine months ago, made a second coup against the president and prime minister of the interim administration. However, in the following period, the French Minister of Defense announced that the operations would continue after the negotiations with the Mali transition authorities and the countries of the region.<sup>33</sup> After this statement of the French Minister of Defense, Macron's explanation of the details of the withdrawal and the need to strengthen the Takuba army, which consists of soldiers of various nations and half of them French soldiers, should be considered within the same context. In line with this, it can be thought that France is negotiating with other actors since it does not want to undertake the majority of the burden alone with its 5,100 soldiers.

On the other hand, against the backdrop of France's refusal to stop its military operations in Mali, there may be a concern about the increasing trend of Russian and Chinese influence, especially in the Sahel region in

recent years. It is known that the US provided intelligence support to the French and United Nations forces from the Agadez Drone base in Niger and was reluctant to join the Takuba army. In the face of this situation, in addition to China's economic rise in the region as well as its efforts to be effective in the military bureaucracy of African countries,<sup>34</sup> Russia's strengthening of its existing military training cooperation agreements to gain superiority by using the slightest opportunities may create a natural process.

As a matter of fact, Macron lost his presence in the Central African Republic to the Russian Wagner company.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, France will do its best not to lose the Sahel, one of the most important centers of influence in Africa, to Russia, and will evaluate different alternatives to withdrawal. At this point, based on Macron's recent statements, the strongest alternative may be to enable Europe and the US to participate more effectively in the operations carried out in the region. As a matter of fact, 300 of the 600 soldiers of Takuba forces are made up of European countries. Therefore, while maintaining its military presence

<sup>33</sup> "France resumes joint military operations in Mali", Al Jazeera, 03.07.2021.

<sup>34</sup> Judd Devermont, Marielle Harris and Alison Albelda, Measuring Chinese and U.S. Engagement with African Security Chiefs, *CSIS Briefs*, August 2021.

<sup>35</sup> "فرنسا تتجهياً للانسحاب من مواجهة الجهاديين في الساحل دون بدائل" (Faransa tatahayaa lilinsihab min muvachahat al cihadiiyin fissaahil dune bedayil)", *London El Arab*, 09.07.2021.

in the Sahel, France is in an effort to avoid being drawn deep into the “depths” of the region.

This concern has become even more apparent with the recent developments in some countries in the region. During the protests in Mali, people burned French flags and shouted pro-Russian slogans.<sup>36</sup> It is clear that Russia will be willing to fill the gap left by the

withdrawal of France from the Sahel region, which is rich in gold, uranium and other mineral reserves. In this equation, it can be said that especially the US will not want to allow this. Currently providing intelligence support to France, the United Nations and local forces, the US can update its strategies in the region by participating more in the international peacekeeping coalition.

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<sup>36</sup> “Mali: Protesters call for French troops to leave, some call for greater Russia cooperation”, *Africanews*, 26.06.2021.



## CONCLUSION



The insecurity spreading from North Africa to the Sahel deeply affects the development of the states in the region. The countries of the region rich in uranium, gold, oil and other mineral natural resources, have witnessed terrorist incidents in the last 20 years and the failure of peacekeeping and maintenance operations led by France, which intervened to prevent them. It is seen that the independence of the Sahel countries with the decolonization policy of the western powers after the Second World War could not prevent the political, economic and social influence of the colonial powers. This situation creates a natural reaction against the presence of the West in the countries of the region. This reaction turned into a vicious circle in which the West increased its military engagement in addition to its political, economic and social influence, while facilitating the expansion of these groups' sphere of influence.

The peoples living in the countries of the region that cannot develop despite the existence of rich natural resources, see the western countries as responsible for this and

consider the peacekeeping and maintenance operations as occupation. It can be said that the killing of the leaders of groups such as the Maghreb al-Qaeda (AQIM), al-Mourabitoun and Ansar al-Islam in the Serval Peacekeeping Operation launched by France in the Sahel had a multiplier effect on the militancy process of these organizations. Indeed, this situation was noticed in the following process, and against these groups holding different parts of the Sahel, France reinforced its military power in the region with the Operation Barkhan. Although many western and regional powers have established peacekeeping missions under the umbrella of the United Nations and African Union in order to prevent the Sahel from becoming a new Afghanistan, the environment of insecurity persists. The crisis caused by the spiral of insecurity in the region is escalating day by day. Today, it is seen that the ineffectiveness of peacekeeping and maintenance operations and the increasing protests against the presence of France, especially in Mali, have forced France to implement a new Sahel strategy.

President of France Emmanuel Macron announced that he will gradually reduce the number of France's 5,100 troops in the Sahel, deployed under the Operation Barkhan, to 3,000. In the background of this lies the pressure of the operations in the Sahel on the French finance and human resources, the ineffectiveness of the operations, the increase in anti-French opposition among the peoples of the countries in the region, and Macron's recent request to European countries to contribute to the Takuba army through operations. However, European countries do not take kindly to the Takuba force, of which 300 out of 600 military personnel are French. Therefore, it is possible that Russia, which has signed military cooperation agreements with

the Sahel countries in recent years, and China, which has shown an economic rise in Africa in the last 30 years, can fill the gap to be created by France. However, it can be stated that regardless of the influence of European countries in the region, the US will not want to allow Russia or China to fill the said gap. The Washington administration is also taking some military steps in this context. For example, the US provides intelligence support to peacekeeping and maintenance operations in the Sahel from its drone base in Niger's Agadez region. From this point of view, it can be thought that the US, although reluctant in the current conjuncture, can fill this gap by increasing its current capacity in the future.

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