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COIN TO COUP, A FRENCH DEBACLE IN THE SAHEL

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Implications of Barkhane's enemy-centred strategy in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso

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"France thought it could assert leadership, but, in reality, it's as if it prohibited the Sahelians from finding peace (...) We created the conditions for our own exclusion, and the countdown began."

Luis Martinez, research director at the Centre de Recherches Internationales²

Introduction

Amid loud cheers from the Malian population, François Hollande arrived in Timbuktu in February 2013, following a tactical blitz offensive against an advancing jihadist caravan. The French president called the liberation of the northern regions *"the most important day in his political life"* (Le Monde, 2023). However, analysts warned that the jihadists were not defeated, would quickly regroup, and that the northern struggles were still unresolved (van der Meulen, 2020). The legitimacy of the government in Bamako remained precarious.

Although President Hollande strongly asserted during Operation Serval that *"France does not have the vocation to stay in Mali,"* a defence

agreement was signed between Paris and Bamako in its aftermath (El Ansari, 2015). The agreement marked the birth of Operation Barkhane and granted the French intervention force a five-year mandate. Furthermore, the operation was no longer limited to Mali but stretched out across Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, all five former French colonies (Sundberg, 2019).

In addition to regionalization, the international community, spearheaded by France, rolled out various development and stabilization initiatives: MINUSMA and EUTM Mali, among others. The multilateral reflex came after the French trauma in Rwanda. The French responsibility in the lead-up to and the outcome of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 marked a pivotal moment in its foreign intervention policy. From then on, Paris would no longer act unilaterally but integrate its operations in an international framework (Petidis, 2024). Thus, the exit strategy of Operation Serval essentially became an expansion of French and international initiatives in the Sahelian fight against terrorism.

¹ In the GIES Honours Papers, students who wrote an exceptional master's dissertation under the supervision of a member of the GIES get the opportunity to present their main argument or findings in a concise paper.

²Luis Martinez in Le Monde (2023).

Diplomatically, efforts were also made to seek long-term solutions. Under the auspices of Algeria, a peace agreement was signed after two years of negotiations. Notably, this occurred without the involvement of the jihadists (Guichaoua, 2020).

Despite the massive presence of security forces, violence spread to the broader Sahel region. In 2023, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso all ranked at the top of the Global Terrorism Index (Vision of Humanity, s.d.). The Africa Centre for Strategic Studies also published alarming figures in 2023: between 2020 and 2022, the number of fatalities from militant Islamic groups in the Sahel nearly doubled (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023). Meanwhile, millions of people are fleeing the wave of conflict. The UN refugee agency states that by 2024, more than 4 million people will be displaced, with the majority within national or regional borders. The Sahel crisis has been termed by the UN as the “*world’s fastest-growing crisis*,” one where ordinary citizens bear the brunt (UNHCR, s.d.).

The escalation of violence demonstrates how Operation Barkhane failed to control the situation. Dissatisfaction among Malians with Barkhane grew, and political tensions reached a tipping point. In June 2019, the Minister of Defence of Burkina Faso hinted that “*France may not be pursuing the agenda it claims to have in the Sahel*” (Allison, 2019). Diplomatic tensions peaked towards the Pau summit in 2020, where French President Emmanuel Macron, in a desperate attempt, tried to inject new energy into French and regional operations (Herszenborn & Marks, 2020).

The renewed efforts proved futile as a wave of coups between 2020 and 2023 brought military juntas to power in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Military collaborations with France were abandoned, French troops were explicitly asked to leave, and in November 2022, President Macron officially ended Operation Barkhane (France24, 2022).

Barkhane has been extensively evaluated and discussed in the press and academia. While the

French government prefers to highlight successes in terms of neutralized jihadist leaders and terrorists, the general consensus is less favourable, labelling the operation a failure. A common thread in the criticism is Barkhane's overly-militarized strategy. Regional expert Nathaniel Powell also reaches this conclusion in an extensive commentary: “*France’s approach in the country was overwhelmingly militarized, based on the incorrect assumption that terrorist groups are the root cause of instability in the Sahel*,” says Powell (2022).

Opponents of this evaluation point to Barkhane's tactical successes, the deficient agency of the Sahel countries, and the recurring ‘what-if’ question, which is answered as follows: “*Without the intervention, the situation would be much worse today*,” (Al Jazeera, 2021). Although it is a valid observation, it is nonetheless relevant to assess the operation on its own merits, especially since it was active for 10 years. One might also return the question: “*What if the strategy of the operation had been completely different?*” The agency argument also needs to be nuanced. According to some analysts, the local government was pressured by the French presence because it was caught in a “*tug-of-war between domestic and foreign agendas*,” (Guichaoua, 2020).

Certainly, Barkhane's sudden and forced ending raises questions about its long term strategy for conflict resolution and how the fatal wave of military coups could have emerged.

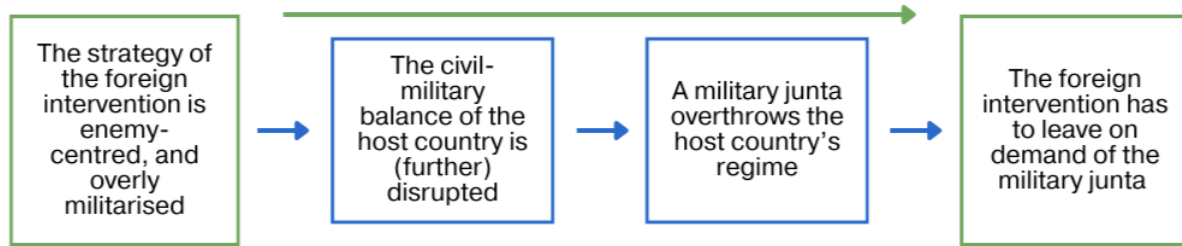
Building on this assessment, this paper examines how the nature of French strategy, enemy-centred and overly-militarised, contributed to the (further) militarization of Sahelian society as a whole. The second part of the study describes how the disruption of the civil-military balance paved the way for a wave of military coups. Thus, the study attempts to explain the failure of Operation Barkhane in a causal sequence of events that links the operation's inherent strategy to its own ending. Figure 1 below shows the schematic representation of the causal mechanism.

The rest of the paper is structured according to the different steps of the causal mechanism. The research relies on extensive literature review and

qualitative research, using previous academic research, government publications, press articles and statements by and secondary interviews with

government members, diplomats, military personnel and analysts, among others.

Figure 1: Schematic representation of the premised causal mechanism.



The Sahel, a complex powder keg

Before delving deeper into the strategy of Operation Barkhane, this paper briefly shines its light on the complex web of causes, dynamics and manifestations of conflict in the Sahel.

In recent decades, the region has been increasingly feeling the effects of global warming. A lack of rain is causing persistent drought, desertification, crop failures and consequent food shortages. Nomadic herdsman like the Fulani have less and less grazing land and thus clash with other communities like the Tuaregs, among others (Centro Studi Internazionale, 2019; Lyammouri, 2019). The latter have repeatedly made their voices heard during uprisings in an attempt to break away from the Malian state (Homan, 2013).

So too in 2011, when a number of Tuareg factions united in Mali. They received support from former mercenaries, who had fled south after the death of the Libyan dictator Mu'ammur Gaddafi (Henke, 2020). The Malian armed forces suffered badly from attacks by Tuareg fighters, and by the end of 2011 the government was forced to leave Mali's northern regions. The resulting power vacuum also gave rise to a temporary alliance between the Tuaregs and the jihadist terrorist movements Ansar Dine and AQIM³. However, the jihadists quickly broke the alliance and set off on the offensive southwards towards the capital Bamako⁴. For France, this would eventually trigger Operation Serval in January 2013, succeeded

by operation Barkhane a few months later (Bergamaschi, 2013).

All eyes on the enemy

Research into the failure of Barkhane suggests that the strategy of the operation paid too little attention to the situation on the ground. Although the causes are primarily political and socio-economic, Paris viewed the conflict through a lens of terrorism. Consequently, the strategy was primarily a military one, aimed at destroying 'the enemy'. However, this paper argues that it is important to view the jihadist activity in its complex context of conflict, violence and marginalisation. The jihadists capitalise on the grievances of marginalised populations, like Fulani or Tuareg communities, or pressure them in joining their terrorist activities.

The military nature of the strategy becomes clear when looking at Barkhane's discourse, methods and evaluation of success.

Sahelian pressure cooker

On the eve of 'Quatorze Juillet' in 2014, Operation Serval is ended and succeeded with one pen stroke by the launch of Operation Barkhane. From the very beginning, it was clear that the strategy and its objectives were overly-militarised. "The objective is essentially to fight terrorism," explains then Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian in a TV interview (BBC, 2014; Les Echos, 2014). President Hollande also makes it clear that

³AQIM: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

⁴The argument of the Bamako offensive is disputed by some analysts since there would have been no mention of an attack on Bamako in jihadist circles. Moreover, they did not have the means to do so, says Guichaoua (2020).

Barkhane is a military operation with “*destroying the terrorists*” as its sole objective (Marchal, 2015). Even five years later, when France has rhetorically shifted the weight to its ‘partner countries’, the objective remains untouched. In a February 2020 press briefing, we read: “(Barkhane’s) primary objective is to support the Group of Five for the Sahel in taking over the fight against armed terrorist groups (...) Barkhane will play its role, certainly with regard to the first axis, the fight against armed terror groups...,” (van der Meulen, 2020).

The justification of the operation makes use of the same military logic. The terrorist threat in the Sahel is framed as a threat not only to the stability of the region, but also to France and Europe (ibid.). Researchers refer to a domino effect or a “terrorist arc from East to West Africa,” (Henke, 2020; Powell, 2017). In turn, a French general uses the metaphor of a “pressure cooker,” ready to explode beyond its borders (Powell, 2017). And within French security circles there are concerns that “if we don’t fight in Mali today, we will fight in Marseille tomorrow,” (Henke, 2020). Moreover, the spillover of terror is linked to a second threat: migration, one of Europe’s crucial geo-strategic interests at the southern border (EEAS, 2021). Both threats are part of a broader security discourse, crucial in the justification of the French intervention. Speaking at a base in Gao (Mali) in 2017, Macron addressed his troops: “As you know, the Sahel is a priority; this is where our security is at stake, this is where part of the future of the African continent is at stake, but also undoubtedly part of our future,” (van der Meulen, 2020).

Good versus evil

To further endorse the military nature of the strategy, Paris invariably chooses a popular discourse of war and terror. As in Bush’s rhetoric after 9/11, ‘the enemy’ is categorised in a Manichean way. “They divide the world into Good and Evil,” argues French ethicist Goffi (2017). Moreover, Goffi claims that linking the noun ‘war’ to the word ‘terrorism’, “justifies the use of mainly, or conclusively, military solutions and violence.”

Researchers also denounce the French image of Sahelian jihadists, citing UN reports or studies by the African Institute for Security Studies on the reasons for radicalisation in the Sahel (Charbonneau & Jourde, 2016; Guichaoua, 2017). In an interview with VICE News, a former member of a jihadist movement testifies: “I joined because my parents were killed and the rest of my family were either also killed or are imprisoned by the army. Wherever I go, I feel unsafe. In the search for safety, the group was the only option,” (VICE-News, 2021).

This again shows the complexity of the context whereby the ‘radicalisation’ of locals is often a trade-off between personal interests, the temporary interests of a community or a consequence of coercion. “The men and women who make up the ranks of the armed jihadist groups in the Sahel do not all conform to the very oft-publicised caricature of the ‘madman for God’ who is willing to die in suicide attacks to impose Sharia law on his fellow human beings and as part of an unlikely ‘global jihad’,” concludes French journalist and Africa expert Rémi Carayol (2019).

The Barkhane method

Within the academic literature on counterinsurgency (COIN), the distinction is made between population-centred COIN and enemy-centred COIN. Although it is seldom a clear-cut, according to Australian COIN-author David KilCullen (2007), the main difference lies in their inherent logic. Indeed, an enemy-centred strategy states that “military response is needed first, everything else follows later.”

We earlier saw this philosophy in Barkhane’s objectives and discourse, but it is also present in the operation’s methods. Although Paris recognises that a good response to conflict must be multidimensional and not purely military, its strategy nevertheless follows the logic of military action first. Looking at the 3D-strategy, defence, diplomacy and development, one would need defence first, before moving on to the other two (van der Meulen, 2020). In the above-mentioned speech at the French base in Gao, President Macron also said the following: “The road to lasting peace is

long. You have to go through it with determination and steadfastness. To begin with, you need security. That presupposes the presence of the armed forces, of you. Next, it presupposes a clearly defined political and diplomatic roadmap, implemented with determination (...),” (ibid.).

As mentioned, Barkhane is also working on the other two Ds. In its press briefings, the French government writes about civil-military actions (CIMIC) organised under Barkhane (Ministère des Armées, 2022). These are projects that provide access to water, energy, health or education. Nonetheless these CIMIC are of secondary importance. In an information report by the National Defence and Army Commission, a French admiral states that *“the only operational purpose of CIMIC actions concerns acceptance of the French troops,”* (Assemblée Nationale, 2020).

Besides CIMIC, there is broader French development assistance (outside the Barkhane framework), organised by the French Agency for Development (AFD). However, a comparison of AFD spending with Barkhane’s expenditures again shows the focus on military solutions. After 2015 the AFD budget for the Sahel hovered between about €250 and €475 million a year (and peaked at €680 million in 2019), while Barkhane is estimated to cost between €600 million and €1 billion a year (Commission des Affaires Etrangères et de la Défense, 2023; Le Monde, 2017; Le Monde, 2021; Dogon, 2021).

Evaluating Barkhane's success

A military strategy requires military evaluation. Paris, for instance, likes to cite Barkhane's success in military terms, for example the number of neutralised terrorists and collected weapons. At a Senate session in 2019, then Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly discussed the operation's interim results: *“In four years, in cooperation with our partners’ armed forces, we have eliminated more than 600 terrorists. Every quarter, we confiscate two tonnes of weapons and ammunition (...) In 2018, we achieved significant successes: we neutralised many terrorist leaders and more than 200 fighters,”* (Le Senat, 2019).

French sociologist Marchal, who specialises in conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, points at an alternative way to evaluate Barkhane's achievements. *“We can also look at the half-empty glass and see that the problems on the ground have not yet been resolved and to some extent have even gotten worse. Operation Barkhane has not changed the situation: it has not enabled the reconstruction of the Malian state and insecurity is greater now than in 2014, as it has spread to new areas,”* (France24, 2017).

Barkhane's objectives, methods, discourse and evaluation show that the operation's strategy fits KilCullen’s description of an enemy-centred approach, focusing on the military side of conflict resolution. This is also reflected in Paris' longstanding refusal to negotiate with jihadist and militant groups, despite calls from NGO's and local governments, among others (Farge, 2020; Politico, 2022).

Criticism of the overly-militarised strategy echoes even within French ranks. In an interview with the New York Times (2022), a general from Barkhane's early years testifies that they were *“trying to solve a multifaceted crisis primarily by military means.”* Another high-ranking officer concludes that Barkhane *“addresses the symptoms, but not the underlying causes, nor the enemy's ability to regroup, because the centre of gravity (of the conflict) is not in the camps in the desert, but in Bamako,”* (Commission des Affaires Etrangères et de la Défense, 2023).

Balance disrupted

The military nature of the French intervention affects the balance between civilian and military powers in the Sahel states. In a healthy democracy, civilian decision-makers are accountable to the people, while military officers are expected to obey and advise civilians, but not impose their views (Wilén, 2021). A pervasive focus on security and military solutions, for instance by international partner countries, can lead to a disruption of the civil-military balance. Especially in countries like Niger, Mali or Burkina Faso, where the military is historically closely intertwined with the civil organisation of society and coup d'états are

no exception (Wilén, 2021; Bove et al., 2019; Guichaoua & Goxho, 2022).

With the launch of Operation Barkhane, we see militarization and the disruption of the civil-military balance manifesting itself in several domains.

Wallet militarization

The clearest manifestation is at the level of the military itself. Data on defence expenditure, arms imports, international security initiatives, the proliferation of military bases, among others, shows the expansion of military power and influence since the launch of Operation Barkhane. As shown in figure 2, defence spending increased as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) in both Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The trend

becomes even more striking when expressed in millions of dollars as shown in figure 3.

Besides increased spending, in Mali the number of armed forces also increased exponentially between 2014 and 2020, from about 10,000 to more than 40,000 troops. In Burkina Faso and Niger, on the other hand, the number of soldiers continued to fluctuate at the pre-Barkhane level of 10 to 12,000 soldiers. With violence increasing, in Niger, the defence minister did announce in November 2020 a multiplication of the armed forces to 50,000 by 2025 (CIA, 2023). In Burkina Faso, a smaller army is balanced out by the historical deployment of local militias. The data platform ACLED estimates their number at around 28,000 in 2022 (ACLED, 2024).

Figure 2: Evolution of military expenditures in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, expressed as percentage of GDP. (The World Bank Data, 2024. Based on data by SIPRI. License: CC BY 4.0)

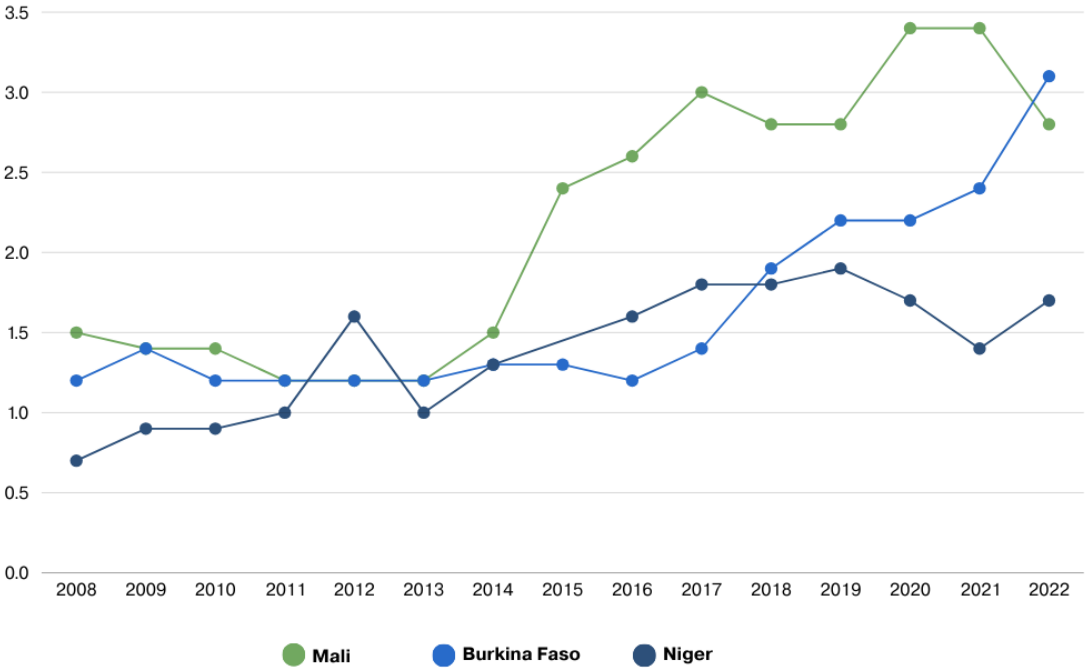
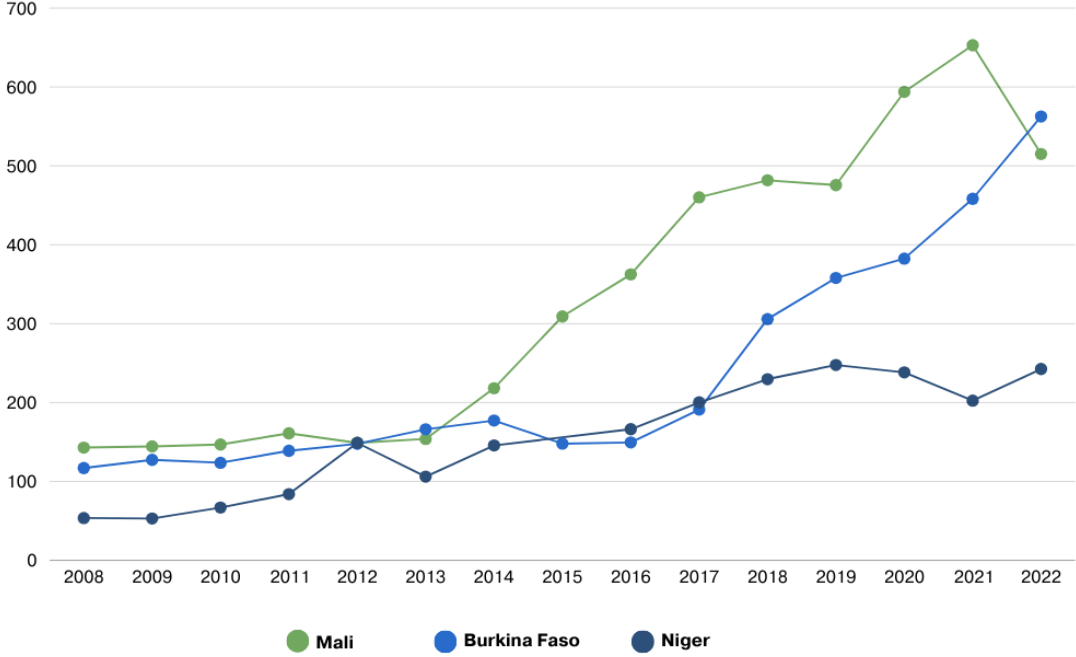


Figure 3: Evolution of military expenditures in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, expressed in millions of dollars. (The World Bank Data, 2024. Based on data by SIPRI. License: CC BY 4.0)



France’s role

The influence of France is threefold. First, through its security-oriented strategy, it encourages host countries to upgrade their military. In addition, the rising defence spending can be linked to the arms imports from France. Reports by the French Ministry of Defence between 2013 and 2022 show that the number of export licences from France to the three Sahel countries has increased sharply since the launch of Operation Barkhane: from 85 licences in the four years before Barkhane to more than 220 export licences in the same time span after 2015 (Ministère des Armées, 2013 & 2022). French companies like Dassault and Thales benefitted from this trend as they saw their shares rise sharply since Serval was launched (MO*, 2018; Stoicesku, 2019).

Third, Operation Barkhane itself brings a huge arsenal of equipment and manpower to the region, accompanied by multiple international initiatives that are being rolled out under France's influence⁵. The UN launched MINUSMA, a peacekeeping mission in Mali with more than 50 countries contributing (Stoicesku, 2019). The European

Union trained and supported the national armies of the Sahel countries through EUTM Mali, EUCAP Mali, and EUCAP Niger (EEAS, 2023). The United States also had a significant presence in the region with two drone bases in Niger, providing necessary intelligence for Barkhane’s operations (Reuters, 2023). However, the massive international presence is not free of criticism. Back in 2016, the African Union expressed concern about the growing foreign military presence in Africa and the establishment of new bases (Atta-Asamoah, 2019).

Political militarization

Besides this ‘military militarization’, the power disruption becomes also clear when looking at the political side of society. Analysts and critics argue that increased investment in security-related domains comes at the expense of attention and budget for other sectors such as development and health, as well as democratic institutions (Hamdaoui, 2022). They argue that terrorist threats create a climate of urgency, providing a ‘window of opportunity’ for political militarization (Bove et al., 2019). Civilian agencies need

⁵Note that France had a pen holder position in the UN Security Council (Tardy 2020).

military expertise in the fight against terror, on the one hand, and those military actors in turn use their knowledge advantage to ‘push’ themselves into the political landscape. A Nigerian opposition leader testified in an interview with The Guardian (2018) that seven of her colleagues were jailed for opposing the establishment of new foreign bases.

Measuring the real political influence of military personnel is not easy, especially in countries where the military and politics are historically intertwined (Wilén, 2021). The PRM-dataset⁶ describes a number of parameters that indicate military influence on the political scene, such as the presence in political positions, impunity or veto power for military personnel, or military repression of demonstrations (Croissant et al., 2016). With a few exceptions, in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso we do not see military holding the position of president or minister of Defence. It is notable, however, that by 2020 in all three, the military enjoys both impunity and veto power (Basedeau, 2020). Research shows that those two factors are important potential warning indicators of military coups (Bayer et al., 2023).

The impunity for military personnel, and the erosion of civilian control over the military is also shown by ACLED. Since 2015, the number of violent incidents by government forces against civilians in Mali and Burkina Faso (and to a lesser extent in Niger) increased sharply. In total, between 2015 and 2022, 3084 civilian deaths resulting from violence by government forces were recorded (ACLED, 2024). Reports by human rights organisations describe the individual stories behind these figures. In a report, Amnesty International (2020) calls on Sahelian governments to “*end impunity over the systematic violations committed by their security forces against unarmed populations.*” Analysts and researchers point out how the (international) focus on security incites acts of violence (Nsaiba, 2020; Wilén 2021) because the government’s survival is linked to its ability to address insecurity. By extension, the survival of the French presence is also linked to the fate of the

ruling power it seeks to restore. Paris thus keeps ruling elites in power through its security policy and contributes to the lack of reform (Gazeley, 2022; Nakoma, 2024).

Democratic consequences

To examine the effect of security politics on democratic institutions in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, this paper studied reports by Freedom House (2014 & 2020 & 2022), a US NGO that researches democracy, political freedom and human rights. It shows that political rights and civil liberties were affected in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, with local differences but similar trends. In Mali and Burkina Faso, scores for the quality of judicial institutions in particular fell. Mali's political institutions also scored very low, but similar to 2014. On the contrary, Burkina Faso did slightly better than in 2014, although this may be partly due to the undemocratic measures introduced by the then president that year. In Niger, political rights shrank and, by 2022, the government was not even considered an ‘electoral democracy’ by Freedom House.

All three Sahel states also scored worse on the Democracy Index in the year before the coup, compared to 2014 (Our World in Data, s.d.).

Social militarization

In addition to the political level, military logic also influences the general perception of security in a society and the deemed effectiveness of military solutions (Frowd & Sandor, 2018). Since Barkhane, conflicts (between ethnic communities) are more often settled with violence. Dutch researcher Kars de Bruijne (2022), describes in detail how self-defence militias such as the Dozo and Koglweogo revived after 2012. Moreover, because national armies are not strong or numerous enough, governments in the Sahel rely on these militias from time to time. One example is the Dogon self-defence group Dan Na Ambassagou (DNA), formed in 2016. The Malian state supported the group in 2018 with arms supplies and training camps. The official support was

⁶PRM: Political Roles in the Military.

withdrawn a year later following DNA's indiscriminate attacks on Fulani. Barkhane's troops also have a history of working with local militias in Mali (Clingendael Instituut, 2019).

Conflict resolution through violence is thus increasingly becoming commonplace. *"Whereas previously disputes between farmers and pastoralists over access to land and water or over ethnicity were often resolved through dialogue, in recent years more violence has been involved,"* notes political scientist Olayinka Ajala (MO*, 2018). Paris's steadfast refusal to negotiate is another example of this way of thinking. *"With terrorists we don't discuss, we fight them,"* President Macron made strong in an interview in late 2020 (Roger & Yahmed, 2020).

It is clear that Operation Barkhane, with an overly-militarised and enemy-centred strategy, has (further) disrupted the Sahel countries' civil-military balance on several levels. The French obsession with restoring the Malian state thus led to a counterproductive focus on military reinforcement and antiterrorism that further destabilised civilian authority (Gazeley, 2022).

Towards a military coup

As the operation progressed, Barkhane's effects became more apparent. Confidence in local governments and the French intervention was waning and protests were growing. At a meeting in Pau, Macron hoped to force a second wind, but after the first coup in Mali a few months later, it became clear that the attempt was in vain.

A bas la France!

The disruption of the civil-military balance also pressured governments in the Sahel to shuffle between demands of external partners and political demands of the population. In annual reports, the Afrobarometer gauges the Sahel population's confidence in government institutions, the military and external partners.

A comparison of the 2014-2015 results with those of the years before the coup shows that in both

Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, trust in government and judicial institutions has declined, while the perception of corruption in these institutions increased. Moreover, in Niger and Burkina Faso there is a major shift since the start of Operation Barkhane towards greater receptivity to a military takeover.

The dwindling confidence manifested itself in massive protests against central governments and international forces. Data from ACLED shows that in Burkina Faso and Mali, the number of protests increased exponentially between 2016 and the coup year. In Niger, there is a slight increase, peaking in the coup year (2023), but the number of protests remains significantly lower than in neighbouring countries. In April 2019, more than 10,000 Malians took to the streets to demonstrate against President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's inability to stem the wave of inter-communal violence (Al Jazeera, 2019). In Burkina Faso, in August the same year, demonstrations were held throughout the country to denounce insecurity and demand the president's resignation (RFI, 2019). But France was also taking the heat, receiving slogans like *"A bas la France"*⁷.

Note that the increase in protests parallels the flare-up of violence and the sharp rise in civilian casualties since 2017-2018.

Desperation in Pau

The protests also reached Paris. At a meeting in Pau in early 2020, Macron made a final attempt to breathe new life into the Sahelian counterterrorism efforts (RFI, 2020). In the end, Pau mostly remained a reaffirmation of the fight against terrorists as a priority (Ministère de L'Europe et des affaires Etrangères, 2020).

Instead, the way France had summoned its 'partners' to this meeting, both within government circles and in public opinion, was deemed neo-colonial and paternalistic (Le Monde, 2023). Governments were forced to declare their support for France, thus choosing sides. Hence, the former became even more dependent on military

⁷ *"A bas la France": "Down with France"*

strength and external lenders to survive against popular discontent. *“The disgruntled faction within the army now had the resources and a domestic political situation that allowed them to seize power,”* concludes historian Joe Gazeley (2022).

Coups in Mali and Burkina Faso

Amid increasing violence, protests and frustration following the Pau Summit, national security forces were suffering heavy defeats against jihadi groups. It would eventually become a deadly recipe for the weakened Sahelian governments as military junta's took power in a wave of coups.

In Mali, as demonstrations under the 'June 5 Movement' became more violent, ECOWAS and the United Nations tried to push for dialogue and mediation. Meanwhile, the army suffered heavy losses between 2019 and 2020. In late 2019, more than 100 soldiers were killed in multiple jihadist attacks (Al Jazeera, 2019). It was the last straw for the army faction of Colonel Goïta, who crowned himself interim president after two successful coups.

In Burkina Faso too, as citizens were protesting en masse, more than 50 security forces died in an attack on a police station in northern Burkina Faso in autumn 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2022). The security officers had been deprived of food rations for a fortnight and had also requested extra equipment in the weeks before the attack (Czerep, 2022). In a first coup, President Kaboré was overthrown by Lieutenant Colonel Damiba (France24, 2022). The latter was himself ousted a few months later by the young captain Ibrahim Traoré (Le Monde, 2023).

Niger's exception

Niger proved to be an exception. Although there were protests against President Bazoum's government, the coup was rather the result of a power shift at the top of the presidential guard (Guichaoua & Wilén, 2023). In an attempt to retain their political power, General Tchiani and other senior military officers staged a coup in July 2023 during which President Bazoum was

deposed and the constitution was suspended (IISS, 2023). Notwithstanding, militarization under Barkhane did help pave the way for the seizure of power. The military junta, conveniently cited *“the worsening security situation”* under Bazoum as the reason for their coup, in line with statements by its counterparts in neighbouring countries (Yabi, 2023).

Remarkable, moreover, was the reaction of the international community, which until then was limited to sanctions and mediation. This time, ECOWAS presented the Nigerian junta with an ultimatum: the coup leaders were given one week to return to constitutional order or force would be used (Guichaoua & Wilén, 2023). The ECOWAS ultimatum drew attention to the situation and made it clear that coups were no longer tolerated in the region, but it also led to a strengthened position of the junta, fuelled by a nationalist discourse of sovereignty (ACLEd, 2023).

La fin

The military coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso marked the end for Operation Barkhane and French military cooperation with the Sahel countries. Its abrupt ending can be (at least partly) explained by the military juntas' legitimization strategy, which is twofold.

First, part of the junta's *raison d'être* consists of condemning and deposing against (the failed policies of) the central government it overthrew. As mentioned earlier, the central government was inseparable from the French intervention and legitimised both their continued existence. *“You need an enemy and the juntas have said from the beginning that France is their enemy,”* explains a Nigerian political scientist (The Washington Post, 2023). Sahel-expert Hannah Armstrong also underlines the importance of the anti-French, anti-colonialist discourse to the junta's legitimacy: *“The coup can be seen as a declaration of independence,”* says Armstrong, *“It amounts to a rejection of a political model that the Nigerians saw as an alliance between French interests and their own corrupt leadership. To be different, they had to wipe out both,”* (ibid.). Moreover, France itself

reinforced the nationalist narrative through its refusal to recognise the juntas.

Besides national, the junta also looked for international legitimization by forging new partnerships, especially on security issues. For this, the new leaders were looking in particular to Russia and its paramilitary Wagner Group⁸. Since 2017, Russia has been active in Africa through Wagner, supporting regimes with military equipment, training and the presence of its paramilitaries. Russia also actively pursues anti-imperialist, mainly anti-French, propaganda through online channels and support for civilian opposition organisations (Le Monde, 2023). Moreover, Wagner had been making life difficult for Paris for some time with numerous propaganda campaigns and inciting anti-French and pro-Russian demonstrations.

In Mali, in the aftermath of the coup, recriminations and accusations were flying back and forth between France and the junta (Maslanka, 2022). When the latter welcomed 1,000 Russian Wagner mercenaries to Malian territory, France had enough. In a reaction, Macron announced the withdrawal of 2,000 French troops from Mali, to which Bamako itself took over the initiative and demanded the immediate departure of French troops. The military agreement with Paris was suspended, removing the legal basis for Barkhane's presence (ibid.). On November 9th 2022, Macron formally ended Operation Barkhane (France24, 2022).

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⁸After the death of Prigozhin, the leader of the group, Wagner was absorbed by the Russian Ministry of Defence and was given a new name: the Africa Corps (Minde, 2024).

In Burkina Faso and Niger, similar frustrations and provocations as well as the Malian precedent led to the forced departure of the French (France24, 2023; The Guardian, 2023). The suspended agreements with France were quickly replaced by deals with Moscow as a new international partner.

Conclusion

The Sahel conflict is one of extreme complexity. A web of international and regional actors, competing interests, local dynamics and geostrategic chess makes it difficult to maintain a clear view on the conflict, as well as to draw far-reaching conclusions. What is clear is that the military-first logic of Barkhane's strategy was flawed and contributed to the disruption of the civil-military balance. In Mali and Burkina Faso, a cocktail of growing protest and defeats on the battlefield served as the last straw for the coup plotters. In Niger, personal power interests played their part, but Barkhane's militarization at least paved the way for the 2023 coup d'etat. Eventually, the junta's legitimization strategy marked the formal end of Barkhane.

It remains to be seen what France's future in the Sahel looks like. In any case, this paper argues that Paris will have to step away from the war-on-terror discourse and thoroughly review its regional strategy. That way, new efforts might not be doomed to fail from the start.

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