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Abstract

This article reviews Operation Barkhane, the French operation to stabilize the Sahel region of Africa. In the article, the author reviews the motivations for the initial operation, its activities, and its eventual conclusion. In addition to these milestones, the author also reviews how Operation Barkhane, and its accompanying successes and failures, may contribute to a revision of French operational strategy.

Keywords: French, Sahel, Military, Stabilization, Jihad

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On November 9, 2022, the French president Macron formally announced that Operation Barkhane in Mali and the Sahel¹ has come to an end. That was the end of a French military “adventure” whose goal was to stabilize the security reality in the Sahel states, which are mostly comprised of former French colonies (up until the 1960s) and prevent the spread of radical Islam organization in that region.

“We do not intend to be indefinitely committed” explained president Macron. The main French military operation beyond the French borders has ended. Macron didn’t elaborate how the troops still in Africa will deploy and operate. He said that “our military support (to the Sahel states) will continue however per terms to be determined with them, our involvement with the African states has to be focused on the logic underlying support and cooperation and therefore we will launch an exchange phase with our African partners to change the status and missions of French bases in Africa”².

1 See : https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/11/09/fin-officielle-de-l-operation-militaire-barkhane-apres-pres-que-dix-ans-d-existence_6149123_3212.html

2 Macron has recently led a tactical line per which the military forces of the African states have to be at the forefront and the French troops are to provide logistic support, air to ground fire power, intelligence and training. Macron’s above insight stems from the French “displeasure” voiced within the French public every time a French soldier is being killed in Africa without any positive outcome (per the French public’s view). See : <https://www.lefigaro.fr/inter-national/emmanuel-macron-officialise-la-fin-de-l-operation-barkhane-20221109>

Barkhane Force operated continuously since August 2014. It was comprised of French elite units and military forces from four states: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger. Mali also participated until it decided to pull its troops out. The joint task force operated under French command. The US and other western states provided logistic support, training and financial support.

The last French troops exited Mali some three months ago after nine years of fighting the jihadists, at the request of the military junta in control of Mali³. Their departure was mired in tension between France and Mali and an anti-French atmosphere in Mali that spilled over to neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso.

In February 2022, president Macron announced the departure of and reduction of the number of French troops. The remaining French troops, some 3,000 soldiers were located to Niger. Macron clarifies that “we cannot stay militarily involved alongside de facto authorities whose clandestine goals and strategy are not shared by us”. The French military has finished its exit of Mali in mid-August 2022 after nine of fighting the jihadists. It should be noted, the French contingency has been viewed in Mali as a new form of neo-colonialism. 5,100 French troops took part in Operation Barkhane, of which 59 were lost.

Operation Barkhane’s Milestones

In 2012, Ansar Dine and jihadists identified with AQIM took over northern Mali⁴. Per the urgent request of the then Mali president, Dionconde Traore, France launched on January 11, 2013, Operation Serval to stop the jihadi columns advancing on Bamako and allow Mali to regain sovereignty over its entire territory. Francois Hollande (then the French president) explained that the goals of the operation were to block terror attacks in Mali, safeguarding the security of French citizens in Mali (approx. 6,000 at the time) and assisting the Mali government in realizing its sovereignty over its entire territory. He added that as far as France is concerned the operation will last as long as required. The French force was supported by several European countries who had sent troops as part of the operation, in order to curb the wave of refugees into Europe due to the political instability in Africa. Operation Serval lasted through July 2014.

Stabilizing the situation in northern Mali with the assistance of the French expeditionary force created full cooperation between the two forces. In June 2014 a peace agreement was arrived at between the Mali government the Tuareg rebels, members of the MNLA

3 The French presence in Mali, first driven by the threat posed by Tuareg rebel terrorists to the Mali government in 2012 enabled France to also maintain control over gold and uranium mines.

4 Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is active not just in Mali but also in the corridor that spread across most of the Sahel. Another jihadi organization active in the region is the Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJAO). The organizations and their turban wearing fighters, cruelly enforce Sharia law in the territories they hold and even maim or execute those who violate them. They even lash women who not fully robed and destroy any western characteristic.

the National Movement for the Liberation of AZWAD – the very same tribe that started the hostilities in 2012. Following the agreement Mali military forces entered the city of Kidal, the Tuareg stronghold.

After the agreement was executed president Traore announced that presidential elections were to take place on July 28.

On May 25, the French military started withdrawing part of its troops from Mali. It left a small number of troops whose goal was to assist the central government to exercise their rule. Simultaneously Mali cancelled the emergency situation that was in effect since the launch of Operation Serval. The presidential elections took place in August 2013 in which Ibrahim Bobakher Keita was elected.

Upon the stabilization of the situation and the strengthening of the central government, France announced the end of Operation Serval on July 15, 2014.

On August 1, 2014, Operation Serval became Operation Barkhane, a regional mission for the Sahel together with Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso troops. The goal of Operation Barkhane was “to put the jihadist enemy in our sights and within reach of the local troops”, i.e., with the assistance of French troops assist the local military forces to be at the forefront of the fight and uproot the radical Islamic organizations, at the local level. On the regional and international level, the goal was to prevent the conversion of the region into a “terrorism highway” where jihadi groups between Libya and the Atlantic Ocean can recuperate, regroup and rebuild which will lead to serious security threats mainly to European security.

The above goal was set under the French understanding that the operation cannot go on indefinitely and drawing it along with the French military presence will be counterproductive in the end.

During the Operation Barkhane the troops gained significant achievements such as the elimination of Abd al-Malik Droukdel the head of AQIM in June 202 after a seven-year manhunt.⁵

The force took over the Trois Frontier region (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger border triangle) that was a preferred destination for the various jihadi organizations’ coordination meetings.⁶ The military pressure on the jihadists forced the latter to split into small groups and spread over a wide territory, mostly desolated which meant that they could not execute large scale attacks but rather rely on guerilla warfare and the setting IEDs.

In hindsight, one can point to four major mistakes of the French government made over the course of Operation Barkhane, especially in 2020 which led to Macron’s decision to

5 See <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3365112>

6 The radical Islamists used to meet under the cover of wooded areas in the region to plan ambushes, share intelligence and plant ambushed and IEDs.

dismantle the force and rebuild it as a smaller force based in Niger.

- 1.** In 2020 the struggle between AQIM and ISGS (IS in the Greater Sahara – an IS affiliate). ISGS strive to create a trans-ethnic caliphate in the in the Sahel that replaces the current states in the region. AQIM from its end, relied on the two largest ethnic groups at the source of the conflict, the Tuareg and the Fulani, whose local leaders (Iyad Ag Ghali – Tuareg; and Ahmadou Koufa – Fulani) do not support the destruction of the current Sahel states in favor of forming a caliphate. French military elements on the ground recommend the political decision makes in France to leverage this political-military opportunity but were turned down.
- 2.** On June 3, 2020, Abd al-Malik Droukdel, AQIM's Algerian leader was eliminated. His killing provided the Tuareg and Fulani, specifically theirs above mentioned leaders (Ag Ghali and Koufa correspondingly) with an autonomy to act as this was the first time AQIM was led by a local Sahel African rather than an Arab. The French government didn't recognize that there was a need to "divide and conquer", i.e., address the latter leaders, whose aspirations were mainly regional and the global jihadi organizations whose aspirations are different and global in nature.
- 3.** In August 2020 the first in a series of several military coups took place on Mali. The coup allowed the ruling junta to open negotiations with Ag Ghali. France was riled up and voiced an unequivocal position that no one should negotiate with terrorists. The internal negotiations intensified the struggle between the two jihadist movements in Mali. At this stage Operation Barkhane would have totally paid off because this enabled the closure of the northern front to focus on other regions. A paradigm change was required but the French government, again, refused to see the dynamic reality on the ground and continued its overall war on global terrorism.
- 4.** The Islamic leaders that succeeded Droukdel had ethno-Islamic characteristics. The French refusal to negotiate with them and the continued Barkhane Force attempts to eliminate them backfired. The November 2020 elimination of Bag Ag Moussa, Ag Ghali's second in command, presented a mirror image of the American strategy – indiscriminate attacks and hits on any terrorist group's leader.

In summation, one can say that the French government's refusal to see the dynamic reality on the ground even though it has been correctly observed by Barkhane Force, led inter alia to the political tension between the French government and military junta in Mali which intensified the anti-French sentiment (neo colonialism) in the country which in turn led to expulsion of the French troops from Mali and the approach to the Wagner Group to act as the fighting, training and backup force to the Mali military.

The end of Operation Barkhane doesn't mean a French withdrawal from the Sahel but rather a rethinking of the French operational strategy. The redeployment of the forces will likely take into account the spread of the radical Islamic organizations towards the countries along the coast of the Bay of Guinea where the French have clear economic

interests and where tens of thousands of French citizens reside (Senegal, Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo, Guinea and Ghana).

The end of the operation and the redeployment of the forces provides the jihadist organizations with a breathing room and a respite from the military pressure Barkhane Force applied to them.