

COUNTERTERRORISM AND COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE SAHEL: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE END OF OPERATION BARKHANE IN THE REGION

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Abstract

9th November 2022 officially marked the end of the French-led Operation Barkhane in the Sahel after a diplomatic skirmish between the Military government in Mali and the French Government. However, France's withdrawal from the Sahel points to a decline of her influence in the Sahel while casting a shadow over international efforts to stabilize the region that has been transformed into a haven for Jihadist insurgents and transnational terrorist organizations and transnational organized criminals since the last decade. Drawing data largely from secondary sources of information and with the aid of the research technique of content analysis, the study attempted an assessment of the end of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel, and concluded that the French sudden withdrawal from the Operation amidst their diplomatic brawl with Mali and Burkina Faso portend significant implications to the security and stability of the Sahel, especially when considered the fragile political governance systems of the Sahel states, most of which are former French colonies, the future of CTCOIN in the region and the rising increase of jihadist insurgency and their transnational terrorist allies supporting their agenda in the Sahel. The study recommends amongst others that the G-5 Sahel countries should as a matter of priority settle France's diplomatic face-off with Mali and Burkina Faso so as to strengthen their support from EU partners in CTCOIN efforts in the Sahel; and that the AU and the sub-regional bodies in the Sahel such as the G-5 Sahel, ECOWAS and ECCAS should intensify engagements with strategic partners within and outside Africa to mobilize resources and assets needed in the joint fight against transnational terrorism and insurgencies in the Sahel.

Keywords: Counterterrorism, Counterinsurgency, Intervention Force, Insurgency, Security and Stability, and Terrorism.

Introduction

While the Sahel region is in dire need of external military assistance to support the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts of the region to contain the rising surge of Islamist insurgency and the rising increase in transnational terrorist organizations and other trans-border crimes that have taken over the entire region since the last two decades, the world was surprised to witness the announcement of France withdrawal of Operation Barkhane in the region amidst the persistent violent attacks and armed conflict by Islamic insurgent groups and their allied transnational terrorist groups. Particularly, in the central Sahel region, which comprised Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Operation Barkhane was a French-led military intervention force of about 3,000 strong French military force, launched on the 1st of August 2014 as a counterterrorism and counterinsurgency (CTCOIN) intervention force to counter the rising Islamist insurgency and transnational terrorism spreading across the African Sahel Belt (Van Der Perre and Tessier, 2019). It became effective immediately after the launch and remained the lead military CTCOIN force in the Sahel until November 2022 when it officially ended its operation in the Sahel.

Meanwhile, Operation Barkhane was a follow-up to Operation Serval, a successful French-led military operation that degraded Ansar Dine and jihadists identified with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) that took over northern Mali alongside Tuareg rebels in 2012 and recaptured the seized vast territory in 2014, but with a much wider geographical focus (Doukhan, 2022). The operation, with approximately 5,100 soldiers comprised of about 3,000 strong French military forces and more than 2000 soldiers from the Sahel

was spread out between Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, and headquartered in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad (Al Venter, 2020). It operated with full heavy military equipment including fighter aircraft and bases for intelligence collection and operations in Niamey, Niger's capital. Others include Agadez, Arlit, Tillabery, and several other sites in Niger. In addition, the operation had around 1,500 troops in northern Mali, spread between the large bases at Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, Tessalit, and later at Gossi closer to central Mali, as well as the border with Burkina Faso (Al Vente, 2020).

Incidentally, the Force became the largest external military intervention force in the Sahel with a budget of nearly 600 million Euro per year, and operational engagements that ranged from combat patrols, together with Malian military forces and partner militias to intelligence gathering and training, to local development activities, aimed at filling absence left by the government (Al Vente, 2020). It has the full capacity of a regional military intervention force that can effectively counter and contain the spread of Islamic insurgency in Mali and the rest of the central Sahel region.

It is remarkable to note that the dislodgement of the insurgents from the recaptured vast territory in northern Mali led to the spread of remnants of the degraded Islamist insurgents towards the southern region and the border regions of Central Sahel region, with attacks affecting neighbouring Burkina Faso, Niger and Cote d'Ivoire and threatening the security and stability of the states and their democratic governance systems (Van Der Perre and Tessier, 2019). This however, informed the main objectives of the Operation, which are to root out the remnants of the degraded and on-the-run insurgents from northern Mali and contained their spread in the central Sahel region, and the neutralization of key transnational terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) that have taken advantage of the fragile nature of the Sahelian countries and the ungoverned spaces in the Sahel Belt to create a safe haven in the region. Incidentally, these objectives were drawn along with the French military presence without an exit plan unlike Operation Serval that gave birth to it.

After eight years of CTCOIN operations in the Sahel, Operations Barkhane came to an end in November 2022 which heralded the withdrawal of French troops from the Sahel. However, the operations did not end without achieving some milestone achievements in the region, however, it recorded a significant failure as it could not achieve the set-out objectives, instead, it was immersed in a conflict of interest with Mali and Burkina Faso. The conflict of interest between France and these two countries culminated in the unceremonious withdrawal of France from the region and the end of the Operation.

The sudden withdrawal of France and the end of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel in the face of the persistent attacks and threats by Islamist insurgents and their allied transnational terrorist organizations to the states in the region has raised many concerns about the future of CTCOIN in the Sahel as well as the security and stability of the region. It is in this light that the study assesses the CTCOIN in the Sahel and the implications of the end of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel. The aim is to draw out the success and failure of the operation based on its mandate and the situation of the region before and after Operation Barkhane and proffer recommendations on the likely ways of enhancing the future of CTCOIN efforts as well as the security and stability of the region.

Methodology

The study relied largely on the use of content analysis on secondary sources of information and data gathering for the analysis of the phenomena under study. These include the use of existing literature on the subject and the use of documentary reports, news reports, as well as the use of trend analysis as its research technique because of the current nature of the matter. This is supported by the use of internet search engines which was quite useful to the study in searching for information.

Basic Conceptual Explanation

Counter-Insurgency

According to the United States Army Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-4), Counterinsurgency (COIN) is the military, paramilitary, psychological, social and economic undertakings implemented by the government to foil insurgency (David and James, 2006). It aims to maintain adequate

security presence, protect lives and property in the conflict zone and promote public order while decimating an enemy and its facilities, structures and forces (Oyewole, 2016). By implication, it is the opposite of insurgency and it incorporates socio-political, legal, bio-psychological, and security doings legitimately and religiously pursued by the state to annihilate the manifestations of insurgency, reinstate stability, promote public order and strengthen the state's legitimacy (Shodunke, 2021).

Counter-Terrorism

Wilcox (1996) views Counterterrorism (CT) as the policies and methods used to deter and defeat terrorism, which involve the use of information gathering, law enforcement, diplomacy, military force and protective security. He further stated that effective CT also attempts to discover and remove the causes that motivate terrorists. In this context, CT encompasses policies and measures that can achieve deterrence and also defeat terrorism. In addition to offensive measures, it also covers defensive measures such as protective security and other non-kinetic approaches like diplomacy and attempts to remove factors that motivate terrorism (Wilcox, 1996).

Intervention Force

Intervention Force is commonly defined as interference in the territory or domestic affairs of another state with military force, typically in a way that compromises a sovereign government's control over its own territory and population (Silverstone, 2020). Its justification, however, is based on the responsibility to protect civilians and a legitimate government from subversion by the threats of insurgents, rebels or terrorists as the case may be. In this regard, Operation Barkhane is a French Intervention Force with the mandate to flush out insurgents and terrorist strongholds in the Sahel Belt.

Insurgency

The United States Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2009) describes insurgency as the use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. In other words, it is a political violence concept that uses a mixture of subversion, sabotage, political, economic, and psychological actions, and armed conflicts to achieve its political aims. Paul et al (2010) conceive insurgency as a protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, a military occupation government, an interim civil administration, or a peace process while increasing insurgent control and legitimacy. In the view of Nwala (2013), the insurgency does not just start rather certain conditions are typical in creating it. These conditions include injustice, the illegitimacy of a regime, self-determination, poverty, weakness of government, ideological influences, the militarization of the society, lack of employment opportunities, and increasing circulation of small arms and light weapons out of which the common denominator of most insurgencies is gaining control of a population or a particular territory, including its resources (Nwala, 2013). Several conflict situations in Africa that spanned decades such as the crises in the Sahelian states of Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and many others can be classified as insurgencies.

Terrorism

According to Schmidt (2011), there is no universally agreed definition of terrorism, because governments around the world have been reluctant to formulate an agreed-upon and legally binding one. This difficulty arises from the belief that the term has become politically and emotionally charged. However, one common understanding of the act of terrorism is the ability to create fear in people through violence. The Dictionary of Political Science defines terrorism as the use of violence or indulgence in violent activity for any political end or to put the public in fear (Chaturvedi, 2006). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Fact Sheet No. 32 (2008) defines terrorism as an act of violence that targets civilians in the pursuit of political or ideological goals. Legally, although the international community is yet to adopt a comprehensive definition of terrorism, existing declarations and resolutions, and universal treaties relating to specific aspects of it, have come to define certain acts and core elements of the act of terrorism. In 1994, the UN General Assembly's Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism in Resolution 49/60 stated:

Terrorism includes criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purpose and that such acts are in any circumstances unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, and religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them

Similarly, the Security Council Resolution 1556 (2004), referred to terrorism as:

Criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a Government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.

The United States in its Title 22 Chapter 38 U.S Code 2656f defined terrorism as premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents. These definitions have one common denominator, an act of violence on people which in all legality constitutes a violation of the laws of every state. Most importantly, the act of terrorism is not bounded by borders as it transcends beyond national frontiers. When such acts of terrorism are carried out by individuals or groups controlled from beyond the frontiers of a sovereign state it is referred to as transnational terrorism. According to Yildiz and Beyham (2014);

Transnational terrorism is an expanded version of domestic terrorism accelerated by globalization, religious extremism, advanced communication tools and sped up by remarkable revolutionary political events, and characterized by a more complex organizational structure, involvement of actors and assets from more than one state and sometimes involves the use of high technology.

The above definition has shown that the phenomenon of transnational terrorism is not border bound, it transcends national frontiers by involving at least two states and non-state actors and it is not peculiar to any group, religion or tribe or race, region or nation (US Department of Justice, 1976). Transnational terrorist organizations tend to often exploit local grievances and insurgencies with ideologies focusing on the transformation of international order or shift in political power to establish their presence. It is these characteristics exhibited by transnational terrorism that differentiates it from domestic terrorism. Examples of terrorist organizations with transnational spread in membership and activities in Africa include Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Region, Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). These terrorist organizations have their transnational linkages to Jihadist insurgent groups operating in the Sahel. In this study, terrorism and transnational terrorism are used interchangeably to mean an act of terrorism perpetrated by terrorist organizations.

Theoretical Framework: Integrated Conflict Management Theory

The analysis of this paper revolves around the French-led Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Operations in the Sahel region, which by inference fall within the context of conflict and its management in the region. Therefore, the study adopts the integrated conflict management theory as its framework of analysis. The aim is to situate the study within the context of conflict management, so as to be able to evaluate the Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency operations conducted by Operation Barkhane and to establish the challenges that culminated in its collapse. The Major proponents of the Conflict Management theory include Burton (1990); Fisher (1993); Bassey (2001); Imorbighe (2003); and Zartman (2000) and it is expressed in the works as dated.

Integrated Conflict Management theory represents a process in which the starting point is conflict prevention and/or peace promotion and consolidation through eliminating the causes of friction and creating a propitious atmosphere for harmonious relationships (Imorbighe, 2003). This contention presupposes the existence of a base point of relative peace and harmony in human or interstate/intrastate relationships. It is a point at which friction is kept at tolerable levels and conflict management moves to a secured stage. In the second stage, the efforts of conflict management are directed towards trying to control and abate the conflict for the third and final phase to take effect. The third stage involves the eventual resolution of the conflict through

intensive negotiation to settle all fundamental issues associated with conflict management (Imorbighe, 2003). Once the affected issues are resolved, conflict management can then be said to have gone full circle, with the relationship between the parties having returned to a tolerable level of friction.

The Integrated Conflict Management Theory in regional conflict management is particularly relevant to Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism operations logic. A CTCOIN Mechanism such as the French-led Operation Barkhane in the Sahel Region that takes on the role of a regional conflict manager, apart from developing the necessary machinery for the peaceful resolution of conflicts within the region should first try to foster harmonious relationships among the parties in conflict. This will help eliminate suspicion among the people and facilitate the peace process (Zartman, 2000). Any attempt to neglect this process will lead to chaos and friction between the parties, thereby hampering any effort geared towards the resolution and management of conflict. This issue contributed immensely to creating the problems that culminated in the cold relationship between Operation Barkhane and its members, particularly Mali and Burkina Faso that eventually led to the collapse of the Operation. If France had followed judiciously the four stages of the integrated management theory (as enumerated above) in the operations of the Force, it would not have run into a hitch with the states but would have consolidated its operations to create a propitious atmosphere that would have achieved the end state, which is the restoration of peace and stability in the region.

Understanding the Sahel Region

The Sahel region or belt constitutes a geographical enclave in sub-Saharan Africa. It covers the vast semi-arid region of Africa separating the Sahara desert to the north and tropical savannas to the south and stretches further from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east at about a 5,900 km (3,670mi) (UNISS, 2021). Thus, encompassing northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan and Eritrea. The Sahel region plays host to notable African rivers such as the River Niger, Gambia River, Senegal Rive and Lake Chad among others (African Defence Forum, 2020). Generally, the region is mostly hot and dry for the most part of the year and has sparse annual rainfall. The geography of the Sahel and its unique features makes it attractive to trans-border criminal activities and irregular migrations between sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and Europe.

In terms of resources, 64.5 per cent of the population of the Sahel is below 25 years and the region boasts of enormous renewable energy potential. The region has tremendous potential for rapid economic growth and development (UNDP, 2020). In terms of baseline rankings, several countries of the Sahel are classified among the highly indebted countries (HIPC) and have repeatedly ranked negatively on basic global baseline indexes such as the Global Peace Index (GPI), Global Terrorism Index (GTI), Human Development Index (HDI), and Global Corruption Perception Index (CPI). In addition, the peripheries of the Sahel are characterized by the absence of state control and state sovereignty, which most often depicts them as ungoverned spaces: a lawless no man's land in local parlance. These features have significantly contributed to sustaining the state's fragility and vulnerability to recurrent security and stability challenges.

It is not surprising therefore that the Sahel in the last two decades has degenerated into a cesspool of all manner of illicit transactions and movement including armed conflicts, insurgencies and terrorism. Thus, transforming the region into a sanctuary of transnational terrorist organizations and Islamist insurgencies with severe humanitarian catastrophes and deaths. The Most affected countries in the region are Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, which have since the last decade remained the epicentre of varying dimensions of armed conflict, insurgencies and transnational terrorism and accounting for more terrorism deaths in 2022 than both South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) combined (Global Terrorism Index, 2023).

The GTI report further revealed that across the Sahel, 22,074 people were killed in 6,408 terror attacks between 2007 and 2022. Thus making it the most impacted area of the world, representing 43 per cent of the total global terrorism deaths in 2022 (GTI, 2023). The Global Conflict Tracker (2023) observed that the last decade of conflicts displaced 2.6 million people in Liptako-Gourma and 2.8 million people in the Lake Chad Basin with hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring into neighbouring countries. This evolving threat dynamics and mortality partly informed decision of the 6965th Meeting of the UNSC held on 13 May 2013,

to describe the Sahel as the “Arc of Instability” in Africa, which could turn the continent into a launch pad for larger-scale terrorist attacks, if left unchecked (UNSC, 2013).



Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023.

Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Operations in the Sahel: Operation Barkhane Assessed

In 2012, the secessionist Tuareg rebellion in Mali set forth events that precipitated a coup d'état, Al Qaeda-linked jihadist organization, Ansar Dine and other jihadist organizations took over northern Mali (Doukhan, 2022). The rebellion led to the displacement of 400,000 persons as refugees (FOI MEMO, 2014). The evolving events of the rebellion prompted the then-Mali President, Dioncounde Traore to place an urgent request to France for intervention assistance. On 11 January 2013, France launched Operation Serval to stop the jihadist insurgents from advancing on Bamako, the capital and allow Mali to regain sovereignty over its entire territory. The goals of the operation were explicitly laid out by the then French President, Francois Holland, which were to block terror attacks in Mali, safeguard the security of the approximately 6,000 French citizens (at the time) and assist the Mali government in realizing its sovereignty over its entire territory. The timeline of the operation was to be determined by Paris according to the French President (Doukhan, 2022). The Force was supported by several European countries who had sent troops as part of the operation, in the bid to control the wave of refugees into Europe due to political instability in Africa. Operation Serval was a huge success and lasted through July 2014 (FOI MEMO, 2014; Doukhan, 2022).

The success of French-led Operation Serval alongside the Malian Army in northern Mali created full cooperation between the two forces. In June 2014, the Mali government and the Tuareg rebels under the MNLA-National Movement for the Liberation of AZWAD arrived at a peace agreement. As part of the agreement, Mali military forces entered the city of Kidal, the Tuareg stronghold. This was followed by the announcement of presidential elections to take on July 28 by President Traore.

On 25 May, the French military started withdrawing a major part of its troops from Mali, leaving a small number of troops whose goal was to assist the central government of Mali to maintain the law. The state of emergency situation that was in effect since the launch of Operational Serval was cancelled. By August 2013 presidential election took place and Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was elected President of Mali.

Upon the stabilization of the situation and strengthening of the central government, on 15 July France officially announced the end of Operation Serval in Mali. It is remarkable to note that though Operation Serval was a huge success it created a spill-over effect on the southern part of Mali and the border regions of central Sahel bordering Burkina Faso, Niger, and the borders of Cote d'Ivoire. The remnants of the Ansar Dine jihadist linked to Al Qaeda and their allies had moved down the southern region carrying out several violent attacks and threatening the stability and security of the region.

In response to the threats, Operation Serval transformed to Operation Barkhane, but this time with a wider geographical scope to assume a regional task for the Sahel together with Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. The Operation was launched on 1st August 2014 as a regional counterterrorism and counterinsurgency force for Mali and the Sahel. The goals of the operation were to contain the jihadist insurgents in the northern and their spill over in the south and neighbouring Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad

including the western Sahara region; and to ensure the neutralization of key transnational terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and ISIS in the Sahel so as to prevent the conversion of the region into a haven for terrorist organizations planning attacks on France and Europe. Incidentally, Sahel has emerged as a busy transit route used for irregular migration between sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and Europe. However, the goals were set under the French understanding that the operation cannot go on indefinitely. Therefore were drawn along with the French military presence to ensure effective control of the operation. This partly informed the decision to have about 3,000 strong French military forces in the operation. However, the inability of the French to draw a timeline for the operation became the albatross that culminated in the unceremonious termination of the operation.

Achievements of Operation Barkhane

Operation Barkhane lasted for almost eight years (1 August 2014-09 November 2022) during which the troops gained significant achievements, despite the failure in achieving the main goals set out for the operation (Schofield, 2022; King, 2023). Among the notable successes of the force was the neutralization of Abdul al-Malik Droukdel, the leader of AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) in June 2020 after a seven-month hunt (News Walla, 2020), and that of Bah Ag Moussa, a military commander of the Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans (GSIM) (Tull, 2021). Although the neutralization of their terrorist leaders fundamentally did not change the political and security context, it gave some reprieve to the armies of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso after a disastrous 2019, during which they suffered more than a thousand casualties at the hands of jihadist groups.

Another great achievement of the Force was the takeover of the Trois Frontier region, a three-country-point joining Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger also known as the Liptako-Gourma region, which became a hotspot for an unprecedented range of security threats and a preferred destination for the various jihadist organizations for coordinating meetings. Operation Barkhane's superior power forced the insurgent groups and their transnational terrorist allies to split into small groups for survival and spread over a wide territory that made it difficult for them to execute large-scale attacks, leading to resort to guerrilla warfare and setting of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) for attacks (Doukhan, 2020). Between 2018 and 2022 there was no record of large-scale attacks in the regional capitals and the number of kidnappings also significantly declined (Guiffard, 2023).

In addition, the operational capability of these jihadist groups, along with their ability to orchestrate propaganda were crippled, leading to the formation of JNIM (*Jama'a Nasral-Islam wal Muslimin*) to consolidate the ranks of several weakened Al Qaeda-affiliated groups under a single command. JNIM also showed a willingness to negotiate with Mali's ruling junta and cease its attack on French interests, but only on the condition that France fully withdraws from Mali. This political concession underscores the group's struggle to confront French forces (Guiffard, 2023). However, these achievements could not translate into the realization of the mandate of the operation as the jihadist resurgence continued unabated with several attacks on the locals and rural communities where the spread gathered fresh momentum.

Challenges that led to the end of Operation Barkhane

One of the major challenges that culminated in the failure of Operation Barkhane was the negligence of a critical development that gained more steam as the fight against terrorism achieved one success after another. The vanguard of foreign jihadists with ambitions for a global Islamic state was able to transform itself into a large-scale local insurgency in the name of Islam (Guiffard, 2023). According to Guiffard:

The addition of hundreds of new recruits in 2012, who had returned to civilian life during the French intervention, armed and indoctrinated by the jihadist revolutionary discourse, allowed AQIM and Ansar al-Dine to quietly organize insurgencies in southern regions (*Katibat Khaled Ibn Walid*), central regions (*Katibat Macina*), and in Burkina Faso (*Ansarul Islam*). In addition, a few surviving members of Al-Mourabitoun pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in order to support a highly radical Fulani insurgency in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso (Guiffard, 2023)

Basically, significant attention and resources were directed on training the armies in the Sahel rather than mopping up on the remnants of the jihadist scattered in the southern region as a result of the Force assault

in the north and the failure to properly anticipate the growing insurgency became a major albatross to the operation that eventually created an operational misunderstanding and disarray between the French force and Malian army. In order to make up for the situation without the French troops, the Malian authorities resorted to wrong methods, such as committing human rights abuses against the civilian population and financing and arming militias such as the Dozo Hunters and the Dogon militias, and the recruitment of members of Ganda Iso and Ganda Koy into their forces to fight the jihadists. A trend that instigated discrimination against the Arabs, Tuaregs, and Fulani across the central Sahel and led to largescale and systematic attacks on Malian, Nigerien, and Burkinabe military bases between 2016 and 2017 (Guiffard, 2023).

The second major challenge was the consolidation of multiple Al Qaeda-affiliated groups (Ansar al-Dine and FLM-Macina Liberation Front) under a unified banner, the JNIM. This restructuring exacerbated the operational brawls between Mali and French authorities, as JNIM publicly called for the withdrawal of foreign forces as a requirement to end the conflict. Although the position of the jihadists may serve as a tactical move to take advantage of the disarray in Mali and regain an advantageous position, it demonstrated the superior power force of the French-led Barkhane on the jihadist insurgents and their transnational terrorist allies. Incidentally, both Paris and Mali fail to understand this trend as an opportunity to mop up the weak and degraded groups, instead, they engaged in more political issues of power which gave the jihadist and international terrorist allies to consolidate and became emboldened.

The third major challenge that led to the failure of Operation Barkhane was the lack of a reasonable exit option. As pointed out by Tull (2021), decision-makers in Paris knew that a more favourable situation to start disengagement will not emerge anytime during the heat of the counterterrorism, but failed to utilize the two opportunities that presented themselves in the operation: After the sweeping Serval campaign in 2013, and in 2015 during the signing of the Mali peace accord which provided a reasonably appropriate exit option. More so, the limit of what French intervention force in the Sahel can realistically achieve has been evident in the successes recorded in Serval and the subsequent achievements under Barkhane, therefore the inability of France to disengage after the training of the local armies of Mali and other states was a major mistake taken to the reputation of the operation.

The fourth issue was the French interference in the politics of the Sahel states (Mali and Burkina Faso) using Operation Barkhane, which created political skirmishes between Paris and authorities in Mali and Burkina Faso that led to the anti-French stance across the Francophone countries of the Sahel. For instance, while France claimed to keep the Force apolitical by virtue of the operation, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, it was reported in many instances to be inconsistent on several accounts (Tull, 2021). Operation Barkhane and its international collaborators, specifically, the EU Partners literally became a security umbrella for political elites in Bamako and the north. Similarly, the Force became decisively involved in domestic politics, which aroused mistrust and rumours about France's hidden agendas in the region, especially their bias in handling the Jihadist insurgents and the secessionist-leaning rebels in the Sahel in Mali and Burkina Faso (Tull, 2021).

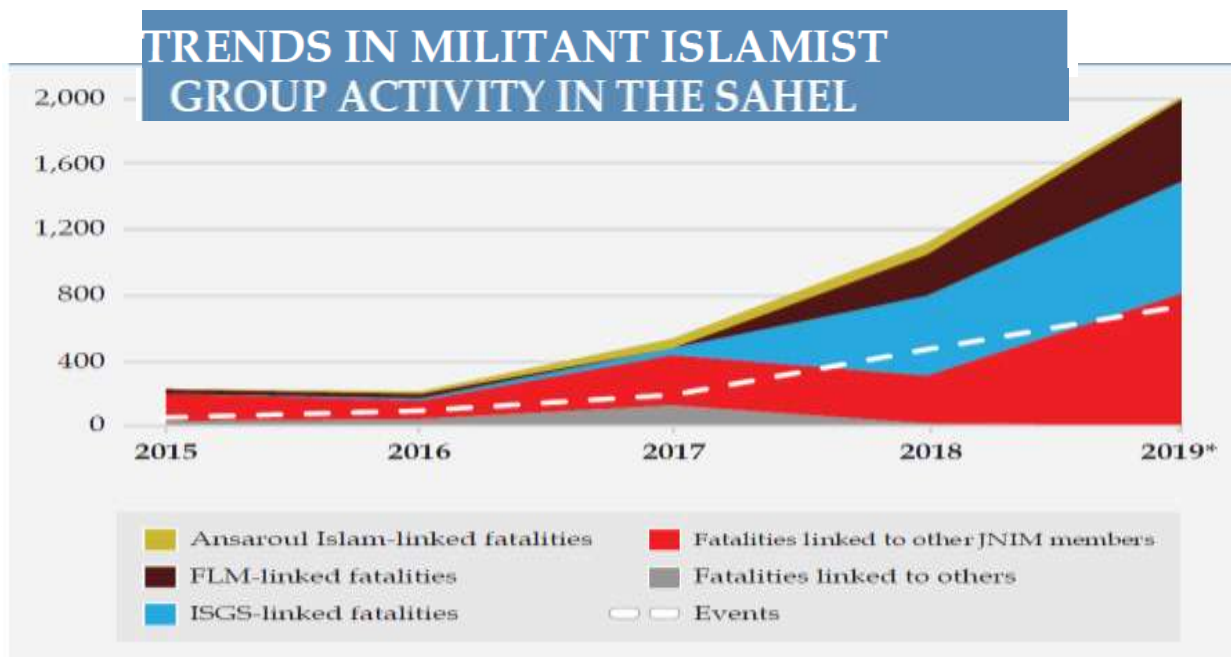
Another proof of the consequence of meddling in the political affairs of the Sahel was seen in the diplomatic face-off between France and Mali and Burkina Faso authorities. In Mali, the French Ambassador to Mali was expelled following the public characterization of Mali's Military government as "out of control and illegitimate" by French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Les Drain in 2021 (CSIS, 2022). In December 2023, the French Foreign Ministry indicated that they had received a letter in which Ouagadougou asked Paris to replace its ambassador, believing he was no longer a reliable interlocutor (Aljazeera, 23 December 2023). At the same time, the Burkinabe authorities had ordered the expulsion of Barbara Manzi, the UN envoy to leave the country on the basis of 'persona non-grate and accusing her of having conveyed an excessively negative picture of security standards in the country (Aljazeera, 4 January 2023).

The sixth major problem that crystallised into the end of Operation Barkhane was France's Declining Image among the francophone Sahel states, due to exacerbating security crisis in the face of Operation Barkhane. The August 2020 and May 2021 coups in Mali as well as the January 24 coup in Burkina Faso, which deposed leaders that were in some capacities cooperating with France and the subsequent expulsion of France in their various countries are indications of the deteriorating image of France and loss of trust by these

countries. The 24 January coup in Burkina Faso means that along with Mali and Chad, three of France’s major counterterrorism partners in the Sahel are regimes with questionable regional and international legitimacy against France (CSIS, 2022). The new National Strategic Review (NSR), one of the key French doctrinal documents that review France’s defence strategy recognized this challenge when it stated that the failure of Operation Barkhane is attributed in large part to the worsening image of France in the Sahel (BBC News, 2022). A veteran African reporter, Patrick Robert summarized the anti-French posture in the Sahel when he wrote in *Le Figaro*, “When France is there, it is accused of interference. When it is not there, it is accused of abandonment. Whatever it does, France is wrong” (BBC News, 2022).

The seventh and most critical of the challenges that torpedoed Operation Barkhane is the widespread of armed conflict and persistent attacks by jihadist insurgencies and their allied transnational terrorist organizations across the Sahel. The failure of the Force’s main objective, to stop the spread of jihadism in the Sahel, and forge a strong partnership with Mali and the G-5 Sahel in the region was a major cursor of the widespread of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel. Elie Tenenbaum, a Defence Specialist at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) recognized this when she stated that Operation Barkhane failed in its initial objective, to stop the spread of Jihad in the Sahel and to build a strong partnership in the region and today jihadism extends itself ever eider in the region and roots itself more deeply in the society while the strategic partnership is in tatters (BBS News, 2022). Events in the region showed that between 2015 and 2019 extremist-related violence doubled every year with a record of fatalities increased from 225 to 2,000 with a record of 1.4 million deaths, out of which 500,000 was recorded in Burkina Faso alone in 2019 (Le Roux, 2019). Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) (2020) observed that these fatalities are linked to the three dominant militant Islamist groups in the Sahel (Macina Liberation Front (FLM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Ansaroul Islam or Ansar al-Dine) whose activities have continued to increase in intensity, fatalities and spread in the Sahel. Even some of the relatively stable states of Niger, Burkina Faso and even Benin on the northern border of Mali and Cote d’Ivoire not known for terrorism and violent extremism are beginning to record incidences of terrorism and violent extremism. Between 2017 and 2021 terrorism-related violence incidents in these states reached an overarching 2,500 with nearly 6,000 deaths (Powell, 2022). The figure below shows the trends in the activity of the groups in the Sahel from 2015-2019.

Fig. 2. Trends in Militant Islamist Group Activity in the Sahel



of strength to other intervention forces such as the UN MINUSMA and African Peacekeepers and European partners who relied on them to protect their troops in the Sahel (The Conversation, 2022).

Secondly, the absence of the Force Operation has helped to embolden the insurgent groups and has led to the deterioration of security conditions in many countries of the Sahel as well as their general vulnerability to insurgents and terrorist groups. Equally, the widespread increase in the activities of these insurgency groups has made it difficult for states to build their administrative and military capacities, and the effort by the military to protect the state and government assets has created opportunities and justification for military coup d'état in the region. Since 2020, the countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) have recorded coups and countercoups with severe consequences from the regional bodies. Chad and Guinea have been under military rule, and Guinea Bissau and Niger have endured coup attempts. As a result, they have contravened the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance adopted in Dakar, Senegal on 21 December 2001 and the Accra Declaration of the African Union rejecting unconstitutional change of government which was adopted on 17 March 2022, and also creates an opportunity for political instability.

Thirdly, given the fragility of the states and their economy, the end of Operation Barkhane, the withdrawal of France and the EU partners in the Sahel portend increase military spending in countries of the Sahel, especially Mali and the G-5 countries where the armed conflict is most prevalent. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 2020 observed a sustained rise in the military expenditure of African countries, which exceeded US\$43.2 billion amounting to a 5.1 per cent and 11 per cent increase from 2019 and 2011 statistics, respectively (Agenzia Fides, 2020). The report noted that the defence expenditure was above 8.2 per cent of public spending in 2020 but was considerably higher in conflict-ridden countries of the Sahel such as Mali and Burkina Faso, which led to 18 and 12 per cent of public spending respectively (Agenzia Fides, 2020). Such a huge expenditure on defence and security in poor and fragile countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and others undermines the capacity of these countries to make public investments in core infrastructures that are critical to the socio-economic development of the states. Fourthly, it will boost the activities of transnational organised criminals and their illicit transactions in the region, particularly, the trade in small arms and light weapons (SALWs) and their circulation. This prognosis is predicated on the realization that an estimated 70 per cent of terrorist attacks perpetrated in Africa on an annual basis is carried out with the use of SALWs (ACSRT, 2022). Thus, posing a severe threat to AU Agenda 2063 efforts at "Silencing the Guns" on the continent.

Finally, all these implications put together opens a floodgate for more deaths and catastrophic humanitarian crisis in the Sahel which are major causes of insecurity and instability in sovereign states. The UNOCHA (2022) report observed that over 30 million people in the Sahel (mostly women and children) will require humanitarian assistance and protection in 2022 due to the rise in armed conflict in the Sahel. It further noted that since 2015, the number of security incidents in the central Sahel has increased eighteen-fold with the number of fatalities increasing more than twelve-fold while Lake Chad is doubling (UNOCHA, 2022). Available statistics have also shown that 2.4 million were displaced in the central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) as of the end of May 2022 with women and children accounting for more than half (UNOCHA, 2022). This represents a 40 per cent increase in a single year and a 56 per cent increase in Burkina Faso with the highest caseload in the region. Similarly, ACLED (2022) noted that Sahel countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger recorded a 50 per cent increase in deaths due to conflicts in 2022 amounting to about 9,000 fatalities, up from about 6,000 the year before. An indication of the severe security and stability threat the region faces, if something strategically drastic is not done to avert it.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Obviously, the Sahel region remains one of the turbulent regions in the African continent characterized by widespread insecurities and instability due to the surge of transnational terrorist-linked jihadist insurgents and the attendant armed conflicts and humanitarian catastrophe that have taken over the region since the last decade. Incidentally, the end of Operation Barkhane, the largest external military counterterrorism and counterinsurgency mission in the Sahel in November 2022 ended its operation in the region. Given the height of jihadist insurgencies and terrorist-related attacks across the Sahel with its attendant deaths and humanitarian catastrophes as well as the threats to legitimate governments, it has been established that the

end of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel portends significant implications to the stability and security of the region.

It is in this light that the study proffers the following evidence-based recommendations that if objectively pursued could strengthen the CTCOIN engagements in the region and ensure the security and stability of the region.

- a. the G-5 Sahel countries should as a matter of priority ensure the end of the diplomatic face-off between France and the Sahel countries especially the Francophone countries of Mali and Burkina Faso to resuscitate the support and contribution of France and other EU partners in strengthening and sustaining CTCOIN efforts in the region;
- b. Governments of the Sahel states should as a matter of priority strengthen their CTCOIN responses by addressing the conditions conducive to the surge of insurgencies and terrorism and their spread in the region;
- c. Governments of the Sahel states should mobilize all elements of national power in the implementation of a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach to the challenge of terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel;
- d. The AU and the sub-regional bodies in the Sahel such as the G-5 Sahel, ECOWAS and ECCAS should intensify engagements with strategic partners within and outside Africa to mobilize resources and assets needed in the joint fight against transnational terrorism and insurgencies in the Sahel;
- e. Governments of the Sahel states and the regional bodies should welcome Russian Wagner Corporation in the region as new partners in the security and stability of the region but should maintain a non-align posture towards the war in Ukraine so as not to draw the region into politics of superpower power game.

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