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LESSONS OF OPERATION BARKHANE FOR FUTURE EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE SAHEL



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Introduction

On August 15, 2022, the last French soldiers involved in Operation Barkhane left Malian territory. The operation began nearly a decade earlier and had the primary objective of fighting against terrorist groups in the region (Burgess, 2018, p. 5). The situation in Mali, however, appears worse now than before. Jihadist violence continues to escalate, anti-Western sentiment runs rampant, and Russian Wagner mercenaries have established a firm footing in the country.

Officially beginning on August 1, 2014, The French operation served as the catalyst for other European and international engagements in the region. The French counter-terrorism force aided the United Nations Peace Keeping Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM), The G5 Sahel States (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) and Task Force Takuba with key intelligence and logistical aid (Lebovich, 2021). However, since the French ended the Barkhane operation, Germany decided to pull out of MINUSMA, the EU suspended the EUTM, and the Takuba mission ceased operations (Shankar, 2023).

Despite what appears to be an operational failure in Mali and the end of critical missions in the region, France and its European allies have expressed their commitment to remain elsewhere in the Sahel to thwart security threats. Therefore, what lessons can Europe take from the French operation in Mali to bolster its new Sahelian security policies in 2023?

The French presence in Mali dates to January 11, 2013. In the months prior, separatists and Islamists supported by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb took control of the Malian cities of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. With the jihadist threat increasing in power, the Malian government requested French aid to help stop the terrorist advance (Spet, 2015, p. 69). Former President François Hollande obliged, sending in soldiers under the framework of Operation Serval. By the end of January, the French forces crushed the jihadist threat by recapturing Gao, entering Timbuktu without a fight, and seizing the Kidal airport. As Nathaniel Powel (2022) notes, one can view Serval as a “clearly defined, locally popular, and successful operation”.

The jihadist threat did not subside, however. The Islamists who survived the initial French operation started a campaign of their own by attacking French, Malian, and UN forces and eventually retook the city of Kidal (Shurkin, 2021, p. 54; Ouest-France 2022). France transformed Serval into a larger mission as the year went on. Serval officially became Barkhane in August 2014 when France combined the former with a 28-year-old mission in Chad called Operation Épervier. The new mission, now consisting of 3,500 troops across Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, aimed to stabilise the regional order under threat (Shurkin, 2021, p. 54).

French leadership prioritised Barkhane as a military-centric counterterrorism (CT) operation from its inception (Powell, 2022). This aspect grew increasingly pertinent in the aftermath of the Islamic terrorist attacks that occurred on French soil in 2015 and 2016 (Hollande, 2015; L’Obs, 2015). Both French presidents who oversaw Barkhane, Hollande from 2014 to 2017 and Emmanuel Macron until its 2022 end, emphasised the French will to fight against terrorism in the Sahel and remain until “the day there is no more Islamic terrorism in the region” (as cited in Richard, 2017).

France also sought to boost the European role in fighting terrorism in the region and integrated the Takuba Task Force under the command of Barkhane (Lebovich, 2021).

Despite the French emphasis on eradicating terrorism, jihadist groups appeared to have gained the upper hand in the region over the years. Fatalities due to violence linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel increased every year between 2017 and 2022. The geographical scope of these attacks also proliferated as 73 administrative districts witnessed violent events associated with militant Islamist groups, up from 35 districts in 2017 (Shurkin, 2022, pp. 1-3). The current Malian government has even accused the French of aiding terrorist groups in the region, a notion Paris sharply rejects (as cited in France 24, 2022b).

An Approach without Local Support

The French focus on terrorism reveals a notable policy flaw in Operation Barkhane. CT operations have merit in specific circumstances. The strategy’s advocates would argue that, in the long run, such a strategy is more cost-effective than a more engaged counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy (Exum, 2009). CT advocates would also add that, more importantly, a good CT strategy allows armed forces to focus on what they are best at: fighting in combat and driving away an enemy (Kaplan, 2009).

However, the approach of the CT focused on combat comes with neglecting to engage with civil society to build trust with the larger population (Shurkin, 2022, pp. 9). Barkhane lacked civilian engagement, which prevented the establishment of Malian trust. Aurélien Tobie noted that “[b]etween 2013 and 2015... the Malian opinion towards the French presence was changing. [Maliens] supported the Serval Operation but did not understand why the French presence was being prolonged with the Barkhane Operation” (as cited in Belsoeur and Tagnan, 2017). The discontent with Barkhane continued as time passed as less than half of Malians, 48 percent, in a 2017 poll, responded that they were satisfied with the French mission (Le Confident, 2017). As one Malian activist reported to French media, France “wants to maintain the status quo, so they can stay and control the region” (France 24, 2022a).

The Malian malaise with the French presence and inability to bolster regional security fuelled support for the August 2020 and May 2021 coups, subsequently sacking leaders that were largely cooperating with French efforts (Doxsee et al., 2022). The post-coup Malian junta has worked to mobilise further anti-French sentiment as a way to strengthen its domestic legitimacy, given the French pressure to return the government to civilian rule (Powell, 2022). The perfect cocktail of a lack of trust and anti-French sentiment ultimately made the French military mission impossible to conduct. Between the political Franco-Malian political crises, anti-French riots in the capital, and the Wagner presence in the country, President Macron finally announced the ending of Barkhane in February 2022 by stating: “We cannot remain military engaged alongside de-facto authorities whose strategy and hidden aims we do not share” (AFP, 2022).

Lessons Learned

All too often, policymakers fail to grasp the key lessons the past has to offer. As nuclear strategist Bernard Brodie once said: “One of the few unequivocally sound lessons of history is that the lessons we should learn are usually learned imperfectly, if at all” (Holsti & Rosenau, 1984, p. 25).

If European states are willing to jump back into the Sahel to ensure the security of the region, they will have to grasp the following three lessons of Operation Barkhane closely.

First, policymakers must understand the situation on the ground in order to create a comprehensive plan. French policymakers seemingly underestimated the complexities of the Sahel region by the time Serval became Barkhane. The focus on CT meant that the French military focused on stamping out jihadists from local al-Qaeda and ISIL groups. French troops did have some success in killing prominent regional terrorists, but this did not contribute to bolstering regional security (Le Monde, 2015; News Wires, 2021). This is because not all threats in the region are jihadist. As noted by Shurkin (2022, p. 2), militants in the Sahel “are less extensions of global terrorist organisations than expressions of local conflicts.” New European engagement in the Sahel will require policymakers to take a deeper look at the local political environment, examine why jihadism and ethnic rivalries persist in the region and formulate a strategy accordingly.

Second, if policymakers want to internationalise the Sahel operation, they must encourage dialogue between allies. As the leading figure in Mali, Paris wanted to include its European and local partners to have a “stronger, more inclusive response” to the security crisis (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, 2022). Cooperation, however, was not always high on the list.

The G5 allies expressed their frustration at how aspects of French policy appeared neo-colonial in its implementation (Firtion, 2020). Paris and Berlin maintained competing visions for carrying out the operation's approach, with the former's vision taking precedence (Goxho, 2021). Germany subsequently failed to challenge French leadership in changing the policy course despite expressing dissatisfaction with the operation's failing results (Erforth & Tull, 2022). New regional engagement must promote and encourage dialogue between partners in order to steer policy in the best direction. An inclusive coalition also has the added benefit of acting as a force multiplier and a source of legitimacy (Fernandez & Jeangène Vilmer, 2020, p. 26).

Third, policymakers must decide if they are willing to bear the cost of a new engagement in the region. Barkhane was an expensive operation to conduct. According to Reuters, France spent €1 billion annually on the operation (Irish & Diallo, 2022). Barkhane also came at the price of 59 French soldiers losing their lives (De Barochez, 2022). Analysts argue that any new engagement in the Sahel must come in the form of a COIN operation (Shurkin, 2022, p. 2). Such a mission will require a serious commitment to finance the necessary capital for the military operation and development programs associated with such a mission. At a time in which European states are supplying costly aid packages and arms to support Ukraine (Fiott, 2022), Europe must reflect long and hard to determine if they will finance a future mission before deciding it is time to reengage.

Conclusion

The end of the French military Operation Barkhane has closed one chapter in the European effort to stabilise security in the Sahel. Despite the end of Barkhane and other European regional operations, European leaders have stressed they do not intend to abandon the region. Therefore, French policy offers valuable lessons on how European policymakers should approach new military engagement. France overwhelmingly viewed the threat in the Sahel as solely a jihadist one. The military relied on the use of force to conduct counterterrorism operations, often neglecting civilian engagement and development as a result. Ignoring the needs of the civilian population helped fuel anti-French sentiment in Mali, rendering it nearly impossible for French forces to conduct the stated mission.

As such, European policymakers should consider three lessons moving forward. First, policymakers must understand regional complexities to confront threats to Sahelian security appropriately. Second, policymakers must encourage dialogue between allies to strengthen decision-making, force multiplication, and legitimacy. Finally, policymakers must decide if re-engaging in the Sahel is a cost they are both willing and able to bear.

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