

A Force for the Right Purpose? Rethinking Western COIN Interventions in Africa's Sahel

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Introduction

French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday, 9 November 2022, announced the end of *Operation Barkhane* in the Sahel region of Africa, nearly three months after French forces pulled out of Mali in August. His announcement marks the official end to France's 9-year counterinsurgency campaign in the Sahel.² The Sahel is a sparsely inhabited land mass that spans the length of the African continent from west to east, just south of the Sahara Desert. It is located between the Sahara Desert to the north and the tropical savannas to the south. The Sahel runs from Senegal on the Atlantic coast to Eritrea on the Red Sea coast, passing through parts of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina

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² "Macron confirms end of anti-jihadist West Africa military operation," *France24*, 9 November 2022, accessed 10 November 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20221109-live-france-announces-end-of-anti-jihadist-west-africa-military-operation>.

Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan.³ Over the years, the Sahel's porous national borders and ungoverned spaces, coupled with the economic marginalization of the region at large, have provided a safe haven and staging ground for criminal and violent extremist groups to launch both national and transnational attacks. Insurgent movements such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (formerly known as Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat: GSPC), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Ansar al-Dine, Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Ansaroul Islam, Ansar al-Sharia, the al-Mulathamun Battalion, the Macina Liberation Front, and Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have operated in various countries in the Sahel.⁴ Separatist and secessionist conflicts are also present in the Sahel. Tuareg secession struggles have been present in Niger since the imposition of colonial borders which divided Tuaregs across Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. In northern Mali, the Tuareg minority has also engaged in protracted conflicts to establish an independent state called Azawad. Such conflicts have led to the emergence of Tuareg-led militia groups such as the National Movement of Azawad (MNA), the National Alliance of Tuareg of Mali (Alliance Nationale des Touareg du Mali, ANTM, in French) and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).⁵

As a former colonial power in the Sahel, France continues to play a significant role in the region's security. After most of its colonies in Africa gained their independence in 1960, France continued to maintain military, economic, political, and cultural cooperation with them. France entered into defence treaties with most of its former colonies, allowing it to establish permanent military bases and militarily

³ Muhammad Dan Suleiman, "Sahel region, Africa," *The Conversation*, 27 February 2017, accessed 25 June 2022, <https://theconversation.com/sahel-region-africa-72569>; Lawrence Cline, "Counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 10 (2007): p. 889.

⁴ Lesley Anne Warner, "The Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership," *CNA Corporation, March* (2014), p. 17 accessed 5 February 2020, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/crm-2014-u-007203-final.pdf.

⁵ Andrew Alesbury, "A society in motion: the Tuareg from the pre-colonial era to today," *Nomadic peoples* 17, no. 1 (2013): pp. 117-118; Merise Jalali, "Tuareg migration: A critical component of crisis in the Sahel," *Migration Policy Institute* (2013), accessed 20 August 2022, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/tuareg-migration-critical-component-crisis-sahel>; Emizet Kisangani F, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger and the US Global War On Terror," *International Journal on World Peace* (2012): pp. 59-97.

intervene directly in their security affairs. Between 1960 and 1994, France signed military cooperation accords with 27 African states including its former colonies. By 1994, there were between 6,000 and 8,000 French soldiers in six African bases, namely, Dakar (Senegal), Port Bouet (Côte d'Ivoire), Libreville (Gabon), N'Djamena (Chad), Djibouti, and Bangui (Central African Republic). Between 1960 and 2008 France launched 50 military interventions in its former colonies.⁶ From 1969 through 1978, France intervened in Chad to halt an uprising against the government of the newly independent country and to defend the state's authority against Libyan-backed rebels. France launched *Operation Manta* in 1983 and *Operation Epervier* in 1986 to safeguard the regime of Hissène Habré in Chad. Similarly, in 2010, France launched a counterinsurgency (COIN) mission, *Operation Sabre*, in Burkina Faso. France's most recent interventions in the Sahel follow the Tuareg uprising in 2012 and the subsequent coup that overthrew the Malian government. The Mali-focused *Operation Serval* was launched on 11 January 2013, to halt the southwards advancement of Islamist insurgents and Tuareg separatists. In August 2014, *Operation Serval* was replaced with *Operation Barkhane* as a French-led counterinsurgency campaign aimed at supporting its Sahelian partners' armed forces in preventing the re-establishment of terrorist safe havens in the Sahel. Unlike *Serval* which focused on Mali, the scope of *Barkhane* included five Sahelian states namely Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.⁷

Since the 2000s, the United States (US) has also been pursuing Counterinsurgency (COIN) missions in the Sahel. Following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US-led *War on Terror*, the US launched the *Pan-Sahel Initiative* (PSI) in Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to strengthen their counterterrorism capabilities to enable them to protect their borders against jihadists incursion. In January 2005, PSI was succeeded by the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) to include

⁶ Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub Saharan Africa* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2008), pp. 68-72.

⁷ Nathaniel K. Powell, *France's Wars in Chad Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 31- 48; Abdurrahim Siradag, "Understanding French foreign and security policy towards Africa: pragmatism or Altruism," *Afro Eurasian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2014): p. 106; David Gormezano, *Barkhane, Takuba, Sabre: French and European military missions in the Sahel*, *France 24*, 16 February 2022, accessed 29 July 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220216-barkhane-takuba-sabre-french-and-european-military-missions-in-the-sahel>

Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia.⁸ In June 2005, the US established *Exercise Flintlock*, an annual regional military exercise between counterterrorism forces from Algeria, Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad, and forces from the US, Europe, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Established in 2008, the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) took command of TSCTP and Flintlock.⁹

In 2013, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), deployed an *African-led International Support Mission in Mali* (AFISMA) after a UN Security Council authorization in December 2012 to assist in training Malian security forces and support them in recovering and stabilizing territory in the north of the country. In July 2013, AFISMA was integrated into the *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali* (MINUSMA) as a peacekeeping operation aimed at implementing a political transition roadmap and assisting the country's political process as it moves toward stabilization.¹⁰ Western contingents from nations like Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada have helped MINUSMA carry out its activities. The *European Union* (EU) launched EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and a Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) to improve the capabilities of the armed forces of Mali and promote political and humanitarian development.¹¹

However, irrespective of these significant Western interventions in the Sahel, jihadist insurgencies in the region don't seem to be slowing down. It is impossible to ignore the region's ongoing humanitarian catastrophes, socio-political instability, and

⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership*, 14 February 2019, accessed 12 July 2022, <https://www.state.gov/trans-sahara-counterterrorism-partnership/>; Lesley Anne Warner, "The Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership," *CNA Corporation, March* (2014), p. 17 accessed 5 February 2020, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/crm-2014-u-007203-final.pdf

⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership*, 14 February 2019, accessed 12 July 2022, <https://www.state.gov/trans-sahara-counterterrorism-partnership/>; Warner, *The Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership*, p. 28

¹⁰ United Nations Peacekeeping, *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali* (MINUSMA), United Nations Peacekeeping, 29 July 2022, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/history>; African Union, *AFISMA Transfers its Authority to MINUSMA* (Bamako: African Union, 2013), <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/afisma-transfers-its-authority-to-minusma>.

¹¹ European Union Training Mission Mali, <https://eutmmali.eu/>; European Union External Action, *Factsheet about EUCAP Sahel Niger*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/10961_en; European Union External Action, *EUCAP Sahel Mali*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-mali/about-eucap-sahel-mali_en?s=331

general insecurity. In 2021, at least 2,005 attacks with an estimated 4,839 fatalities were linked to militant Islamist groups across the portion of the Sahel that spans Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. In comparison to other UN operations, MINUSMA soldiers have suffered 281 fatalities, a fairly high number of losses, whereas French casualties in Barkhane are just 58.¹² The question to be asked is do Western militaries represent the right COIN forces in Africa's Sahel region? Drawing upon the 12 "Bad COIN practices" identified by RAND Corporation's research *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, this article examines why Western COIN interventions in the Sahel have failed to achieve long-term success.

The Concept of Counterinsurgency (COIN)

The literature on the conduct of COIN is dominated by the writings of both military officers and academic scholars whose works and experiences cut across different time frames. A British army officer during the Scramble for Africa in the 19th century, Charles Callwell viewed COIN as strictly enemy-centric with a focus on the total destruction of the insurgent force.¹³ Sharing a similar view on COIN is Martin van Creveld, a current Israeli military historian and strategic theorist who draws heavily on examples of colonial, Cold War, and post-Cold War era COIN operations. Van Creveld conceives of COIN as a purely military endeavour with the destruction of the enemy force as its ultimate objective. To him, aiming to win the "Hearts and Minds" of the populace hence avoiding the use of maximum force only protracts COIN warfare and demoralizes the counterinsurgent force, situations which only enhance the insurgent's eventual victory.¹⁴ Contrary to the views of Callwell and Van Creveld is David Galula's idea of COIN. Having participated in COIN missions in China in 1945, Greece in 1948,

¹² Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Surge in Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel Dominates Africa's Fight against Extremists*, 24 January 2022, accessed 21 August 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2022-01-surge-militant-islamist-violence-sahel-dominates-africa-fight-extremists/>; United Nations Peacekeeping, *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali*; Romain Mielcarek, "French troops forced to withdraw from Mali," *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 2022, accessed 12 September 2022, <https://mondediplo.com/2022/05/04mielcarek>

¹³ Charles Callwell E, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, (London: His Majesty Stationery Office, 1906).

¹⁴ Martin Van Creveld, *The changing face of war: Combat from the Marne to Iraq* (New York: Presidio Press, 2008).

Indochina in 1952, and Algeria from 1956 to 1958 with the French army, Galula's theory conceptualizes COIN as a merger of military, political and social activities. He recognizes COIN as a "population-centric" operation which must focus on winning "Hearts and Minds" rather than solely as a military pursuit aimed at the violent destruction of the insurgent force.¹⁵ Drawing on his experiences from the insurgencies in Malaya and South Vietnam as the head of the *British Advisory Mission* from 1961 to 1965, Robert Thompson shares the same stance with Galula that COIN must focus on winning "Hearts and Minds," and he further demonstrates that addressing the fundamental causes of an insurgency must represent an equally important focus for a COIN operation. Consequently, he recognized COIN to transcend a mere military campaign to broadly encompass other political, economic, and social measures which are equally effective in quelling an insurgency.¹⁶ It is worth noting that Galula and Thompson developed their views on COIN during the Cold War era and in the context of national liberation struggles. More recent and post-Cold War COIN theorists including John Nagl, argue that there is no dedicated approach to conducting COIN. Every insurgency must be approached on its own terms. Steven Metz and Raymond Millen reiterated this when they argued that the traditional "Hearts and Minds" approach to COIN applies to only specific insurgencies.¹⁷ Most post-Cold War insurgencies have consisted of alliances between local insurgent movements and international terrorist organizations with religious motivations. The COIN approach to such insurgencies usually requires a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic tactics by the COIN force.¹⁸ An understanding of these COIN theories is important to this paper given that Western COIN intervention in the Sahel involves different institutions, states, and state agencies, each of which has distinct COIN doctrines, and strategies.

¹⁵ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare Theory and Practices* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006).

¹⁶ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

¹⁷ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Steven Metz and Raymond A. Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century: Reconceptualizing Threat and Response* (Strategic Studies Institute, November 2004).

¹⁸ Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups form International Alliances* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), pp. 1-8; David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 12-13.

Analysis of Western COIN Intervention in the Sahel

Despite the extensive body of literature on the conduct of COIN, most COIN missions, including the US-led War on Terror in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and Western COIN missions in the Sahel have been more of a failure than a success. A comprehensive analysis of the causes of the failure of COIN is provided by the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit research organization based in the United States. In their research, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, they sought to investigate what COIN approaches give a government facing an insurgency the best chance of prevailing. They examined 30 insurgencies begun and completed between 1978 and 2008 using the Qualitative Comparative Analysis approach. The study identified twelve “Bad COIN practices” that, in some combination, account for the failure of COIN missions.¹⁹ This paper argues that the failure of Western COIN operations in the Sahel can be largely explained by looking at six of the 12 bad practices identified by RAND. This paper, however, makes no claims that the findings of the RAND report provide a perfect framework for analysing the success or failure of COIN operations. Nonetheless, some of the bad practices identified by the report overlap with those of Western COIN forces operating in the Sahel. The paper will focus on these six bad COIN practices. Namely, the primary COIN force being an external occupier; the COIN force or government’s actions contributing to substantial new grievances claimed by the insurgents; militias working at cross-purposes with the COIN force or government; the COIN force being perceived as worse than the insurgents in the area of conflict; the COIN force failing to adapt to changes in adversary strategy, operations, or tactics; and the COIN force and its host nation’s government having different goals and levels of commitment.²⁰ Despite these bad practices, the COIN effort in the Sahel also employs some of the useful techniques described in the study. These include the COIN force having sufficient strength to force the insurgents to fight as guerrillas as well as having and using uncontested air dominance.

¹⁹ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2010).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

The Primary COIN Force being an External Occupier

The RAND research identifies that the perception of security created and maintained among the population in the areas controlled by the COIN force contributes to COIN success. In addition, the research makes the case that local focus is crucial for gaining public support, which is important for COIN success. As a result, it is difficult for foreign COIN forces to achieve sustained support from a local population with whom they have no long-term relationship. Furthermore, foreign forces are also unable to sustain their external deployments indefinitely given their own political and economic limitations. The combination of these factors ultimately leads to a COIN failure. In all 30 cases examined, the only 3 occasions where COIN troops were external occupiers, were COIN losses. These are the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (1978–1992), Serbia in Bosnia (1992–1995), and the Russian Federation in Chechnya (1994–1996).²¹ Other noteworthy COIN failures where the main COIN force was a foreign occupier include the French in Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s, the US in Vietnam in the 1960s, and US and UN forces in Somalia in the early 1990s.²²

Since the independence of its former colonies in Africa in the 1960s, France has continued to regard them as its sphere of influence and maintains strategic economic, monetary, and political relations with them. Most significantly, France still maintains a special defence and security partnership with its former colonies. Such colonial and post-colonial connections between France and its former colonies and other Francophone African countries granted France a special responsibility for the internal security and stability of these countries.²³ In 1978, French foreign minister, Louis de Guiringaud, best summarized this when he noted that “Africa is the only continent which remains within France’s reach, within the range of its means. The only one where she can still, with 500 men, change the course of history.”²⁴ It is therefore unsurprising that since 1960, France has conducted far more military interventions in Africa than any

²¹ Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, pp. 39-40, 66-67.

²² David Hunt, “Dirty wars: Counterinsurgency in Vietnam and today,” *Politics & Society* 38, no. 1 (2010): pp. 35-66; Richard Stewart Winship, *The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994* (Washington DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2002).

²³ John Chipman, *French Power in Africa* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Baadikko Mammadu, *Françafrique: l’échec: l’Afrique postcoloniale en question* (Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 2001).

²⁴ Christian d’Epenoux and Christian Hoche, “Giscard the African,” *L’Express*, 15 December 1979, accessed 31 July 2022, https://www.lexpress.fr/informations/giscard-l-africain_590960.html.

other Western power either to maintain or restore a political regime, preserve its economic interests, protect French nationals, or maintain French dominance.²⁵ These interventions involved Senegal (1962), Gabon (1964 and 1990), Chad (1968–72, 1978, 1983 and 1986), Mauritania (1977), Zaire (1978 and 1991), Central African Republic (1979), Togo (1986), Comores (1989 and 1995), Rwanda (1990–93, 1994), Djibouti (1991), and Benin (1991).²⁶ France also maintained military garrisons in some of its former colonies.²⁷ Between the 1960s and the end of the Cold War, France's military interventions in Africa were unilateral in nature and outside of any institutional framework. However, after 1990, France tended to intervene under the auspices of international bodies such as the EU, UN, or NATO, although they typically pursued a similar set of goals as previously.²⁸ Notable examples include the UN-sanctioned *Operation Turquoise* in Rwanda in 1994, the EU-led *Operations Artemis* and *EUFORRDC* in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2003 and 2006 respectively, and the EU-led *Operation EUFOR Tchad-RCA* in Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) from 2008-09.²⁹ In the Sahel, the most recent and ongoing French military interventions, *Operations Serval* and *Barkhane* further demonstrate France's continued commitment to military cooperation with its former colonies and the pursuit of its strategic interests on

²⁵ Nathaniel Powell K., "Battling instability? The recurring logic of French military interventions in Africa," *African Security* 10, no. 1 (2017): pp. 47-50; Siradag, *Understanding French Foreign and Security Policy towards Africa*, pp. 103 – 111; Anna Gueye and Lova Rakotomalala, "Gabon to Mali History of French Military Interventions in Africa," *Global Voices*, 18 January 2013, accessed 31 July 2022, <https://globalvoices.org/2013/01/18/gabon-to-mali-history-of-french-military-interventions-in-africa/>; Michael Galy, "Fifty years of 'Francafrique' fiasco," *Le Monde*, 5 December 2013, accessed 31 July 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/12/04/cinquante-ans-de-fiasco-de-la-francafrique_3525416_3232.html.

²⁶ *Le Monde*, *Previous French military interventions in Africa*, 24 June 1994, accessed 31 July 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1994/06/24/les-precedentes-interventions-militaires-francaises-en-afrique_3814806_1819218.html.

²⁷ Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism*, p. 60.

²⁸ Thierry Tardy, "France's military operations in Africa: Between institutional pragmatism and agnosticism," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 4 (2020): pp. 534-559; Rachel Utley, "'Not to do less but to do better...': French military policy in Africa," *International Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2002): pp. 129-146; Pierre, Lellouche and Dominique Moisi. "French Policy in Africa: A lonely battle against destabilization," *International Security* 3, no. 4 (1979): pp. 108-133.

²⁹ Tardy, *France's military operations in Africa*, p. 537.

the continent. Both operations are separate from the EU training mission (EUTM) and the UN operation (MINUSMA).³⁰

Following the 2012 Tuareg uprising and the subsequent collapse of the Malian army, Islamist insurgents and Tuareg separatists capitalized on the power vacuum left by the military coup that toppled the government of Amadou Toumani Touré to seize control of northern Mali and advance southwards towards the capital city of Bamako. At the request of the Malian government, France launched a military intervention called *Operation Serval* in Mali on 11 January 2013. *Serval* was a conventional warfare operation aimed primarily at stopping the insurgents' advance and preventing them from taking over Mali entirely, protecting French citizens in Mali, and freeing those held hostage by AQIM. It consisted of an initial force of 2,400 French troops supported by armoured vehicles, twelve fighter jets, three KC135 Stratotanker aerial refuelling planes, one Transall C-160 transport plane, and an even larger C-130 Hercules transport plane. Additionally, *Serval* had a naval component. French troops were also transported to Dakar, Senegal, by the amphibious assault ship *Dixmude* before driving on to Mali. Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Benin, Senegal, Niger and Chad, deployed about 3,750 troops in support of the mission.³¹ At the peak of *Serval*, there were about 5,000 French troops in Mali with logistical and intelligence support from France's Western allies including the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and The United Arab Emirates. Canada deployed a C-17 Globemaster to France to assist with the transport of troops and logistics to Mali.³² *Serval* was successful in securing Bamako by stopping the insurgents' progress. The central Malian city of Konna, together with several northern towns including Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, were

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, *Rapport D'information Sur L'opération Serval Au Mali* [Information Report On Operation Serval In Mali] (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, 2013), p. 37; Michael Shurkin, *France's war in Mali: Lessons for an expeditionary army* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2014), p. 8; Michael Shurkin, *France's war in Mali: Lessons for an expeditionary army* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2014), p. 8; Hussein Solomon, "Mali: West Africa's Afghanistan," *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 1 (2013): p. 17.

³² Guilloteau and Nauche, *Rapport D'information Sur L'opération Serval Au Mali*; Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, *Support to French operations in Mali*, accessed 22 August 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/recently-completed/support-to-french-operations-mali.html>.

recaptured by French forces.³³ However, following the initial success of Operation Serval, the French army, to the dislike of the Malian government, allied with the ethnic Tuareg MNLA, the very group that mounted the rebellion which destabilized northern Mali. Primarily focused on combating Islamist groups, the French force returned control of northern Mali to the secular MNLA, which did not represent the interest of all the northern people.³⁴

Operation Serval was replaced with *Operation Barkhane* in August 2014. In contrast to Serval, which was primarily a conventional combat operation, *Barkhane* was a French-led COIN mission with a broader geographical focus. It integrated France's *Operation Epervier* in Chad and *Operation Sabre* in Burkina Faso. By this time, the crisis had spread beyond northern Mali into parts of Niger and Burkina Faso. With an initial force of about 4,500 troops, *Barkhane's* mandate covered five Sahelian states: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. These states together form the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel), an intergovernmental joint military force for combatting the expansion of armed and violent extremist groups in the Sahel. *Barkhane* aimed to support the armed forces of its Sahelian partner countries in their fight against armed terrorist groups and contribute to preventing the resurgence of terrorist sanctuaries in the Sahel.³⁵ France maintains permanent military bases across the Sahel. N'Djamena, the Chadian capital, hosts the operational headquarters and the main air base of *Barkhane*. In Mali, France had military bases in Gao, Gossi, Ansongo, and Menaka but withdrew after relations with Bamako soured. Beyond Mali, French forces have permanent military bases in Niamey, the capital of Niger, where *Barkhane's* intelligence and surveillance base is located; and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso where about 400 French special forces troops belonging to *Operation Sabre* are stationed. At the peak of their

³³ Michael Shurkin, *France's war in Mali: Lessons for an expeditionary army* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2014), 8; Sergei Boeke, and Bart Schuurman, "Operation 'Serval': A strategic analysis of the French intervention in Mali, 2013–2014," *Journal of strategic studies* 38, no. 6 (2015): pp. 801-825.

³⁴ Adam Sandor, *Insecurity, the Breakdown of Social Trust, and Armed Actor Governance in Central and Northern Mali*, (Centre FrancoPaix, August 2017), p. 9, <https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Sandor-english-Report.pdf>.

³⁵ Conway Waddington, "Understanding Operation Barkhane," *African Defence Review*, 1 August 2014, accessed 31 July 2022, <https://www.africandefence.net/operation-barkhane-under-the-hood/>; Yvan Guichaoua, "The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): pp. 898-899; Bruno Charbonneau, "Counter-insurgency governance in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (2021): p. 1812.

involvement, French forces deployed to Barkhane included 5,100 soldiers, 7 fighter jets, 6 Reaper drones, 22 helicopters, 290 heavy armoured vehicles, 380 logistics vehicles, and 240 light armoured vehicles. Although it comprises a large brigade-sized force, the operation covers an area equivalent to 5,097,338 km², about 10 times the size of France.³⁶

Aside from France, several other international actors are either directly intervening in the Sahel or are indirectly involved through their support for Barkhane. In 2012, the EU established EUCAP Sahel Niger, a civilian capacity-building mission to contribute to the development of an integrated, coherent, sustainable, and human rights-based approach among the various Nigerien security forces in their fight against terrorism and organized crime.³⁷ In February 2013, the EU launched the EU training mission, Mali (EUTM Mali) to provide counterinsurgency training for the Malian army. In April 2014, the EU again established EUCAP Sahel Mali, to contribute to the restoration of democracy and state legitimacy in Mali. All three missions are a part of the EU's Common Security and Defense Program (CSDP) towards establishing a stable Sahel.³⁸ In April 2013, the UN Security Council launched MINUSMA as a UN counterinsurgency mission in Mali functioning parallel to the French-led Barkhane. With 17,609 troops, police, civilians and volunteers, including from nations like Germany, Canada, the US, Norway, Switzerland, and Britain, MINUSMA aims at supporting the political process and providing stabilization assistance in Mali.³⁹ To accomplish this mission, the UN Security Council authorized MINUSMA to "support the transitional authorities of Mali, to stabilize the key population centers, especially in the north of Mali and, in this context, to deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas."⁴⁰ In Mali, MINUSMA maintains an All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), the first attempt to incorporate a large-scale intelligence capability in UN peacekeeping. The Unit comprises tactical intelligence

³⁶ Michael Shurkin, "France's war in the Sahel and the evolution of counter-insurgency doctrine," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (2020): p. 54; Gormezano, *Barkhane, Takuba, Sabre*.

³⁷ European Union External Action, *Factsheet about EUCAP Sahel Niger*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/10961_en.

³⁸ European Union External Action, *EUCAP Sahel Mali*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-mali/about-eucap-sahel-mali_en?s=331; European Union Training Mission Mali, <https://eutmmali.eu/>.

³⁹ United Nations Peacekeeping, *MINUSMA-Military*, accessed 22 August 2022, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/military>.

⁴⁰ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2100, S/RES/2100*, United Nations, April 2013.

officers and analysts from the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway. With the introduction of the ASIFU, together with over 11,000 military forces, MINUSMA retains a very robust mission and is engaged in a de facto counterinsurgency operation in Mali.⁴¹ Consequently, a majority of MINUSMA fatalities are from direct engagements with jihadist groups.

The European Special Forces unit, *Task Force Takuba*, also operates with Barkhane forces in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Announced in late 2019, Takuba consists of 900 elite troops from 10 European states namely, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden. Besides Takuba, Britain, Belgium, Canada and the U.S. provide further military, intelligence, and logistical support to *Operation Barkhane* and have conducted a series of COIN training operations in the region to assist local troops in coping with the dangers posed by the insurgencies.⁴²

The major tactical success of *Operation Barkhane* has been to prevent the establishment of an Islamist caliphate in the Sahel. It has been successful in killing key jihadi leaders including Abdelmalek Droukdel, founder of AQIM, Bah ag Moussa, and Yahya Abu al-Hammam, both commanders of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), while driving them away from their strongholds in the region.⁴³ Despite these successes and the fact that Malians welcomed French troops during the initial intervention in 2013, France's COIN in the Sahel has come under increasing local

⁴¹ John Karlsrud, "The UN at war: examining the consequences of peace-enforcement mandates for the UN peacekeeping operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2015): pp. 45-46.

⁴² Philippe M. Frowd and Adam J. Sandor, "Militarism and its limits: Sociological insights on security assemblages in the Sahel," *Security Dialogue* 49, no. 1-2 (2018): p. 74; "EU's Takuba force quits junta-controlled Mali," *France 24*, 1 July 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220701-eu-s-takuba-force-quits-junta-controlled-mali>.

⁴³ Camillo Casola, "What's Next for Operation Barkhane in the Sahel?" *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI)*, 3 March 2021, accessed 10 July 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/whats-next-operation-barkhane-sahel-29332>; Nathaniel Powell, "Why France Failed In Mali," *War on the Rocks*, 21 February 2022, accessed 10 July 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/>; Alex Thurston, "France Should Give Mali Space To Negotiate With Jihadists," *War on the Rocks*, 16 April 2020, accessed 10 July 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/france-should-give-mali-space-to-negotiate-with-jihadists/>; "French troops kill commander of al-Qaeda-linked group in Mali," *Al Jazeera*, 13 November 2020, accessed 10 July 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/13/french-troops-kill-top-al-qaeda-commander-in-mali>.

opposition and growing anti-French sentiment in many Sahelian states. In the northern Burkina Faso town of Kaya on November 19, 2021, anti-French demonstrators set a week-long blockade of a French army supply convoy heading to Mali. In a similar incident in the Nigerien city of Tera, on 27 November 2021, two protestors were killed when French soldiers attempted to free the convoy. Again, in wake of the January 2022 military coup in Burkina Faso, many Burkinabés who took to the streets to support the coup were waving Russian flags and holding anti-French banners.⁴⁴ The situation is not different in Mali where there have been periodic protests against the French military presence with demonstrators flying Russian flags. Pro-Russian sentiment has been on a rise in the Sahel. In 2019, the then-Malian government signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia for four MI-171S attack/transport helicopters, weapons, and ammunition. Immediately after the August 2020 coup, the Malian military junta entered into an agreement with the pro-Kremlin Private Military Contractor, the Wagner Group, to conduct military training, close protection, and counterterrorism operations in the country. These developments, together with the fact that the Wagner Group has been operating in Sudan and the Central African Republic since 2017, have had ramifications in Burkina Faso, where people are demanding for the Wagner Group to intervene.⁴⁵ The reasons for the growing calls for Russian engagement in the Sahel remain unclear. However, this may partly be due to the fact that Russia has no colonial ties to the region

⁴⁴ Naomi Moreno-Cosgrove, "France's unattainable counterterrorism mission in the Sahel," *Elcano Royal Institute*, 6 April 2022, accessed 31 July 2022, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/commentaries/frances-unattainable-counterterrorism-mission-in-the-sahel/>; "French military facing growing protests in Sahel," *France 24*, 30 November 2021, accessed 31 July 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211130-french-military-facing-growing-protests-in-sahel/>; "In Burkina Faso, the French army faces popular anger," *L'Humanite*, 21 November 2021, accessed 31 July 2022, <https://www.humanite.fr/monde/burkina-faso/au-burkina-faso-larmee-francaise-face-la-colere-populaire-728267>; "French military convoy blocked in Burkina Faso by protesters," *Reuters*, 20 November 2021, accessed 22 August 2022; "Deaths in Niger as protesters confront French army convoy," *Aljazeera*, 27 November 2021, accessed 22 August 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/27/three-killed-in-niger-as-protesters-confront-french-army-convoy>.

⁴⁵ Raphael Parens, "The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, (2022); Andrew Lebovich, "Russia, Wagner Group, and Mali: How European fears weaken European policy," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 December 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/russia-wagner-group-and-mali-how-european-fears-weaken-european-policy/>; John Irish and David Lewis, "Deal Allowing Russian Mercenaries into Mali is Close – Sources," *Reuters*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-deal-allowing-russian-mercenaries-into-mali-is-close-sources-2021-09-13/>.

and is hence not seen as being motivated by neocolonial objectives, especially considering that its support comes with few specific political conditions for the host countries. In an interview with the BBC, Oumar Cissé, a peace campaigner in Mali's Mopti region, noted that "Russia has no interest in Malian politics unlike France, which manages the conflict according to its economic and political interests."⁴⁶ Similarly, in an interview with Al-Jazeera, Boubacar Salif Traore, a Malian consultant, mentioned that "Many Malians believe that the Western presence has no other purpose than the exploitation of raw materials. The French policy is decried in Mali because it is considered neocolonialist by many observers and advisers to the authorities in place."⁴⁷

The August 2020 and May 2021 coups in Mali further deteriorated the relationship between France and its former colony. President Macron announced the withdrawal of French troops from Mali after the first coup citing that "we cannot remain militarily engaged alongside de-facto authorities whose strategy and hidden aims we do not share."⁴⁸ In May 2022, the Malian military junta renounced defence accords which provide the legal bases for French-led military interventions in Mali.⁴⁹ This means that despite leaving Mali, French forces will continue to operate throughout the Sahel from neighbouring nations like Niger and Chad.

Anti-French sentiment has undoubtedly spread across the Sahel with increasing hostilities against foreign military interventions in the region. Not only have Western troops been unsuccessful in reducing the violence in the region, but attacks carried out by the insurgents have further spread into other Sahelian states. Also, the alliance between Western forces and local militia groups has exacerbated internal conflicts and instability within the region. Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maiga reiterated this when he openly accused France of training a "terrorist group" in the northern region of the country.⁵⁰ Such accusations, however, come as no surprise. The increasing

⁴⁶ Moses Rono, "Mali's plan for Russia mercenaries to replace French troops unsettles Sahel," *BBC*, 2 October 2021, accessed 23 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58751423>.

⁴⁷ Mucahid Durmaz, "Talk of Wagner mercenary deal shines light on Mali power politics," *Al-Jazeera*, 21 September 2021, accessed 3 December 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/21/talk-wagner-mercenary-deal-shines-light-mali-power-politics>.

⁴⁸ Gormezano, *Barkhane, Takuba, Sabre: French and European military missions in the Sahel*.

⁴⁹ "Mali junta breaks off from defence accords with France," *France 24*, 3 May 2022, accessed 31 July 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220502-mali-junta-breaks-off-from-defence-accords-with-france>

⁵⁰ "French military facing growing protests in Sahel," *France 24*.

presence of Western troops in the Sahel has deepened the perception among the majority of Sahelians that international actors have turned the region into a stage for pursuing their neocolonial objectives, a rhetoric widely popularized and exploited by insurgent movements in the region.

The COIN Force or Government's Actions Contributing to Substantial New Grievances Claimed by the Insurgents

According to the RAND research, when the COIN force or government's actions appeal to the people, it increases its legitimacy, gains greater support and patience for its shortcomings, as well as better intelligence on insurgents. However, when the COIN force or government is seen as corrupt, self-serving, and inept, the population may be persuaded to support the insurgents, who, despite their harsh rule, are regarded as being more just and fair. A classic example is the Serbian COIN campaign in Bosnia (1992–1995),⁵¹ where about 8,000 Bosnian Muslims, also known as Bosniaks, were killed by Serb troops, while an estimated 23,000 women, children, and old people were held in concentration camps where many perished.⁵²

The main objective of the French, UN, and EU COIN operations in the Sahel is to combat the spread of jihadist insurgency in the region. However, after 9 years of active engagement, the insurgency shows no signs of slowing. From Mali, where it began, the insurgency has extended to Burkina Faso and Niger. More crucially, the COIN campaign is facing dwindling local support amidst increasing civilian casualties. There are increasing claims that France's engagement has exacerbated local unrest and that French forces are aiding extremists. As was previously mentioned, the French army ironically handed over control of northern Mali to the ethnic Tuareg MNLA, the very group which caused the conflict in the region, after *Operation Serval's* initial success. The France-MNLA alliance sparked outrage not only in the north but throughout Mali. In an interview, a resident of the northern town of Gao lamented that “the MNLA has benefitted from the intervention more than any other group. So now I have to ask, did

⁵¹ Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, p. 41.

⁵² Kenan Trebinčević, and Susan Shapiro. *The Bosnia list: A Memoir of War, Exile, and Return* (Penguin, 2014); Paul Bartrop, R., (ed.), *Bosnian Genocide: The Essential Reference Guide* (ABC-CLIO, 2016).

France intervene to save Mali, or did they intervene to save the MNLA?"⁵³ It is worth noting that following *Operation Serval*, the Malian government founded the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés - GATIA) in August 2014 after the Malian army's defeat by Tuareg separatists in May of that year. GATIA is a pro-government self-defence organization composed of fighters from Tuareg and Arab communities in northern Mali. Since its formation, GATIA has been a staunch opponent of the MNLA's desire to establish an independent state known as "Azawad."⁵⁴ After *Operation Barkhane* succeeded *Serval* in 2014, the French army, in a sudden turn, allied with a group of pro-government northern militias known as the Platform, to enhance *Barkhane's* military and intelligence capabilities in northern Mali. The Platform consisted of GATIA, the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA).⁵⁵ In doing this, the French were adhering to a standard COIN practice by collaborating with local groups who have a greater understanding of the conflict zone. Unfortunately, these French alliances further deteriorated the already precarious inter-ethnic relationships in northern Mali. It has caused some ethnic groups to believe they are being persecuted, thereby pitting ethnic groups against one another.

Furthermore, French troops in the Sahel are seen as the *personal army* of corrupt Sahelian governments. Sahelian people have become increasingly resentful of France for promoting corrupt, authoritarian, and oppressive leaders. The recent military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso are stark indications of the loss of public trust in Sahelian leaders. French journalist Remi Carayol noted that France had "blindly" supported Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita until he was overthrown in August 2020. France ignored the Malians' protests against the worsening security situation and escalating

⁵³ Peter Tinti, "Tacit French support of separatists in Mali brings anger, charges of betrayal," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 March 2013, accessed 31 July 2022, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2013/0320/Tacit-French-support-of-separatists-in-Mali-brings-anger-charges-of-betrayal>.

⁵⁴ Andrew McGregor, "GATIA: a profile of northern Mali's pro-government Tuareg and Arab Militia," *Terrorism Monitor* 13 no. 7 (2015): p. 6.

⁵⁵ Sandor, *Insecurity, the Breakdown of Social Trust*, p. 19; Michael Keen, "Shifting Militia Allegiances and the Prospects for Ending the Small War in Northern Mali," *Small Wars Journal*, 14 August 2019, accessed 17 July 2022, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/shifting-militia-allegiances-and-prospects-ending-small-war-northern-mali>; McGregor, *GATIA*; Andrew McGregor, "Anarchy in Azawad: a guide to non-state armed groups in northern Mali," *Terrorism Monitor* 15, no. 2 (2017): p. 9.

government corruption.⁵⁶ In Niger, a similar resentment against the government and its international allies has resulted in a series of protests. In March 2020, a protest against the government's corruption broke out in Niger after a defence sector audit uncovered that some \$137 million had been lost to overcharging, embezzlement and kickbacks in the course of President Mahamadou Issoufou's two terms in office. This occurred after Nigerien security forces had clashed with civil society activists to stop planned anti-French protests in response to terrorist attacks on Nigerian military bases in Tillabery. The demonstrators questioned the significant casualties that the Nigerian security forces were sustaining while French troops were still present in the nation claiming to be combatting insurgencies.⁵⁷ In Burkina Faso, protests against the government for poor living conditions, insecurity and mass displacement, and corruption have been on the rise since 2018, culminating in the January 2022 coup that toppled President Roch Kaboré. The overwhelming public support for the recent coups in the Sahel and the rapidly escalating public discontent with France's involvement in the region demonstrate how public mistrust of the national governments has become intertwined with widespread resentment of Western intervention in the Sahel.⁵⁸ This has contributed significantly to the increasing local support for insurgent groups and the failure of Western COIN operations in the Sahel.

Militias Working at Cross-Purposes with the COIN Force or Government

The RAND study notes that the COIN force's use of local militias to extend armed presence in a conflict area also gives locals a stake in their own security. However, where militias and the COIN force or government have conflicting agendas, it leads to COIN failures. 25 of the 30 cases they analyzed involved the employment of

⁵⁶ Remi Carayol, "In Mali, the "blind" support of France pointed out," *Mediapart*, 21 August 2020, accessed 5 August 2022, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/210820/au-mali-le-soutien-aveugle-de-la-france-pointe-du-doigt>.

⁵⁷ Mark Anderson, Khadija Sharife, and Nathalie Prevost, "How a Notorious Arms Dealer Hijacked Niger's Budget and Bought Weapons from Russia," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 2020, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/notorious-arms-dealer-hijacked-nigers-budget-and-bought-arms-from-russia>; International Crisis Group, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, African Report No. 299 (2021): p. 7, accessed 28 June 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/299-course-correction-sahel-stabilisation-strategy>.

⁵⁸ International Crisis Group, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, p. 8.

local militias, and 19 of those were COIN losses because the militias and COIN forces had different agendas. These include Soviet Union's counterinsurgency in Afghanistan (1978–1992)⁵⁹ where although the Soviet forces fought alongside pro-government militia groups, these groups had divided allegiance. They allowed the mujahidin to move around quite freely despite the agreement they had made with the Afghan government.⁶⁰

As noted earlier, in both Operation Serval and Barkhane, French forces cooperated with local militia groups. The vastness of the Sahel and the complexity of the conflict, together with the fact that local military forces are still understaffed, insufficiently trained, and incapable of effectively carrying out COIN activities, make the use of proxy fighters important to Western COIN forces, a practice which constitute a standard COIN strategy. In Mali, French authorities saw the cooperation between Barkhane and local militia groups as legitimate as long as the latter committed to fighting against the insurgents, were loyal to the Malian state, and adhered to international humanitarian law.⁶¹ However, in most cases, the use of non-state armed groups by foreign or national COIN forces has not been without problems. In most instances, the use of proxies causes COIN missions to become dominated or problematized by inter-communal and inter-ethnic rivalries. Ethnic-based militia groups see their alliance with COIN forces as a means of serving their interests and settling personal scores with their rivals. It is important to note that Sahelian states have a history of employing local ethnic militia groups to help them with military operations. In Mali, for instance, the government employed the Ganda Koi, subsequently known as the Ganda Izo, a mostly ethnic-Songhai militia group, to support the Malian army's operations in the Gao and Timbuktu regions during the Tuareg separatist rebellions in northern Mali.⁶² Similarly, the creation of GATIA goes beyond being a mere reaction to

⁵⁹ Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, p. 63.

⁶⁰ Antonio Giustozzi, *War, politics and society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000), pp. 213-231.

⁶¹ Vincent Hugué, "Faced with Barkhane, an enemy at bay," *L'Express*, 20 April 2018, accessed 18 July 2022, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/face-a-barkhane-un-ennemi-aux-abois_2001343.html.

⁶² International Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding Escalation," *Africa Report* 189, (2012): p. 3, accessed 14 December 2022, <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/189-mali-avoiding-escalation.pdf>; Human Rights Watch, "'We Used to Be Brothers:' Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali," (2018), p. 23, accessed 14 December 2022, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/mali1218_web.pdf.

the rising unrest in the northern Kidal region due to the lack of government security. Its origin is deeply entrenched in a history of rivalry between the vassal Tuareg clan of Imghad and the noble Tuareg clans of Kel Ifoghas or Kel Adagh.⁶³ It, therefore, stands to reason that, GATIA would capitalize on its alliance with Barkhane to strike back against its rival Tuareg clans. The MSA and GATIA have for several decades been in conflict with the Fulanis of Mali and Niger because they are often portrayed as terrorist accomplices throughout the Sahel due to the history of Fulani jihads in the region. There are documented instances of Barkhane's proxies targeting Fulanis. On 5 October 2018, MSA militiamen attacked the Fulani camp of Sadjo Douna in Niger. Witnesses of the massacre claimed the militiamen were supported by French forces of *Operation Barkhane*.⁶⁴ Similarly, on 23 March 2019, armed militia groups with links to *Barkhane* attacked the Fulani community of Ogossagou in Mali. In addition to over 220 homes set ablaze, at least 157 individuals, including women, children, and elderly people, were massacred.⁶⁵

Such acts of violence are a few of the many atrocities committed by armed militia groups against a background of long-standing inter-communal tension. The tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger also referred to as the larger Liptako-Gourma region, has become the hotspot for intercommunal and inter-ethnic atrocities because different ethnic communities with different socio-economic, cultural, and religious identities overlap at the borders of these three countries and there has been little to no government presence in the area. This increases the likelihood of conflict erupting among the different ethnic groups.⁶⁶ French military support for militia groups in the

⁶³ McGregor, *GATIA*.

⁶⁴ Remi Carayol, "On the border between Niger and Mali, the guilty alliance of the French army," *Mediapart*, 29 November 2018, accessed 5 August 2022, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/291118/la-frontiere-entre-le-niger-et-le-mali-l-alliance-coupable-de-l-armee-francaise>; Sory I Konate, "IN A WORD: Dirty Barkhane," *30 minutes*, December 2018, accessed 5 August 2022, <https://30minutes.net/en-un-mot-barkhane-souillee/3>

⁶⁵ UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA), *Press Release: Preliminary Conclusions of the Special Investigation Mission on the Serious Human Rights Violations Committed in Ogossagou on March 23, 2019, 2 May 2019*, accessed 18 July 2022, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/communiqu%C3%A9-de-presse-conclusions-pr%C3%A9liminaires-de-la-mission-d%E2%80%99enqu%C3%AAte-sp%C3%A9ciale-sur-les-graves#:~:text=Au%20terme%20de%20l'enqu%C3%AAte,autres%20en%20tenue%20civile%2C%20a>

⁶⁶ Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local politics and rebel groups* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 210.

Sahel indirectly encourages and even legitimizes inter-ethnic violence. The result is the emergence of a pattern in the Sahel where communities seek the support of armed movements with whom they share common enemies to help them seek redress to atrocities committed against them. This has in effect made it difficult for Western COIN forces to defeat Islamist groups operating in the Sahel.

The COIN Force being Perceived as Worse than the Insurgents in the Area of Conflict

According to the RAND study, COIN forces' use of violence relative to the insurgents is a crucial determinant of COIN success. Where the COIN force avoids excessive collateral damage, disproportionate use of force, or other illegitimate applications of force, it wins. Nevertheless, where the COIN force uses excessive force, it loses. 22 of the 30 COIN cases examined were failures because of the COIN forces' illegitimate use of aggression. They include the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1978–1992), the Somoza regime's counterinsurgency in Nicaragua (1978–1979), and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) regime's COIN campaign in Nicaragua (1981–1990).⁶⁷ These were unsuccessful due to the brutal crackdown carried out by the respective COIN forces which included violations of human rights, arbitrary detention, torture, rape, and summary executions.⁶⁸

At the core of both insurgency and COIN is the struggle for the population's support. Consequently, COIN campaigns must be designed to secure the population.⁶⁹ Galula notes that COIN is *population-centric*, 80 percent political and 20 percent military. In his laws of COIN, Galula underscored the importance of civil-military relations when he contended that the COIN force must aim at gaining the support of the population rather than controlling territory and since this support is conditional, what the

⁶⁷ Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, pp. 42-43.

⁶⁸ Giustozzi, *War, politics and society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992*; Rosanne Klass, "Genocide in Afghanistan 1978-1992," in *The Widening Circle of Genocide*, edited by Israel W. Charny, (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 129-164; Thomas Walker, and Christine Wade, *Nicaragua: Emerging from the Shadow of the Eagle*, 6th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017); James Lemoyne, "Peasants Tell of Rights Abuses by Sandinistas," *The New York Times*, 28 June 1987, accessed 19 December 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/06/28/world/peasants-tell-of-rights-abuses-by-sandinistas.html>.

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of the Army, and U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 40.

counterinsurgent force does is critical.⁷⁰ Although Western COIN interventions in the Sahel militarily target insurgency groups, they also conduct civilian assistance missions. Alongside the military operations, the UN's MINUSMA together with the EU's EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali offer civilian capacity-building initiatives aimed at advancing human rights, development, and the restoration of democracy, peace, and security in the region. However, the military element of the Western COIN effort in the Sahel is heavily criticized for its repressive strategy and contribution to the deteriorating security situation in the region. *Operation Barkhane* has been overly focused on hunting for jihadists and destroying their operations. This approach is however criticized by most Sahelians for two major reasons. First, it has contributed to the expansion of Islamist groups across the Sahel. Before *Operation Serval*, jihadist groups were limited to only northern Mali. *Serval* was militarily successful in defeating the insurgent offensive on Bamako, securing the northern towns, and inflicting heavy casualties on the insurgents. Over the years, however, violence has spread from northern Mali into the rural stretches of central Mali, south-western Niger and northern Burkina Faso. According to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel is home to the world's fastest-growing and most-deadly terrorist groups with deaths in the region accounting for 35 percent of the total global terrorism deaths in 2021.⁷¹ Significantly, this shows how the French and UN military operation against jihadists has not worked. Secondly, the French COIN approach in the Sahel has led to increasing civilian casualties. The use of airstrikes against jihadi targets most often results in high collateral damage including the killing of innocent civilians, which is a common problem in guerrilla warfare since combatants hide among non-combatants and cannot be distinguished from civilians. A classic instance happened in January 2021 when *Operation Barkhane* forces carried out an airstrike in the Malian village of Bounti, that killed 22 civilians. While the villagers insisted the targeted gathering was a wedding ceremony, the French Ministry of Defense argued that its forces struck a group of Islamist insurgents. According to a MINUSMA investigation, only 3 of the casualties were armed members of Katiba Serma, an al-Qaeda affiliate, while the other 19 were

⁷⁰ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare Theory and Practices*, pp. 50-54.

⁷¹ Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney, March 2022, accessed 29 June 2022, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web-09062022.pdf>.

unarmed civilians.⁷² Again, on Friday, 26 March 2021, local Malian officials in the western Gao region accused the French military of killing at least 6 civilians in an airstrike in the village of Deliman. While the French force maintained it had hit armed Islamist militants, Mohamed Assaleh Ahmad, mayor of the nearby village of Talataye, argued that the victims were six male civilians from Talataye who were out in Deliman to hunt birds and had just a single rifle between them.⁷³ On 2 April 2022, another French military offensive against an al-Qaeda affiliate jihadist group, Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM), near the village of Tessalit, left one woman dead and a child injured.⁷⁴ There is growing concern among the Sahelian population that Western intervention in the Sahel is hurting the security and stability of the region. Consequently, popular support for such engagements is dwindling.⁷⁵ Allied with *Operation Barkhane*, national armies of the regional G5 Sahel group are also accused of crimes against civilians.

According to a report by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), state violence against civilians increased substantially in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger following the January 2020 Pau Summit in France where the French government and its Sahelian partners outlined a new roadmap, the Sahel Coalition, for

⁷² Danielle Paquette, "French airstrike in Mali killed 19 civilians, U.N. investigation finds," *The Washington Post*, 30 March 2021, accessed 15 July 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/03/30/mali-france-airstrikes/>;

United Nations, "UN investigation concludes French military airstrike killed Mali civilians," *UN News*, 30 March 2021, accessed 15 July 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088722>.

⁷³ Paul Lorgerie, and Tiemoko Diallo, "Northern Mali officials say French strike killed civilians, France denies," *Reuters*, 27 March 2021, accessed 19 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-france-idUSKBN2BJ0HZ>.

⁷⁴ "Mali. Woman killed and child injured in fire during French raid," *Ouest France*, 2 April 2021, accessed 19 December 2022, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/monde/mali/mali-une-femme-tuee-et-un-enfant-blese-dans-un-incendie-pendant-un-raid-francais-1d48aa1a-93d2-11eb-8160-b8e1983487e6>; Ornella Moderan, Habibou Souley Bako, and Paul-Simon Handy, "Sahel counter-terrorism takes a heavy toll on civilians," *Institute for Security Studies (ISS)*, 14 April 2021, accessed 19 December 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sahel-counter-terrorism-takes-a-heavy-toll-on-civilians>.

⁷⁵ Rahmane Idrissa, "In the Sahel, France pays the bill for half a century of military interventions in sub-Saharan Africa," *Le Monde*, 18 December 2021, accessed 19 December 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/12/18/au-sahel-la-france-paie-la-facture-d-un-demi-siecle-d-interventions-militaires-en-afrique-subsaharienne_6106582_3232.html; Alex Thurston, "Who Are France's Sahelian Critics, and What Are They Saying?" *Africa up Close*, *Wilson Center*, 6 July 2022, accessed 19 December 2022, <https://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/frances-sahelian-critics/>.

countering insurgencies in the Sahel.⁷⁶ In Burkina Faso, security forces killed 31 unarmed civilians in the town of Djibo on 9 April 2020. On 2 May 2020, Burkina Faso's security forces assaulted the Mantao refugee camp and injured 32 people. They later gave the refugees a 72 hours ultimatum to leave the camp or face death.⁷⁷ In Niger, the army summarily executed 102 Tuaregs and Fulanis in the towns of Inates and Ayorou between 27 March and 2 April 2020.⁷⁸ A MINUSMA report noted that between January and March 2020, the Malian security forces carried out 101 extrajudicial execution of civilians, 32 forced disappearances, and 32 cases of torture.⁷⁹ Such gross human rights violations committed in the name of COIN only alienate local communities and undercut any potential short-term advantages achieved by the COIN force. While local forces are primarily responsible for carrying out these atrocities, their Western allies like France and the EU play a critical role by supplying them with intelligence, training, and arms. The surge in anti-French sentiment across the Sahel in recent years is undoubtedly partly traceable to the human rights atrocities associated with their COIN activities.

⁷⁶ Héli Nsaibia, "State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians," *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, 20 May 2020, accessed 9 August 2022, <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-results-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians/>; Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *The International Coalition for the Sahel: The Coalition for the Sahel*, 13 January 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/africa/the-international-coalition-for-the-sahel/>; Coalition Sahel, <https://www.coalition-sahel.org/coalition-pour-le-sahel/>.

⁷⁷ "Burkina Faso: Security Forces Reportedly Executed 31 Detainees," *Human Rights Watch*, 20 April 2020, accessed 9 August 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/04/20/burkina-faso-les-forces-de-securite-auraient-execute-31-detenus>; "Burkina Faso: UNHCR condemns violence against Malian refugees," *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*, 4 May 2020, accessed 9 August 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/5/5eafedba4/burkina-faso-unhcr-condemns-violence-against-malian-refugees.html>.

⁷⁸ "Sahel: Soldiers rampage through villages killing people under guise of anti-terror operations," *Amnesty International*, 10 June 2020, accessed 9 August 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/sahel-soldiers-rampage-through-villages-killing-people/>; "Best Of Niger (5), 102 civilians massacred and buried in mass graves," *Mondafrique*, 3 August 2020, accessed 9 August 2022, <https://mondafrique.com/niger-cent-deux-hommes-massacres-puis-ensevelis-dans-des-fosses/>.

⁷⁹ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Division of Human Rights and Protection, *Note on trends in human rights violations and abuses 1 January - 31 March 2020*, April 2020, accessed 9 August 2022, https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/note_trimestrielle_sur_les_endances_des_violations_et_abus_des_droits_de_lhomme.pdf.

It is, however, worth noting that these violations are not limited to only French forces operating the Sahel. There have also been widespread concerns in Mali over human rights violations carried out by African troops in MINUSMA, especially Chadian forces. Reports that were later corroborated by the UN, indicated that Chadian soldiers sexually assaulted women in the northern Malian city of Gao in September 2013.⁸⁰ African Union (AU) officials at the MINUSMA headquarters have also expressed concerns about the conduct of the Chadian army. An AU officer noted that “At the moment, everybody is romanticizing Chad’s role in fighting terrorism, but the way its army is organized is like militias. In fact, Chad does not have an operational force.”⁸¹ According to military officers from other MINUSMA troop-contributing countries, Chadian soldiers demonstrate great courage but most often their actions push the limits of what is allowed within MINUSMA’s mandate.⁸² The lack of discipline among Chadian soldiers in Mali contributes to their abusive behaviour against the civilian population.⁸³

The COIN Force Failing to Adapt to Changes in Adversary Strategy, Operations, or Tactics

According to the RAND analysis, superior technology and overwhelming firepower have never ensured success in COIN operations. Victory depends largely on the COIN force’s ability to adapt quickly and effectively to changes in warfare. The study asserts that COIN is a two-player game between adaptive opponents. A successful COIN force must therefore learn and adapt to the changing dynamics of the insurgent force. Of the 30 insurgencies they looked at, 16 COIN forces were not adaptable and they all turned out to be COIN failures. They include the Soviets in

⁸⁰ “UN’s Minusma troops ‘sexually assaulted Mali woman,’” *BBC*, 26 September 2013, accessed 21 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-24272839>; Dulcie Leimbach, “A Rape Accusation in Northern Mali and the UN’s Awkward Response,” *Pass Blue*, 28 January 2014, accessed 21 December 2022, <https://www.passblue.com/2014/01/28/a-rape-accusation-in-northern-mali-and-the-uns-awkward-response/>.

⁸¹ Adam Fejerskov Moe, Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, and Peter Albrecht, “Regional interests in African peace operations,” *Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Report* 2017, 11 (2017): p. 54.

⁸² Peter Albrecht, Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, and Rikke Haugegaard, “African Peacekeepers in Mali,” *Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Report* 2017 02 (2017): p. 71.

⁸³ Fejerskov et al, *Regional interests in African Peace Operations*, pp. 54-55; Karlsrud, *The UN at War*, p. 47

Afghanistan (1978–1992), the Said Barre regime in Somalia (1980–1991), and the Somaza regime in Nicaragua (1978–1979).⁸⁴ The COIN failure in each case was the result of the inability of the counterinsurgent force to adapt to their respective insurgency situations.

The COIN theories of Galula and Thompson, though they demonstrate that addressing the fundamental causes of an insurgency is critical to the success of a COIN mission, also recognize the importance of combating insurgents.⁸⁵ This signifies that COIN requires a balance between military and non-military approaches to insurgencies.⁸⁶ The use of either a non-military or military approach and the type of military approach to be adopted by the COIN force depends on the insurgency they face: the operational tactics, ideologies and goals, and motivation of the insurgent force. From the COIN theories previously discussed, it can be realized that colonial-era COIN theories, as developed by authors like Callwell, are distinct from Cold War-era strategies outlined mainly by Galula and Thompson. Whereas both periods involved predominantly racist COIN forces, the insurgencies during the colonial era were driven primarily by anti-colonial resistance while the Cold War era insurgencies were motivated mainly by national liberation struggles. Both cases are, however, different from post-Cold War era insurgencies which are mostly motivated by a combination of religious doctrines and dogma (Islamist jihadism) and secessionism, making colonial and Cold War era COIN strategies less relevant.⁸⁷ An effective counterinsurgent force must therefore be a learning organization capable of adapting its strategies to meet the insurgents' strategy and tactics. By their nature, insurgents constantly shift between military and political phases and tactics in the course of their activities. The counterinsurgent force's ability to alter its approach and tactics during such changing circumstances is therefore key to the success of a COIN mission. As John Nagl notes, the ability of the British to adapt to the insurgency situation in Malaya contributed to their success whereas the Americans' continued application of conventional war strategies to the insurgency in Vietnam ended up in their failure.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, p. 73

⁸⁵ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare Theory and Practices*; Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*.

⁸⁶ U.S. Department of the Army, and U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, p. 43.

⁸⁷ Metz and Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century*.

⁸⁸ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*.

The complexities of the insurgencies in the Sahel make adaptability an important quality the COIN force in the region must possess. Unfortunately, French operations in the Sahel have not shown any sign of adaptability. Although Islamist groups like Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates operate throughout the Sahel, the insurgency in the region is rooted in conflicts fueled by the quest for access to and control of resources between herders and farmers, endemic poverty, inequality and high unemployment levels, illiteracy, ethnic divisions and poor governance. Having lost most of their strongholds in North Africa, Iraq, and Syria, Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have capitalized on the internal instability to forge relationships with Sahelian jihadist organizations like Ansar al-Dine, al-Murabitoun, Katiba Macina, ISWAP, and ISGS to frame their struggles as a part of a broader ideological, theological, political, social, economic, and cultural movement.⁸⁹ In the wake of the 2012 Tuareg insurrection and the subsequent creation of the Islamic Emirates of Azawad in northern Mali, Islamist jihadists seized control of the area. The prospect of a thriving caliphate in Mali attracted jihadists from across Africa, including Algeria, Mauritania, Sudan, Niger, Nigeria, Morocco, Senegal, and Western Sahara.⁹⁰ It therefore stands to reason that an effective COIN effort in the Sahel must be multi-faceted. While it focuses on apprehending or killing jihadists, it must also seek to counter their ideology and eliminate the fundamental conditions they exploit to forge alliances with local insurgent groups by engaging in mediation and negotiations to solve local grievances. French and UN COIN efforts have not been able to achieve this.

Militarily, the French military continues to prioritize active combat operations towards a violent destruction of the insurgent force over efforts aimed at countering the insurgents' ideology. This, however, is not surprising considering the fact that despite Galula's writing, French COIN as exemplified in Indochina and Algeria has always been very military oriented. The conventional military tactics of *Operation Serval* helped

⁸⁹ Jacob Mundy, "Securitizing the Sahara," in *US militarization of the Sahara-Sahel: Security, space, and imperialism*, edited by Jacob Mundy, *The Association of Concerned African Scholars (ACAS) Bulletin* 85, (2010): p. 2; "Global Terrorism Index 2022," *Institute for Economics and Peace*, p. 48.

⁹⁰ "Mapping Militant Organizations: Ansar Dine," *Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC)*, Stanford University, July 2018, accessed 4 July 2022, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansar-dine>; International Crisis Group, *Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM*, African Report No. 306 (2021): p. 3, accessed 28 June 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/306-mali-enabling-dialogue-jihadist-coalition-jnim>.

to halt the offensive of the insurgents and recovered key cities in northern Mali from the insurgents' control. It also paved the way for further international and domestic stabilization efforts such as the launch of EUTM Mali and MINUSMA, the organization of an election in Mali in August 2013, and the signing of the Algiers Accord between the Malian government, the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), and the Platform of armed groups (the Platform), in May 2015.⁹¹ Although Serval's successor, Barkhane, has also had some notable operational successes, insurgent attacks continue to rise throughout the Sahel.⁹² Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have significantly changed their strategy and operations in the Sahel to enable them to firmly establish their power and influence across the region. Between 2013 and 2015, Islamists such as AQIM and ISGS attacked mainly local civilian targets including hotels in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Ivory Coast. However, from 2016 onwards, the target of the groups has focused mainly on local security forces, UN MINUSMA peacekeepers, French Barkhane troops, and the kidnapping of foreign nationals for ransom.⁹³

Again, the refusal of Western COIN forces to negotiate with local insurgent groups despite the willingness of their Sahelian and international partners to do so, demonstrates yet another example of their lack of adaptation.⁹⁴ In 2017, JNIM accepted the Malian government's offer for dialogue. However, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault rejected the idea completely.⁹⁵ In February 2020, during the sixth G5 Sahel summit in Nouakchott, Mauritania, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian while

⁹¹ "Minusma Fact Sheet," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, United Nations, 2022, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>; Bruno Charbonneau, "Counter-insurgency governance in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (2021): p. 1812.

⁹² Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Surge in Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel*.

⁹³ Sergei Boeke, *Pathways Out of the Quagmire?: Perspectives for Al-Qaeda in the Sahel* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2021), p. 8; Michael Barak, "Signs of a Change in Strategy for AQIM," *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, May 2016, accessed 24 August 2022, <https://ict.org.il/signs-of-a-change-in-strategy-for-aqim/>; Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, and Caleb Weiss, "Desert Drift, Declining Deadlines: Understanding the Evolution of AQIM's Suicide Bombings," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 2020, accessed 24 August 2022, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1145097.pdf>; Folahanmi Aina, "Mapping the contours of Jihadist groups in the Sahel," *The Conversation*, 2021, accessed 24 August 2022, <https://theconversation-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/theconversation.com/amp/mapping-the-contours-of-jihadist-groups-in-the-sahel-168539>

⁹⁴ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, France's fiasco in the Sahel, *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 2021, accessed 24 August 2022, <https://mondediplo.com/2021/10/03mali>

⁹⁵ Thurston, *France Should Give Mali Space to Negotiate with Jihadists*.

reacting to the planned dialogue between Malian authorities and leaders of jihadist groups, noted that:

It is not for me to enter into a debate specific to Mali. It is the responsibility of Malians to ensure that an inclusive debate takes place...The only point on which I take the liberty of expressing myself in this respect is the question of impunity. And besides, the question of impunity is even in Malian law. In the law of July 2019, the Malian Parliament, Malian legislation indicates that there can be no impunity for terrorists. I stick to Malian law.⁹⁶

In November 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron also ruled out the possibility of negotiation with jihadist groups in the Sahel when he declared that “We don't talk with terrorists. We fight.”⁹⁷ Jihadist organizations in the Sahel have intensified their attacks as a result of France's refusal to support negotiation efforts. On 19 March 2020, JNIM attacked the Malian army base in Tarkint in the northern region of Gao killing 29 soldiers. JNIM attributed the attack to the Malian government's reluctance to engage in negotiations because of French influence. JNIM noted that as the “Malian government continues to display hesitation and confusion” the jihadists will continue assaults on military targets.⁹⁸

In an interview with the French daily *Le Monde*, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres emphasized the need for a dialogue with local insurgent elements when he noted that “there will be groups with whom we can talk and who will have an interest in engaging in this dialogue in order to become political actors in the future. But there remain those whose terrorist radicalism is such that there is nothing to do with them,”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ “Dialogue with the jihadists in Mali: reaction of Jean-Yves le Drian,” *Rfi*, 26 February 2020,

<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200226-dialogue-jihadistes-mali-r%C3%A9action-jean-yves-drian>.

⁹⁷ “Macron blames Russia and Turkey for bolstering anti-French sentiment in Africa,” *France 24*, 20 November 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20201120-macron-blames-russia-and-turkey-for-bolstering-anti-french-sentiment-in-africa>.

⁹⁸ Thurston, *France Should Give Mali Space to Negotiate with Jihadists*; “Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM,” *International Crisis Group*; Caleb Weiss, “JNIM kills dozens in Mali base attack,” *Long War Journal*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/03/jnim-kills-dozens-in-mali-base-attack.php>.

⁹⁹ “Antonio Guterres: “The Sahelian crisis is a threat to all of us,” Interview by Laurence Caramel, *Le Monde*, 19 October 2020, accessed 11 August 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/10/19/antonio-guterres-la-crise-sahelienne-est-une-menace-pour-nous-tous_6056573_3212.html.

citing IS and al Qaeda. Despite France's unwillingness to encourage negotiation efforts, its Sahelian partners have made efforts to negotiate with insurgent groups. Before being ousted in August 2020, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta considered negotiating with JNIM. Subsequently, as part of their effort to broker a peace agreement with local insurgent groups, Mali passed the National Concord Law in 2019 to provide amnesty for insurgents.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Burkina Faso also secretly negotiated a ceasefire with JNIM and Ansarul Islam in Soum province in October 2020.¹⁰¹ In February 2022, Niger's president, Mohamed Bazoum, also announced the commencement of negotiations with ISGS local affiliates.¹⁰² Given the complex nature of the insurgency in the Sahel, any strategy to bring about peace in the region will be difficult, if not impossible to succeed if it does not make use of dialogue and negotiation.

The inability of Western COIN forces to adapt in the Sahel also manifests in non-military ways. Despite their awareness that conflict in the Sahel is mostly rooted in local grievances, Western political elites as well as the international community continue to use the term *terrorists* as a label for all insurgent groups in the region. This makes it difficult if not impossible for the COIN forces to negotiate with local insurgent elements. As can be seen above, the French President continues to refer to local insurgency groups as *terrorists*.

The COIN Force and Government have Different Goals or Levels of Commitment

This is another RAND research finding that is relevant to the Western COIN effort in the Sahel. According to the research, there is no guarantee for a successful counterinsurgency if a host nation's government, or its structure and procedures, are incompatible with the COIN force's goals and do not follow the best COIN methods. This was an important contributor to the loss of the Soviet Union's COIN mission in

¹⁰⁰ "Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM," *African Report No 306*, International Crisis Group, 10 December 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/306-mali-enabling-dialogue-jihadist-coalition-jnim>; Amnesty International, *Mali: Crimes without Convictions* (London: Amnesty International Ltd., 2021), p. 7.

¹⁰¹ "EXCLUSIVE: Burkina Faso's secret peace talks and fragile jihadist ceasefire," *The New Humanitarian*, 11 March 2021, accessed 12 August 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2021/03/11/exclusive-burkina-faso-s-secret-peace-talks-and-fragile-jihadist-ceasefire>.

¹⁰² Africa Research Bulletin, *Political Social and Cultural Series* 59, no. 3 (March 2022): p. 24.

Afghanistan (1979-1989).¹⁰³ While the Soviets' main focus was on establishing a communist regime in Afghanistan, the Afghan government on the other hand aimed at suppressing rival tribal groups that threatened its rule.¹⁰⁴

In the Sahel, the goals of the local Sahelian nations have consistently conflicted with those of French and UN COIN efforts. The recent conflict between the Malian junta and France, which ultimately led to the withdrawal of French forces from Mali, is an indication of the contention between the differing COIN agendas at play in the Sahel. As noted earlier, while the French saw it as a good practice to incorporate local tribal militia groups into their COIN operations, the Malian government on the other hand considered the action as a betrayal since they recognize the tribal militia groups as the cause of the instability. This led to claims from the Malian administration that France is supporting "terrorist" organizations in northern Mali.¹⁰⁵ One of the factors that led the Malian military junta to forego defence agreements with the French in favour of hiring the Russian Wagner Group was the disparity in COIN agendas between the two. The justification French President Macron provided for the withdrawal of French soldiers from Mali was that his nation's COIN strategy and goals differed from those of the Malian military junta.¹⁰⁶

Similarly, the UN has come under immense pressure from the Malian government to give MINUSMA a more robust mandate with a clear offensive counterinsurgency component.¹⁰⁷ A majority of Malians have extensively criticized MINUSMA for being ineffective in providing them with security. They argue that the mission spends more energy and resources on keeping its own convoys and facilities safe than on protecting civilians, especially in the countryside.¹⁰⁸ In Mali, concerns have been raised regarding an expensive UN operation that has failed to accomplish its

¹⁰³ Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, pp. 95-96.

¹⁰⁴ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992*.

¹⁰⁵ Tinti, *Tacit French support of separatists in Mali brings anger, charges of betrayal*; Hugeux, *Faced with Barkhane, an enemy at bay*; "French military facing growing protests in Sahel, France 24.

¹⁰⁶ Gormezano, *Barkhane, Takuba, Sabre: French and European military missions in the Sahel*.

¹⁰⁷ Adam Fejerskov Moe, Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, and Peter Albrecht, "Regional interests in African peace operations," *Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Report No. 2017, 11* (2017): p. 47.

¹⁰⁸ "MINUSMA at a Crossroads," *International Crisis Group*, 1 December 21 2022, accessed 21 December 2022.

primary objectives of safeguarding human rights and protecting people.¹⁰⁹ In July 2021, officials from Mali resisted a French and UN plan to expand MINUSMA's troop cap by about 2,000, claiming that doing so would be useless in the absence of a robust counterinsurgency mandate. Bamako believes that MINUSMA's excessive focus on human rights overstates abuses by its security forces and therefore impedes the Malian army's operations against militants.¹¹⁰ MINUSMA chief, Mahamat Saleh Annadif, reiterated the issue of the growing mismatch between the mission's goals and those of the Malian government when he noted that "The idea that MINUSMA came here to fight terrorists has always been a major misunderstanding between Malians and MINUSMA, and unfortunately one that still exists."¹¹¹ Tensions between MINUSMA and the Malian state were further demonstrated when Mali's military authority arrested 49 Ivorian soldiers of the mission in July 2022, on the grounds that they were mercenaries who "were illegally on the national territory of Mali."¹¹² This further led to Bamako's dismissal of MINUSMA's spokesperson Olivier Salgado when he said that Mali was notified of the arrival of the Ivorian soldiers. Mali subsequently suspended MINUSMA'S peacekeeping rotations in the country.¹¹³

Conclusion

France, the EU, UN, US and its Western allies have implemented several COIN interventions in the Sahel. While these interventions have accomplished some immediate outcomes, their long-term success remains daunting. This article has examined six bad practices responsible for the failure of COIN operations. Comparing

¹⁰⁹"A dozen shades of khaki: counter-insurgency operations in the Sahel," *The New Humanitarian*, 11 January 2018, accessed 22 December 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2018/01/11/dozen-shades-khaki-counter-insurgency-operations-sahel>

¹¹⁰ "MINUSMA at a Crossroads," *International Crisis Group*, , p. 3.

¹¹¹ "A dozen shades of khaki," *The New Humanitarian*.

¹¹² "Mali authorities arrest nearly 50 soldiers from Ivory Coast," *France 24*, 12 July 2022, accessed 22 December 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220712-mali-authorities-arrest-nearly-50-soldiers-from-ivory-coast>

¹¹³ "Mali orders suspension of new UN peacekeeping rotations," *DW*, 14 July 2022, accessed 22 December 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/mali-orders-suspension-of-all-new-un-peacekeeping-rotations/a-62475213#:~:text=The%20Malian%20government%20on%20Thursday,with%20a%20bloody%20jihadist%20campaign.>

these practices to Western COIN interventions in the Sahel, the evidence provided here demonstrates that these Sahelian COIN missions are doomed to fail. In addition to being foreign occupiers in the Sahel, the activities of Western forces and their local allies are considered worse than insurgent groups due to their contribution to the creation of new grievances in the region. Furthermore, the alliance between foreign forces and local militia groups has led to an increase in inter-ethnic and inter-community violence mainly due to differences in their agenda and strategy for combating the insurgency. Finally, some Western actors operating in the Sahel, especially the French, remain unprepared to adapt their strategy for combatting the insurgency.

Given the deplorable condition of the national armies of the Sahelian states, it is likely that the departure of French forces will bolster insurgents in the region. Even though the UN is still present in the area, the future of its counterinsurgency operations seems gloomy, especially in light of MINUSMA's deteriorating relationship with the Malian junta and, more crucially, the fact that some contingents such as the British are pulling out. The military regime in Mali is well aware of this and has replaced the French with the Russians. However, so long as the bad COIN practices examined in this article persist in the Sahel, achieving any long-term COIN success will continue to be a challenging job for Western forces.