

***Barkhane* : the successes, the assets and the limits of an unprecedented French operation in the Sahel-Saharan strip**

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Between January and April 2012, the whole Northern-Mali region is brought under control of armed terrorist groups, who mostly seek inspiration in the jihadism. On January 11th, 2013, subsequent to Malian President Dioncounda Traoré's desperate plea and as a result of potential extension toward Bamako (capital of Mali), Operation Serval was set in motion on French President François Hollande's initiative. Air strikes and commando units immediately ensued and then were reinforced by 4,000 French soldiers and by 1,500 vehicles within a few days. They were also backed up by Chad and the AFISMA (African-led International Support Mission to Mali). French soldiers deployed into two columns and rapidly head north-east, facing extreme logistical constraints. The cities of Gao and Timbuktu were bombed on January 27th, which resulted in the liberation of the latter the following day. Armed groups flee toward Kidal and the Adrar des Ifoghas, where the most violent skirmishes will occur, as well as in Gao. From April onwards the whole country seems at peace, or at least under control considering that no one owns this vast empty space, a large buffer strip in which crimes are perpetrated including circulation, smuggling, and escape.

Operation *Serval* was a success² : Malian populations welcomed the French expedition and no Muslim battlefront was formed against the “faithless”. Those military operations even triggered the start of a political settlement, leading to Ouagadougou agreements between the MNLA (National Movement for Liberation of Azawad) and the Bamako authorities in May 2013. Yet, as stated throughout the three following years, this fast and un hoped-for result would not come to sustainable peace. How could have France, Mali and their allies wanted to secure the region through Operation *Barkhane* without fully achieving their goal?

The ways and means of Operation *Barkhane* : an innovative setting

Sahel G5: the roots of Operation *Barkhane*

After the successes of Operation *Serval*, France was to continue fighting armed terrorist groups in the long run in a “brilliant military strategy” environment. Unlike those that occurred from January to March 2013, international actors would intervene in these operations.³ France was one of the few countries to take part in this operation :

1 Translated by Morgan Poullelaouen.

2 O. Hanne (ss.dir.), *Mali, une paix à gagner. Analyses et témoignages sur l'opération Serval*, Paris, Lavauzelle, 2014.

3 We refer to our à book co-written with G. Larabi, *Jihâd au Sahel. Menaces, opération Barkhane, coopération régionale*, Paris, Éditions Giovanangeli, 2015, and to *Contrer les menaces transnationales dans le Sahel*, Dakar, Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique, May 2014.

thus, the country got back to a more traditional form of military intervention, bolstered by a strong political willpower and free of any disagreements from cabinets and chancelleries. However such format was not to last.

“Sahel G5” was formed in Nouakchott in February 2014 during a summit instigated by Mauritanian President, gathering 5 countries - Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad - that cope with the same security, human and geographic issues. Senegal will not be part of the project. Supporter since the start, France has accepted the gathering, along with the UN and the European Union (EU). As a matter of fact, Paris needed an institutional framework to back up its Operation *Barkhane* that started on August 1st, 2014. Sahel G5 then became inseparable of this military operation.

Sahel G5's pragmatic and transnational response to armed terrorist groups cross-border logical threat is to lessen its forces across the Sahelian zone. In order to prevent armed terrorist groups from fleeing beyond the frontiers, Sahel G5 allows a wide pursuit and endorses joint interventions against refuge zones which straddle multiple countries e.g. in Wagadou forest (Mauritania-Mali). Each Sahelian operation integrates a DLAO (French military unit gathering together Battlefield Coordination Detachment and Operational Support) and benefits from logistical support and help from the French intelligence agency and sometimes from the American's.⁴ The first joint axis of *Barkhane* and Sahel G5 is partnership.

Objectives

Signatory countries confirmed, upon Sahel G5 second meeting on November 19th, 2014, to act together against armed terrorist groups, to develop strategic partnerships and to improve partners fund management. The promotion of “the less developed areas”, or in other words cross-border areas, is emphasized. The UN stood behind those principles, that corresponded to MINUSMA's (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) that started in April 2013 (12,600 men) and whose terms and conditions claimed to be societal and political (discussion with Mali, Human Rights, Humanitarian action, good governance...)⁵ For its part, the EU manages EUTM Mali (European Union Training Mission in Mali), launched in December 2012 and whose aims are to form six Malian battalions and to make suggestions with respect to human resources and to humanitarian international law matters. The security dimension then would grow concerned regarding an overall approach.

Paris ensures a close and constant dialogue through Sahel G5 and its size that was reduced down to five close-to-France countries, so as to use a hard power approach based on regional security. On the other hand, the UE, first financial backer in Sahel,

⁴ The sharing of intelligence leads sometimes to surpass the Sahelian framework for special operations. On May 18th, 2015, an American raid on Adjedabia in eastern Libya targeted the central council of Al-Murabitoun and failed to kill Belmokhtar, a refugee in Libya.

⁵ Cf. <http://minusma.unmissions.org>.

advocated the use of soft power based upon sustainable development and to uphold Human Rights.

The objectives of Operation *Barkhane* and Sahel G5's were set concurrently in accordance with purely operative axes : to prevent any resurgence from armed terrorist groups threat, to avoid the outbreak of new sanctuaries, to hinder the jihadist regeneration capacity and to cut off the logistics flows. The privileged spaces of its deployment have been the same hubs of transit flows for 1,000 years and intersect with the following Sahelian underdevelopment areas : Tessalit, Gao, Faya Largeau, N'Djamena, Madama. *Barkhane* responds to an innovative and intellectual change of France, which reassessed its strategic approach and matched its military presence with the new geopolitical structure of Sahel G5. Thus, Operation *Serval* in Mali and the historical presence of Operation *Épervier* (Sparrowhawk) in Chad both merged to generate the most extensive French military operation in 60 years, straddling five countries. The regional feature of its missions is made clear : it is a question of “*supporting partner countries located in the Sahel-Saharan strip in their combat against armed terrorist groups; [and] contributing to hamper the reconstitution of terrorist sanctuaries in the region*”⁶.

Operational prerequisites

Yet, theoretically, *Barkhane* is just a support to Sahelian actors whose armies are declared to be “*leading the fight*” against armed terrorist groups.⁷ Another advantage is to cut financial costs of an OPEX in an unprecedented format and which, in 2014, was expected to be long. This resulted in an unavoidable aftermath : the surveillance of a territory nine times bigger than France with some thousands of men. France undertook this “accepted dilution” by deciding to keep under surveillance the meaningful strategical barriers of the region: the Adrar of Ifoghas, the Salvador Pass and the Lake Chad region. Thus, Operation *Serval* that reached up to 4,500 soldiers before decreasing its number down to 2,100 men by June 2014 and Operation *Épervier* in Chad triggered in 1986, i.e. 28 years ago and which tallied up 1,200 soldiers were both succeeded by Operation *Barkhane*, which only comprises 3,000 soldiers for a significant area of operation. The generated tension necessarily weights upon the equipment and men that must generally shift every 4 months instead of every 6 months like in Afghanistan.

In early 2015, Operation *Barkhane* arms two “desert” battle group, 14 helicopters, 200 logistic vehicles, 200 armored fighting vehicles, 8 fighter air crafts (4 Mirage 2000 in Niger and 4 Rafale in Chad), 5 drones (2 Harfang and 3 Reaper) and a dozen military transport air crafts. There are only two permanent positions, 4h30 terrain flight away from each other : one is located in Gao, the other one in N'Djamena. Detachments are deployed into the deep desert on temporary forward operating bases that are logistics location. In such environment, the air component is essential to military power projection, intelligence support, fire at the enemy and medical

⁶ *Dossier de présentation de l'opération Barkhane*, État-major des Armées françaises, August 11th, 2014.

⁷ Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d'expérimentations (CICDE), Paris, July 12th, 2011.

evacuation.

Air combat is indicative of the tactical acculturation of France in Sahel, especially when adjusting to rezzou's offensive speed.⁸ Despite its Rafale and its drones, *Barkhane's* force would remain inadequate on such a large surface area without Sahelian armies' experience. However, Sahelian armies would also be limited without the superiority of France's intelligence, mobility and strikes. Consequently, the tactical importance used by Force *Sabre*, operation led by COS (Special Operations Command) in the Sahelian region since August 2012, is now understood. Force *Sabre* was first deployed in Mauritania to secure the eastern section of the country, then in Burkina Faso where it set up its center in Ouagadougou, in Niger and also in Mali. It also means France has not waited for Operation *Serval* to intervene alongside its partners. Force *Sabre* and air combat are both building blocks of a French “rezzou” against armed terrorist groups...

Outcomes

After operating for two years, conducting an assessment might be early, particularly as available information is too limited. However, three types of outcomes can be drawn : operational, tactical and intellectual.

On the operational side, *Barkhane's* successes are unquestionable. Since 2014, mission reports and AAR (After-Action Review) have indicated that numerous logistics platforms were discovered, countless pick-up trucks were neutralized and persons were captured. In 2015, 150 operations were conducted, a hundred and so weapon caches were found and 16 tons of ammunition and explosives were destroyed.⁹ Several armed terrorist groups leaders were killed or arrested, including Abou Yahya in July 2016 in the Ségou region, the military leader of the Macina Liberation Front (MLF). During a midnight raid on December 10th and 11th 2014, French troops, in coordination with Malian authorities, neutralized a dozen of terrorists near the city of Gao, including Ahmed El-Tilemsi, co-founder of MOJWA (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa) and emir of Al-Mourabitoun in Mali. A total of 165 terrorists, 65 of which were captured, were put *hors de combat* (out of fight) throughout the first year of Operation *Barkhane*. Despite the combats, secret negotiations are still ongoing, particularly in order to free hostages. In December 2014, Frenchman Serge Lazarevic, captured by AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), was freed for ransom.

Several joint operations served as military cooperation references for the future. Between April 7th and 13th 2015, 90 paratroopers from Force *Barkhane*, backed up by around 30 Nigerian taken by helicopter from the garrison of Madama, were dropped over the Salvador Pass. The intervention enabled the dismantling of a logistics location and the arrest of three lookouts working for an armed terrorist group. Another example

8 Michael Shurkin, *France's War in Mali : Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2014, p.8.

9 Cf. <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/sahel/actualites/barkhane-point-de-situation-au-07-janvier-2016>.

of transnational cooperation took place from July 27th to August 15th, 2014 : transitioning from Operation *Serval* to Operation *Barkhane*, Malian and Mauritanian soldiers conducted Operation *Baobab* at the border of their countries. Over 800 men, about a hundred of whom were French, conducted reconnaissance operations in Wagadou forest along with armored fighting vehicles. From November 17th to 22nd, several tons of weapons, ammunition and explosives were seized during cordon and search operations in the regions of Bourem and Almoustarat. This led to the dismantling of one logistical location and two shop floors where explosive devices were being manufactured.

The level of coordination also enabled to combine simultaneously several types of forces (special and conventional) of multiple countries, a challenge rarely accepted in Africa. On October 9th and 10th 2014, two AQIM's convoys from Libya on their way to Mali were intercepted, which were carrying three tons of armaments and fifteen or so terrorists.

Those undeniable successes are followed by tactical outcomes that bring about major operational mode changes in Sahel. A mutual trust is being established through joint missions and shared decisions. In this case, the regional will of defeating Islamist-terrorists threat is taking shape through the success of such delicate and difficult operations, requiring extremely short decision-making process. An authentic strategic command network established between the different flag officers of the area, whether they are French or a citizen of Sahel G5. In order to secure its borders, Chad got involved in the creation of joint security forces with its neighbors : first with Sudan, then with neighboring countries of Lake Chad in 2012. Sahel G5 countries benefit from this collaboration. Mauritania formed a human curtain facing the Algeria-Mali border, counting around 35 compulsory crossing points (including markets, wells, intersections). Mauritania's national strategy for combating terrorism enabled the country to be at the forefront in the collection of information about those devoted to the jihadism in West Africa. By acquiring a seven helicopters and 5 air crafts air fleet, Niger made tremendous signs of progress in air combat and was able to back up France which sallied a hundred or so times from July 8th to July 15th, 2015, 26 of which were combat sorties.¹⁰ Results produced go beyond Sahel G5: from 2015 onwards, France and Nigeria strengthened their cooperation, in concert with the United States, against Boko Haram. France used air crafts and drones to perform aerial reconnaissance¹¹ in north eastern Nigeria to enhance military intelligence. Diffa-based French soldiers, in south-eastern Niger, helped secure frontiers between both countries.

Finally, the situation report on *Barkhane* takes on an intellectual aspect since the operation stems from a process assumed - despite himself? - by François Hollande, convinced that “Françafrique” was definitely unavoidable while the threat of terrorism and the migration risk were still in the news. Good governance, sustainable

10 Website of the Ministère de la Défense.

11 “Les avions français survolent bien le Nigeria, malgré les démentis”, *Jeune Afrique*, September 11th, 2015.

development and reconstruction of States were matters that had to be temporarily overlooked: UN or the EU were left in charge of such matters, for more limited yet more realistic security objectives. Whether or not this change was chosen, it took place, and both the American counterinsurgency strategy and the global view, prevailing since the 1990s, have been eclipsed. Due to this recent understanding of the Sahelian complexity, all illegal flows (drugs, fuel, cigarettes...) present in the zone were not stopped ; gun running and human trafficking are the main focus. If all traffics were to be blocked, then pauperisation and resentment from the populations would be even stronger. There lies the dilemma of an age-old transit: the State does not define the line between licit and illicit; the frontier is “drawn” by imperative for survival. Though this intellectual process had started before 2012 events, France having saved Idriss Deby's government in 2008, in spite of its dictatorial nature.

After what happened in Mali, geostrategy now prefers promoting efficiency over theoretical ideal and large plans of modernization of Africa coming from outsiders and influenced by societal changes, perceived as a way of westernizing the continent. From 2014 onwards, France and Sahel G5 have been developing new alternatives – pragmatism and consistency – to populations' clean profit.

Strategic development of armed groups

2013 : the flight of jihadists

Operation *Serval* drove armed terrorist groups out of Azawad within a few weeks. In August 2013, leaders of the organization MOJWA (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, gathering together Fulani and Songhai people) and of “Those of sign with blood” founded by Mokhtar Belmokhtar decided to combine their forces (nearly 300 men in total), now known as Al-Mourabitoun.

Serval allegedly neutralized between 600 to 1,000 jihadists : those who were not arrested or killed tried to blend in with the population. The others, along with their leaders, fled to Kabylia or to Ubari, Lebanese capital of smuggling and sales of weaponry. Among the Lebanese chaos, jihadists found a shelter where they could reconstitute, hire and rearm themselves with ease. They also established contacts with Tunisian and Lebanese terrorists going to Syria and Iraq on behalf of Jihad, they trained in their camps and they shared information and strategies. Because they left the Malian scene, Al-Mourabitoun's men launched several attacks in May 2013 in Niger : in Agadez against soldiers, in Arlit against Areva and in Niamey. Belmokhtar was barely ousted of Mali when he promised in January 2013, a large-scale operation in In Amenas, 1,500 km away from his bases.

From 2013 onwards, the situation in Mali stabilized despite a concerning number of displaced persons and refugees. From June 2013 to January 2014, terrorist attacks slowed down due to operations deployed by French forces to secure the area. In November, AQIM manifested once again through the murder of two journalists in Kidal, though the movement could no longer assure an efficient guerrilla. The insecurity

was particularly linked to the actions led by the MNLA against the Malian army.

Redeployment (2014-2015)

Armed terrorist groups still managed to survive and to quickly adapt by following a “deprofiling” strategy that started in 2013 and was proven effective by the following year. AQIM gave up on extending its territory, preferring to hide within the population or remain unseen in refuge zones, out of reach of the State. Jihadists move from one place to another alone or along with a small group, disguised as shepherds or driving on motorcycles, avoiding over-armed *Katiba* grouping (military camps located in North Africa or in Sahel). They can be seen crossing the desert from Libya, driving over 100 kph the last Japanese ATV on dangerous roads, all fitted with GPS and fuel jerrycans.

Armed terrorist groups prefer deploying a strategy of systematic harassment, usually nocturnal and asymmetric, over seeking confrontation and territorial conquest. Operational modes remain the same and quite simplistic: bombing, car bomb, IED implant, home-made rocket launcher, improvised strafe. They can also start kidnapping – AQIM's trademark until 2012 – if they are enough funded and organized, and backed up by local supports. This action mode is more delicate logistically speaking, but profitable. From January 2015 onwards, some groups were able to frontally attack Malian army's garrisons in the north-east of the country: on January 15th, 11 soldiers were killed in Nampala; on January 17th, MINUSMA's headquarters were targeted, one day after the attack in Tenenkou, meaning a threatening coordination was ongoing. Despite armed terrorist groups autonomy, they collaborate for some operations e.g. Ansar Dina and AQIM, and MLF with Al-Mourabitoun.

Within a few months, jihadist networks deployed once again to act in the whole Malian territory, in Burkina Faso and in Niger.¹² In 2014, Mali recorded 40 attacks; in 2015 the country recorded 98. In general, 60% of those attacks are undertaken by Al-Mourabitoun and 40% by AQIM. If the latter is confined in the Adrar region, the privileged space of Al-Mourabitoun is the center and the west of Mali. On March 7th, 2015, he approved the first attack in Bamako since *Serval* was launched, which caused the death of five persons in an expat bar. On April 4th, 2015, the first kidnapping of a Westerner occurred in Burkina Faso. Their main targets are Malian soldiers and civilians, Tuareg and the MNLA, MINUSMA and the Blue Berets, Chadian and French soldiers.

Undiminished dangerousness

In Sahel, the threat has taken several shapes in 2016. All traditional factors of social and political breakdowns accumulated: agricultural crisis, endemic poverty, regional claims, social injustice, failed States, corrupted elites and, moreover, ethnic tension slowing down national construction and individual initiatives. Thus, jihadism is

12 N. Hubert, *Monitoring de la stabilité régionale*, note du GRIP, Bruxelles, October-December 2014.

just the most salient aspect of accumulated breakdowns and the over-violent feature is a widely shared weapon by Tuareg or Tubu uprisings, by some States and by traffickers.

Armed terrorist groups excel in conducting corruption operations (terrorism and harassment) but fail to claim ownership on a territory in the long run¹³. Besides, “salafization” is used as their best weapon since this subversive method led inhabitants to offer their tacit complicity. In January 2015, a new *Charlie Hebdo* issue, disparaging of Prophet Muhammad, triggered a wave of protests, resulting in a riot in Zinder and Niamey, Niger. Jihadists do not only take advantage of poverty, they also thrive from the sense of humiliation of the populations.

Their second asset lies in an “International Jihadist” movement, whose networks improved since 2014. Islamic and resistance organization in an expanding territory sought its inspiration in Daesh victories in the Middle East, conducting similar attacks and adopting comparable means of communication. Since AQIM was created, it recorded videos of suicide attacks, directly inspired of what Irak used to do. Moreover, its combats in Mali benefited from Yemeni jihadists experience¹⁴.

Despite a symbolic rivalry between Boko Haram, AQIM and its former branches, three countries where the African jihad is strong, combined their forces: Mali, Libya and northern Nigeria. However, this continuum of Jihadist opinions is interrupted by Chad and hindered by *Barkhane* in northern Mali and northern Niger. Niger's 3,000 km-long unattended borders enabled combatants to circulate freely between Kidal and the Salvador Pass, along the Algerian border, and avoiding the Aïr mountains and the Ténéré desert¹⁵. AQIM resumed its operation in the Wagadou forest and launched an attack on a military barrack in Nara on May 26th, 2015, killing three soldiers. Ansar Dine took control two days later over the small town of Fakola near Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) for 24 hours, waving the Jihadist black banner before the Malian military intervention.

Yet, armed terrorist groups should not be confused with Boko Haram in Nigeria, which is a regional guerrilla warfare. It is the deadliest movement, causing the death of about ten thousand people in 2015. Besides, it hires the most combatants, with at least 8,000 soldiers in 2014 against 200 to 300 Sahel's armed terrorist groups, among which some are ethnically and regionally based (Tuareg MNLA, Fula MLF), while others are ideologically and religiously based (AQIM, Ansar Dine) but there are all traffic funded. Al-Mourabitoun, the most dangerous group, now launches attacks in the southern Niger Rive region. They include : Bamako hotel attack (November 20th, 2015) ; Ouagadougou attacks (January 15th, 2016) and Grand-Bassam shootings (March 13th, 2016). Ouagadougou attacks were a two-stage operation : the Cappuccino cafe, nearby the Splendid hotel, was first targeted through a simple tactic. This efficient and low-priced

13 O. Hanne & G. Larabi, “Lutte contre le terrorisme et sécurité au Sahel”, *Sécurité & Défense magazine*, June 20th, 2016.

14 B. Rogio, “Wuhayshi Imparted Lessons of AQAP Operations in Yemen to AQIM”, *Long War Journal*, August 12th, 2013.

15 E. Grégoire, “Dangers extérieurs, dangers intérieurs : le Niger face au radicalisme islamique”, *EchoGéo*, Sur le Vif, April 2nd, 2015.

operation resulted in an immediate publicity stunt. On the same day, a profit-making kidnapping operation of two Australian was conducted, requiring more time to prepare, more money and specialized units in and out of the city (extraction, refuge, resale...). Al-Mourabitoun then sends out a strong signal of its capacity to harm.¹⁶ Besides, diverse groups cooperate on complex operations since Ansar Dine (Sahara Emirate) claims responsibility for the attack and Al-Mourabitoun held the hostages. Moreover, Belmokhtar and AQIM allegedly reconciled in December 2015. *Barkhane's* presence is a double-edged sword : it deepens even more competition, tension and trafficks between armed terrorist groups while giving them an opportunity to cooperate.

Armed terrorist groups ability to react is impressive, taking advantage of any weakness from Sahel G5 countries : after the failure of 2015 Burkinabé coup d'état, military forces were put on the hot seat and elite troops were partially dismantled. Because of this security loophole, Al-Mouratiboun was able to conduct the Ouagadougou operation¹⁷.

Toward a 3SS ? (Sahel-Saharan-Senegambian strip)

Between 2015 and 2016, jihadism spread in the southern region of the Sahel-Saharan strip.¹⁸ Sub-Saharan populations clearly become more radical, turn into Salafists and gradually into Jihadists.¹⁹ In December 2015, President Jammeh declared Gambia to be an "Islamic Republic". Even though this is a message of domestic policy, the timing of the decision could not have been worse.

From January 2015 onwards, a new jihadist group wants the jihadist movement to spread in southern Mali so as to reinstate Macina's former Fula empire : it's the Macina Liberation Front (MLF). The group participated in the attack at the Radisson hotel, cooperates with Al-Mourabitoun and exemplifies the Islamisation of Fula people, who are caught between a rock and a hard place : on the one side, southern Mali farmers who criticize them because of their warlike and pastoral traditions; on the other side, the Tuaregs.²⁰ Moreover, most of the attacks that occurred outside north-east Mali since 2015 were carried out by non-combatant Subsaharan 15-year-old youth, who radicalize and are goaded into seeking martyrdom, which is even more worrying. Jihadism is then drawing closer to the Gulf of Guinea.

In the future, armed terrorist groups will be able to settle a third jihadist anchor point (with Libya and Nigeria in the Senegambian area. The Sahel-Saharan strip security issues now extend to a Sahel-Saharan-Senegambian strip²¹, which might result in Sahel counter-terrorism presence removal including Operation *Barkhane*. In 2015, the MSJI (Islamic youth movement of Western Sahara) emerged in Mauritania and at

16 O. Hanne & G. Larabi, "Lutte contre le terrorisme et sécurité au Sahel", *op.cit.*

17 M. Ecoiffier, "Attentat au Burkina : il y a une sorte de concurrence entre Aqmi et l'EI", *Libération*, January 16th, 2016.

18 B. Lugan, *L'Afrique réelle*, March 18th, 2016.

19 "AQMI recrute de plus en plus de jeunes en Afrique de l'Ouest", *RFI*, March 17th, 2016.

20 "El-Mourabitoune et Aqmi revendiquent les attentats de Bamako", *Alakhbar*, November 20th, 2015.

21 G. Larabi, "Barkhane risque le grand écart", *Le Huffington Post*, January 22nd, 2016

the border between Algeria and Morocco. Although this armed terrorist group is limited, it might take advantage of the "salafizations" and of the Western Sahara conflict. Unless their forces are reinforced, it is inconceivable to redeploy the 3,500 French soldiers already operating in a large territory. Consequently, it becomes imperative that Algeria, Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and members of ECOWAS.

While the jihadist hub has changed their location since 2012, Operation *Barkhane's* did not relocate. Such gap will eventually be hazardous. Armed terrorist groups show marks of intelligence and creativeness in exploiting local tensions : they especially capitalized on people's frustration and on state oppression. In addition to bank on a religious and anti-Western dimension, they all instrumentalize ethnic lines, former conflicts between rural and urban residents, and between pastoralists and farmers. However, unlike Daech in the Middle East, using only violence will not help them to withstand : they have to redistribute to enjoy some popularity.

A limited foreign presence (Operation *Barkhane*, MINUSMA)

Barkhane : an unsatisfying outcome ?

Some people might consider *Barkhane* as a disappointing operation since armed terrorist groups have been redeploying their forces since 2014. Besides, *Barkhane* costs over 700 million euros a year. The operation was even accused of being "*circumvented*" by armed terrorist groups and of being the victim of a "*Maginot Line syndrome*"²², although such accusation does not tally with a context where there is no line nor border to cross, only a large desert area to inspect and to monitor. The principles of a continental and interstate war dating back to the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) are no longer applied, to the benefit of naval warfare's. The jihadist movement is no longer able to maintain its forces in the Azawad region since *Barkhane* causes complications for armed terrorist groups and therefore, the movement spreads to southern Mali.

Operation *Barkhane's* shortcomings stem from assigned ambitious objectives whereas its partners' forces are weak and its presence remains incomplete. All Sahel security issues go beyond national boundaries and they involve the participation of countries that are not part of Sahel G5. Libya is an asset for armed terrorist groups, leading to the forward operating base of Madama in December 2014. The Salvador Pass cannot be effectively secured without *Barkhane's* intervention on the other side of the border, which the French General Directorate for External Security²³ can allow himself to do (along with Force *Sabre* ?). Taking advantage of the drying-up of Lake Chad and its muddy islands, traffickers and Boko Haram combatants cross without any difficulty the borders of Cameroon, of Chad and Niger – where the group plays an important part in the destabilization of those two countries – and of Nigeria – where the cooperation with France did not come to terms despite the agreement signed on June, 16th 2016.

²² Jean-Dominique Merchet pour *L'Opinion*, November 21st, 2015.

²³ "Trois membres de la DGSE tués en Libye, le gouvernement libyen proteste", *Le Monde*, July 20th, 2016.

Then they take shelter in the marshes.²⁴ Since the election of President Buhari in March 2015, everybody is waiting to know whether or not Nigeria will join Sahel G5 to prevent the jihadist continuum from appearing. However, the character of a pernicky nationalism seems more inclined to settle the question of Boko Haram on his own.

To achieve a lasting solution, Sahel G5 and France must make connections with Algeria, a country that has the strongest army in the area and with the most convincing results against jihadists. However, an opportunistic partnership with Algeria would compromise the chances of rapprochement with Morocco, whose historic rivalry around the Western Sahara issue persists.

Faced with the risk of Barkhane's dislocation because of the descent of jihadism towards Senegambia, no solution seems perfect. Pulling out of the stronghold – or at least an area – seems unthinkable without fear of seeing armed terrorist groups resettle there. The budget being drastically cut, deploying a new battle group seems illusory. Some operations then must be redirected to south-western Mali, northern Burkina Faso, the N'Djamena region and even northern Cameroon. New forms of partnership with Yaoundé, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea will certainly also have to be found.

Partners' weaknesses

Although Sahelian Heads of States are aware that cooperating with France on a military and a political level has become urgent, realities are somewhat different. There is an evident lack of materials and means of Sahel G5 armies while EUTM Mali has to cope with Malian armies' blatant lacks of resources in all fields. Regional armies budget are incomparable to the extent of profits generated by the traffics.²⁵

The Tuareg issue, at the center of all rebellions in Mali and in Niger since the 1960s and that triggered a 2012 crisis, has not been solved²⁶. January 2013 was the right time for the MNLA to dissociate themselves from armed terrorist groups. Separatist groups had been working with jihadists for a few months when, in May 2013, they gathered together and created the High Council for Unity in Azawad (HCUA). Presenting itself as legitimate, the HCUA requested Algeria, Burkina Faso and Morocco to intervene so as to prevent Malian army from returning to Kidal.²⁷ The city was then occupied by French and Chadian soldiers, but not by the government army, which led to southern Malian to feel humiliated by this victory. Most of the local actors thought that the Ouagadougou peace agreement, signed on June 18th, 2013, was nothing but a piece of paper supposed to reassure France. Anti-French riots broke out to denounce Paris indulgence towards Tuaregs after January 2014, when Malian troops were driven away from Kidal without nor the intervention of France nor MINUSMA's.²⁸ Malian President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta assured in the French newspaper *Le Monde* that there will be

24 “Sur les bords du lac Tchad, au cœur de la folie meurtrière de Boko Haram”, *Le Monde*, August 18th, 2016.

25 The Ivorian Defense budget is about 400 million euros in 2014, the income of two tons of cocaine.

26 M. Raffray, *Touaregs. La révolte des hommes bleus (1857-2013)*, Paris, Éditions Economica, 2013.

27 “Mali, les rebelles du HCUA jouent un double jeu selon Paris”, www.voaafrrique.com, June 8th, 2016.

28 “Mali, des hommes d’un groupe pro-Bamako sont entrés dans Kidal”, *RFI*, February 2nd, 2016.

no discussion with terrorists, implying the MNLA : "*We are bound, by the international community, to negotiate on our soil with people who took up arms against the State*" (December 5th 2013). Bamako tried to play on the Tuareg divisions by using Colonel Gamou, promoted general, who created GATIA (*Imghad and Allies Tuareg Self-Defence Group*). *He was backed up by soldiers from the Imghad, the former serfs of the Tuareg aristocracy, and he works in tandem with Malian army against the MNLA.*²⁹

Despite a general unwillingness, Algiers pre-agreement was signed in October 2014, so as to preserve Mali's territorial unity. However, diverse independent groups gathered together and formed a coalition: the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), through which they reaffirmed their commitment to federalism, much to the chagrin of the people of southern Mali. GATIA immediately entered into open conflict with the MNLA in the valley Tilemsi, although the Songhaï and Bambara populations become radical against the Tuareg. As soon as a proposal of administrative autonomy is put forward by Bamako, riots or militias attack the Tuareg. Indeed, if the process of decentralization were honestly initiated, the northern provinces would join the elite of the CMA, and the southern Malians would think the unity of the country is at risk. Many of them would take up the arms and join the already formed self-defense militias.³⁰

Throughout 2015, the CMA kept negotiations with the Malian government while holding the north-eastern territory. Whether it came from rebels, jihadists, GATIA men or the Malian army, violence was ongoing every day. Malian authorities speak about "black huntings".³¹ On January 27th Blue Berets were killed in Tabankort. MINUSMA responded by sending an airstrike, killing 6 members of the MNLA. On 27th April, GATIA brought Ménaka under its control, after driving the MNLA away. Immediately, the latter attacked Lere and Timbuktu, killing eight Malian soldiers. The peace agreement, supposed to be signed on May 15th, lapsed. However, the CMA initiated it but without signing it, demanding "official recognition of Azawad as an entity". Within three days, the Tuareg movement killed three southern Malian soldiers in Timbuktu among the Bambara.³² On June 20th, 2015, the final peace agreement was yet signed in Bamako, promising to disarm combatants, to integrate them into the army and to decentralize. So many promises conceded then abandoned for twenty years.

The Tuareg issue is far from being resolved and the Bamako agreement is suspended to the goodwill of the signatories. Southern Bambara people want to believe in the survival of the Malian nation, at the expense of the Tuaregs, who have no unity and accepted all the compromises so as to revive their dream of independence and power : deals with traffickers, roads cutters, Islamists and jihadists.

But the fragility also concerns other France's partners. Chad, one of those

29 B. Lugan, *L'Afrique réelle*, May 11th, 2015.

30 "Mali : l'armée ouvre le feu sur une manifestation de jeunes à Gao", *France24*, July 12th, 2016.

31 "Mali, le gouvernement dénonce une épuration raciale à Kidal", *Jeune Afrique*, June 3rd, 2015

32 We refer to *Rapport Afrique 226*, from International Crisis Group, May 22nd, 2015

countries, became a favorite target of Boko Haram in 2015³³. President Idriss Deby is responsible for its political balance : if he was to be replaced or to die, given the president has been sick for several years now, the balance, achieved over 25 years, would be upset and then would plunge Chad into ethnic-political recomposition at the worst possible time. The country is one of the only remaining barrier against the jihadism coming from the north through Libya, from the west with AQIM and from the south with Boko Haram. Darfur Islamist militias would benefit from it to swoop on eastern Chad, probably carrying along the countries of the Sahel like dominoes.

Finally, the risk of a sudden rethinking of the process initiated by the G5 Sahel can not be ruled out, particularly during a regime change or a military coup in a country, which would eliminate this cooperation because of nationalist spirit, by inter-ethnic mistrust, to give a pledge to the deeply rooted Francophobia sentiment. Now, armed terrorist groups can play on the strings of identity and revive ancient wounds.

Legal framework and unassailable ethics?

Operation *Barkhane* and recent military strategies evolution in Sahel could eventually raise legal issues in the long run. The conditions for renewal of the mission by the French Parliament, in accordance with Article 35-2 of the Constitution, are not always met (presentation every four months for prolongation, contradictory debates, details of pursued objectives ...). Operational partnerships between the French forces and the armies of the Sahel are a daily gap between European military ethics and customs in the region, where the figure of the soldier not only represents legal force but also brutality and impunity.³⁴ When deployed in Mali, Chadian soldiers are criticized for their "muscular" methods. In Niger, Chad and Mali, the removal of gendarmerie posts or garrisons makes it difficult to transport captives. *Barkhane* or *Saber* units are reluctant to entrust local authorities with intercepted traffickers who can easily be considered as jihadists and disappear once the French troops have left. Around the prisoners, lucrative or ethnic negotiations escape the understanding of the men of *Barkhane*. The simplest way is to puncture the tires of the pick-ups after confiscating the equipment and the armaments of the arrested persons.

The countries of G5 Sahel favored the rise of the special forces, also on the initiative of France, which in 2010 trained Mauritians in this field, then Nigerians in 2013. But this phenomenon made imperceptible the limit between regular and irregular warfare, between conventional operations and special missions, even of the DGSE kind, hence a perceptible gap between *Barkhane* and *Saber*. Faced with administrative and material burdens, there is a great temptation to use PMC (Private Military Companies), following the American model, which, without being illegal, abandon the framework of public action. In the end, the French Parliament will find it difficult to control the nature of the operations, part of which *Barkhane* cannot control. Military ethics may be

33 "Tchad, au moins 41 morts dans 5 explosions attribuées à l'ex-Boko Haram", *RFI*, October 10th, 2015

34 "Dans la boue, arme au poing : l'étrange bizutage des femmes de militaires maliens", *France24*, September 2nd, 2016

affected, but also the judicial responsibility of the COS men or the associated forces (PMC, African armies).

MINUSMA and the stalemate of the "thing"

MINUSMA, more than Barkhane, is becoming a UN machinery disconnected from realities. When a Danish general, with no African and little French experience, was chosen to head MINUSMA, was a bad signal to the people. The disconnection of Minusma with public opinion reinforces the Francophobe climate. Minusma's communication actions on its successes (organization of presidential and legislative elections, installation of prefects, defense of gender parity) are considered with contempt because they reinforce international interference on democratic criteria that public opinion considers as manipulated. The total number of victims within MINUSMA (38 deaths between 2013 and 2014, 39 between 2015 and August 2016) does not see the effectiveness of its action.

The stabilization in Mali can be understood in two different ways : MINUSMA authorities perceive it as an administrative, institutional and governmental process whereas public opinion sees it as the result of a complex balance between ethnic groups, foreign actors, elites interests, trafficking conditions and agricultural conditions

By fostering decentralization and regionalization, the MINUSMA and the European Union imitate 1990 reconciliation procedures. Although it instigated them, the central authority already knew back then that such procedures were bound to fail, since their applications were inadequate or were to the detriment of Tuarerg and Moors ethnic groups. In pursuing the same arrangements, MINUSMA fuels conspiracy theory speeches in the south of the country without rallying the populations of the north. Under such conditions, as soon as the international military presence decreased, the troubles will resume as they did in 2006 and in 2012.

Finally, MINUSMA is pressurized into making mistakes by Bakamo government's passiveness and *susceptibility*, which enables political elites not to collaborate too closely with foreign countries, an attitude that will turn out to be helpful in an electoral or clientelist context. Whatever the outcome of the negotiations, if MINUSMA intervenes in the reconciliation process (trading fees, presence of Minusma delegates in the national dialogue ...), its action will be reinterpreted to its disadvantage. The deeper the Malian State will decay, the more implicated in the country management MINUSMA will be, subsequent to Mali's request (hence the decision taken by the United Nations Security Council in June 29th, 2016 to reinforce the UN mission). This process does not allow local actors to face their own contradictions, and responsible for their actions and statements before their opinion.

There is a greater risk that international bodies take over the role of government of a little-governed country for political effectiveness, although it does not comply with Mali's temporary zone.

Different understandings

Local actors are familiar with European mentalities and they know how to use UN semantics while addressing to their clientelistic networks. Reestablishing security and the State then demands to fight against drug trafficking and corruption, which Public Officials and their families are living on. As for the city of Bamako, conducting a subtle communication operation is a requirement so as to fight against drug trafficking : taking action so as not to be denounced and collaborating to receive subsidies, without destructuring so as not to become impoverished.

Armed groups, while serving their interests by relying on trafficking or on an alleged adherence of one ethnic group or another, now have an unequalled position in the negotiations. To withstand and to negotiate, they wage guerrilla warfares and they use pick-ups as part of their strategy. The issue of geostrategic issues is beyond the control of the MNLA and of Bamako : on the one hand, they both have a horizontal vision of the policy (immediate interest and understanding of the local) ; on the other hand France's vision is of Sahelian security vertical and satellite (state of the jihadist networks throughout the Sahel, situation in Libya, risks of mass migration). Therefore, It will be tricky to bring the "separatists" to reason, for their understanding of the state and of "regional separatism" is not France's.

Finally, UN resolutions and EU rules distinctly make a difference between jihadist combatants and civilians, a rigid distinction in the Malian context – as it had been in Afghanistan – in which, according to the UN and to the EU, the word insecurity cannot be applied any alliance can be formed. The recent threat of targeted sanctions against those who do not respect the peace agreements can easily be exploited by Bamako against Tuareg groups, Fulani or even political opponents.³⁵

Besides, France's goodwill towards the Tuareg claims, which originated in colonization in the 19th century, now became anachronistic, especially with respect to future relations between France and Bamako. The Tuaregs count for 4% of the total population of the Bamako, a country that cannot be entirely redrawn only because of the mentioned demographic aspect, especially as all Tuaregs do not associate with the MNLA. In July 2013, France's interposition operation between the Malian army and the MNLA avoided a bloodbath. However, the operation was seen as not only the first act of foreign interference in favor of the Tuareg but also as the splitting of Mali. Yet, Tuareg groups only serve their own interests and by no means tried to enhance diplomacy with neither France nor Europe. The Tuareg leaders do not represent all the currents of the ethnic group, as evidenced by the constitution of the GATIA and the clashes with the HCUA in Kidal in August 2013. In September 2016, the MNLA experienced a major internal schism³⁶ : the security zone established near Tabankort in 2015 to protect the Tuaregs could represent an autonomous enclave, initiated by France. But no collaboration of the Tuareg was guaranteed.

35 "Affrontements de Kidal, Bamako veut prendre les choses en mains", *Studiantamani*, August 13th, 2016

36 "Mali, le MNLA une nouvelle fois amputé", *Jeune Afrique*, September 2nd, 2016

Conclusion

Francophobia is expanding dangerously in the countries of Sahel, where anti-*Barkhane* riots took place in 2016. Among the population, a popular distrust remains deep toward the former colonizers and conspiracy rumors are legion. In the streets, families and necessarily among soldiers, France is accused of secret schemes and of wanting to establish itself once again, to overthrow the Head of state, to destroy the nation or to tap into the wealth of the country. The presence of French troops, of Areva and of Bolloré in Niger was denounced during riots in Niamey on June 6th, 2015. Jihadists can take advantage of this distrust toward the « White », also seen as a faithless.

Barkhane cannot change this current state of affairs; the operation neither has the vocation to do so nor the means. If *Barkhane*, *Sabre* and Sahel G5 are seen as a coherent security and strategic whole, then the fight against armed terrorist groups may be relatively successful but substantive matters won't be resolved (bad development, political stability...). However, if the three organizations were to develop separately or to compete with one another, then the jihadism will spread in favor of unavoidable conflicts of authority.