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Assessing France's Success in Anti-Terror Operations in Africa

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On June 30, 2020, French president Emmanuel Macron, who arrived in the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott to attend the G5 Sahel Summit, spoke about the desire to “Europeanize the fight against terrorism in the Sahel”, as he handed over the lead of counterterrorism operations in the Sahel to the European Union.¹ The G5 Sahel Summit is a regional, institutional framework formed by a coalition of local governments of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger who cooperate in matters of development and security issues in West Africa. France has been one of the ardent supporters of this framework in efforts to cohesively fight against terrorism.

France’s involvement in the African continent has been significant since the seventeenth century² when they had a colonial empire which stretched from North to Sub-Saharan Africa, a region that is referred to as a “strategic asset”.³ However, in the twenty-first century, France maintains a counterterrorism force of less than 5000 troops in West Africa, as it

hopes to depart the region militarily. Towards this end, France has extended its support to G5 Sahel, to fight rising terror groups in West Africa. In addition, France provides logistical support to several African countries as part of its counterterrorism efforts⁴ with the *Agence Française de Développement* and the Sahel Alliance framework which are involved in developmental efforts.

French presence in the region has been justified on grounds of weak governmental structures and limited capabilities by local leadership to conduct sustained counterterrorism operations against terror groups operating in the region. In recent times, the challenges of extremism and terrorist attacks have been increasing significantly with a dangerous proliferation of terrorist entities being observed in West Africa. This includes organizations such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIB), Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mujao)/Al-Mourabitoun and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as the Group

to Support Islam and Muslims. These groups are involved in kidnappings, production of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), arms trafficking, landmines, narco-terrorism, suicide bombings, and intelligence gathering.⁵ The groups have become dangerously deep seated in the region by exploiting existing tensions between nomadic groups and farmers, instigating communal conflicts, garnering local support by providing welfare services, forging blood relations and utilizing religious dogma as well as experienced fighters from West Asia. Moreover, the groups are ideologically supple and collaborate together in order to increase their reach.⁶

The French approach to deal with this challenge is best exemplified under the aegis of *Operation Barkhane*, which is a counterterrorism operation involving Burkina Faso, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mali and Niger in the Southern region of the Sahara in collaboration with the United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union Training Mission in Mali, as well as allies in the region.⁷ The goal has been defined as the creation of a favorable environment for a political solution. In their operations, the French seem to select mobility over protection, small forces with quick response time, an assorted range of regiments, and acceptance of a higher degree of risk.⁸ The French have built a base and few radio stations in

Mali. French troops have conducted joint operations with the armed forces of Mali and Burkina Faso. Operation Barkhane involves focusing on developmental aspects and winning the hearts and minds of the local population while working to address the wider crimes related to "communal tensions and banditry".⁹ The French have also used airstrikes and drones. One of the advantages that the French have over their foreign allies in the region is a high level of regional expertise and the ability to practice austerity under harsh conditions.

However, there are several challenges that France faces in its fight against terrorism in this region. First, critics state that these efforts work to increase French legitimacy at the expense of local governments. There are also concerns about French support for regimes which are accused of inflicting violence on the populace such as in Chad, as it feeds radicalization as well as more violence. Other challenges confronting French efforts are limited sharing of best practices, limitations in training of forces from African nations and paucity of sustained airpower to effectively coordinate between multiple French bases (both temporary and permanent) to reduce the risk of troops to IEDs and sneak attacks.¹⁰ In addition, France has also not acknowledged the socio-economic factors that fuel extremism.¹¹ French involvement in the region has also increased anti-French sentiments among the people. Counterterrorism efforts are perceived to be undertaken in order to protect

Paris' regional political influence as a form of power projection and a way to justify its defense budget, all at the price of regional peace and sovereignty.¹² The credibility of French efforts in this regard suffers immensely. This has led to reinforcing the perception of France as a post-colonial power which uses anti-terrorism as a justification to maintain its influence. And even so, it is perceived as having been unsuccessful in making a significant dent in eliminating terror groups in the region. More effective outcomes are now being expected from the newly announced European Approach. But results are yet to be seen.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ "Macron underlines fight against terror in Sahel summit", *AA.com*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/macron-underlines-fight-against-terror-in-sahel-summit/1895294>, accessed on July 14, 2020.

² Norman Dwight Harris, "French Colonial Expansion in West Africa, The Sudan, and the Sahara", *The American Political Science Review*, 5, issue 3 (1911), at https://www.jstor.org/stable/1944867?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents, accessed on June 22, 2020.

³ Rasmus Alenius Boserup and Luis Martinez, "French Counterterrorism", *Danish Institute For International Studies*, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep17370.8.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A7af835967081da26d94f4efd9041d00f>, accessed on June 25, 2020.

⁴ Robbie Gramer and Colum Lynch, "U.S. Tussles with France, U.N. Over Counterterrorism Efforts in West Africa", *Foreign Policy*, May 21, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/21/trump-united-nations-terrorism-threat-west-africa-united-states-minusma-sahel-counterterrorism-mali/>, accessed on June 1, 2020.

⁵ Modibo Goïta, "West Africa's Growing Terrorist Threat: Confronting AQIM's Sahelian Strategy", *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, February 11, 2011, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19071, accessed on June 1, 2020.

⁶ Neil Munshi, "Niger: War at the Heart of West Africa", *The Financial Times*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/bffcec52-578f-11e9-91f9-b6515a54c5b1>, accessed on June 23, 2020.

⁷ Alan Taylor, "Operation Barkhane: France's Counterterrorism Forces in Africa", *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/10/operation-barkhane-frances-counter-terrorism-forces-in-africa/543834/>, accessed on June 23, 2020.

⁸ Michael Shurkin, "What It Means to Be Expeditionary: A Look at the French Army in Africa", *Joint Force Quarterly*, 82, issue 3 (2016), at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/jfq/joint-force-quarterly-82/article/793271/what-it-means-to-be-expeditionary-a-look-at-the-french-army-in-africa/>, accessed on June 24, 2020.

⁹ Flore Berger, "West Africa: shifting strategies in the Sahel", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/10/csdp-west-africa-sahel>, accessed on June 24, 2020.

¹⁰ Quentin Lopinot, "What Does "European Defense" Look Like? The Answer might be in the Sahel", *War on the Rocks*, March 19, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/what-does-european-defense-look-like-the-answer-might-be-in-the-sahel/>, accessed on June 23, 2020.

¹¹ Boserup and Martinez, n. 3.

¹² Nathaniel K Powell, "Africa: The Flawed Logic Behind French Military Interventions in Africa", *The Conversation*, May 12, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/the-flawed-logic-behind-french-military-interventions-in-africa-132528>, accessed on June 23, 2020.