

## FRANCOUZSKÉ PROTIPOVSTALECKÉ OPERACE V MALI PŘED A PO VOJENSKÉM PŘEV RATU Z ROKU 2020 Důsledky operační činnosti Task Force Takuba

### FRENCH COUNTERINSURGENCY IN MALI BEFORE AND AFTER THE COUP D'ÉTAT OF 2020 Fallout from Task Force Takuba's Operational Activities

*Ondřej Čábelka<sup>a</sup>, Stanislav Štěpánek<sup>b</sup>*

#### Abstrakt

Občanská válka v Mali je jedním z nejdéle trvajících konfliktů v regionu afrického Sahelu. Tento konflikt je typickým příkladem asymetrického konfliktu, kdy na jedné straně stojí síly národních států a na straně druhé nestátní ozbrojené aktéři. Článek popisuje kořeny konfliktu, jeho vývoj, zapojení Francie do protipovstaleckých a protiteroristických operací a operační aktivity Task Force Takuba. V závěru hodnotí celou problematiku, včetně naplnění cílů, kvůli kterým byla Task Force Takuba utvořena.

#### Abstract

The civil war in Mali is one of the longest-running conflicts in the African Sahel region. The conflict is now a typical example of an asymmetric conflict, with nation-state forces on one side and non-state armed actors on the other. This article describes the roots of the conflict, its evolution, France's involvement in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, and the operational activities of Task Force Takuba. Finally, it provides an assessment of the overall issue, including an assessment of whether the objectives for which Task Force Takuba was formed have been met.

#### Klíčová slova

Mali; Francie; Task Force Takuba; speciální síly, COIN; boj proti terorismu

#### Keywords

Mali; France; Task Force Takuba; Special Forces; COIN; Counterterrorism.

---

<sup>a</sup> Department of Political Science, Masaryk University. Brno, Czech Republic. Email: [ondra.cabelka@gmail.com](mailto:ondra.cabelka@gmail.com).

<sup>b</sup> Department of Political Science, Masaryk University. Brno, Czech Republic. Email: [stepanek.standa@centrum.cz](mailto:stepanek.standa@centrum.cz).

## INTRODUCTION

The West African region is becoming increasingly important not only in the economic sphere, but also in the political and, above all, security sphere. The presence of natural resources combined with weak and corrupt state institutions or governments that are often unable to maintain control or security over the entire national territory is an ideal environment for the development of armed insurgencies and terrorist groups.

Following the loss of government control over the northern part of the country, Mali has become a stronghold for several terrorist organizations and remaining jihadist fighters who have fled to the country after losing conflicts elsewhere in Africa and the Middle East. The gradual increase in the power and influence of these non-state actors, coupled with widespread violence against the civilian population, may lead to a further destabilization of the security situation not only in Mali, but all across the Sahel region.

It is precisely this deteriorating security development that has prompted Western powers to intervene to help put control of the situation in the hands of individual state governments. France has launched large-scale military operations in the state of Mali, as its former colony, and although it is effectively applying its counterinsurgency (COIN) strategies, it is likely that without the future presence of French and European forces, Malian forces would not be able to control the situation on their own. The goal of the French military leadership is therefore to reach a point where the Malian government will be able to suppress the insurgency and maintain security on its own or with minimal assistance from foreign powers.

In this article, the authors focus on a detailed analysis of the French military operations in Mali during two main periods and its COIN aspect. Although the article outlines a comparison of the two periods, due to its focus and limited scope it does not go deeper into this matter. Nevertheless, it provides a comprehensive basis for further in-depth research aimed at a direct comparison of the two periods. The first timeframe, referred to as the period before the coup d'état of 18 August 2020, covers the analysis of the conflict and the situation in the region, including the Serval and Barkhane military operations. The second time frame is defined as the period after the coup d'état and focuses on the changes in the French approach to Operation Barkhane. Furthermore, authors focus on the implementation of the mandate and declared objectives of Task Force Takuba.

## METHODOLOGY

### The theoretical framework of the French approach to counterinsurgency

Due to the nature of the article, the authors take the liberty not to address general approaches to COIN in the theoretical framework. Instead, the appeal will be mainly to the French approach to the aforementioned phenomenon, as it is in direct correlation with the central theme of this article.

The French COIN strategy has been greatly influenced in the past (and to some extent still is today) by the ideas of French military theorists David Galula and Roger Trinquier. In their publications, both authors place particular emphasis in COIN on winning the support of the domestic population, i.e., winning the hearts and minds of the enemy, and identifying the enemy being fought.<sup>1</sup> The problem associated with the strategy presented by both Galula and Trinquier is that the strategy presented was not only meant to offer a way to effectively fight the insurgency, but also represented a moral and political justification for the brutal French COIN tactics used in Algeria.<sup>2</sup>

After the highly controversial war in Algeria, France did not abandon its, although severely limited, involvement in small wars where COIN played a dominant role. However, there was a significant change in how the French approached their military interventions. None of the post-Algerian interventions were politically important enough for France to allocate anything other than minimal resources to them.<sup>3</sup> In light of their colonial history, French expeditionary forces in this period again had to rely on the minimal numbers of expeditionary troops and the high political expectations placed on them. However, France's policy of non-intervention in the affairs of other states during this period tended to lean more toward supporting host states. It meant that many of the political activities that colonial armies had pursued during colonial and Cold War-era were no longer appropriate. France thus promised to increase its international prestige and legitimacy, which had been severely undermined after the controversial war in Algeria.

COIN had been a considerable taboo since 1962 due to the torture that French soldiers had demonstrably committed against the local population during the Algerian war and the subsequent attempted coup d'état. This state of affairs lasted until the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Shurkin locates a turning point in the French approach to Afghanistan, specifically 2008, when French forces operated in the Kapisa Province. The intensity of operations increased in this year, but the results were not satisfying, and French casualties increased due to poor planning.<sup>4</sup> Each field commander approached COIN as he saw fit, as there was no official document to be strictly followed. The French army ended its involvement in Afghanistan in 2012, and already in 2013, the document *Contre-insurrection* was published, which built on previous documents and which defines

---

<sup>1</sup> GALULA, ref. 1, and TRINQUIER, ref. 2

<sup>2</sup> SHURKIN, Michael. (2021). France's War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine. *Texas National Security Review* 4(1), 36-60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 36-60

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

the French approach to COIN to this day, and its practical application can be seen in the French operations in Mali and the Sahel region.<sup>5</sup>

The document foresees that France will no longer engage in wars equal in size to Indochina or Algeria. The document then also deals with the political side of COIN, thus critically responding to Galula and Trinquier, where interventions are intended to serve as aid to the host country, which will be treated as a sovereign state, according to the document. The host country should then be the agent of political action. French operations are thus chained to the host nation's agenda, interests, and pace. The French conduct their military operations according to their own rhythm, but the more critical work, upon which the ultimate success of the entire venture depends, is in local hands.<sup>6</sup>

The current French doctrine defines COIN as the set of institutional or non-institutional political, economic, social, military, and psychological activities necessary to eliminate insurgency. The COIN strategy contained in the document is based on the premise that COIN operations will be conducted to combat non-state actors threatening the legitimacy and existence of the state actor outside of France.<sup>7</sup> The main pillar of the strategy is the stabilization of the situation, which includes not only security issues but also issues of political, economic, and social stability. Military force is to be used to achieve political stability, which is represented by the establishment of a government made up of local actors. Dealing with the issue of insurgency is seen as a complex problem that requires the intervention of an external actor - i.e., France. Ensuring political stability and a legitimate government is the primary objective of the COIN operation, and everything should be subordinated to this objective, but only in accordance with international law. The cooperation and synergy of the French military and political leadership is essential. Again, gaining the support of the host population (reference to Galula) plays an important role, for which adaptation to the local cultural and ethnic environment is essential. However, the support of the domestic French population also plays a role. The military approach to fighting insurgency itself is based directly on the theories of Galula and Trinquier. Rigorous preparation for a COIN operation, maintaining security in the host nation, and subsequent reconstruction are all important. Simultaneously with this, the strengthening of host nation security forces must then take place. In the fight against insurgents, it is then important to isolate the enemy and use all means to disrupt any integrity within the insurgency.<sup>8</sup>

### **Research question and hypothesis**

The research aims to investigate the course and impact of French military operations in Mali before and after the coup d'état of 18 August 2020, including the recent operational activities of Task Force Takuba. The examination will focus on how, if at all, elements of COIN were incorporated and implemented within these operations. The research will also focus on assessing TF Takuba's operations in Mali to date.

---

<sup>5</sup> CENTRE DE CONCEPTS, de doctrines et d'experimentations. (2013). Contre-insurrection: Doctrine interarmées DIA-3.4.4. (A)\_COIN (2013). Ministère de la Défense. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/39SPNQw>. (15. 6. 2021).

<sup>6</sup> SHURKIN, ref. 6, pp. 36-60.

<sup>7</sup> CENTRE DE CONCEPTS, ref. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

The research questions are defined as follows:

Research question: How did the French military operations in Mali evolve in relation to counterinsurgency before and after the coup d'état of 18 August 2020?

- Research sub-question no. 1: In what ways did the coup d'état of 18 August 2020 affect the French-led counterinsurgency operations?
- Research sub-question no. 2: How are the mandate and objectives of Task Force Takuba being implemented in Mali?

At this point, it is possible to formulate a hypothesis that will incorporate our early guesses on the implications of the French COIN strategies and international efforts to resolve the conflicts roiling the West African region. We will therefore seek to confirm or refute the hypothesis, which is formulated as follows:

Hypothesis: In the aftermath of the 2020 coup d'état, there has been an increase in cooperation between Malian and French forces to counter insurgent tendencies in the country, aided by the operational launch of the international Task Force Takuba.

### **Previous research on the topic**

There is a wealth of academic literature on the COIN phenomenon. In general, there are many approaches to the phenomenon, however, it is safe to identify two schools of COIN that stand well above the rest - the French one and the American one.

Authors belonging to the French school were greatly influenced in their theories of COIN warfare by several conflicts in which France participated after World War II. These include, in particular, the colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria. Here it is important to mention, especially in relation to the central theme of this article, David Galula, and his book *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, originally published in 1964.<sup>9</sup> In his book, Galula describes the strategies that can be used to defeat insurgents and guerrillas. In doing so, he bases his theory on his own practical experience gained during his wartime service in China, Greece, Indochina, and Algeria. Since the book was published in the 1960s, it is still of immense value and has become a guide for modern authors dealing with the COIN phenomenon. Another French author actively engaged in the phenomenon was Roger Trinquier, who, like Galula, summarized his practical insights in a book entitled *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, which was published as early as 1961.<sup>10</sup> Trinquier also gained much experience during his time in World War II, as well as in Indochina and Algeria. He then spent most of his military career serving mostly with the paratroopers and special forces (SF).

The American School began to evolve gradually after the Vietnam War, where the United States suffered a defeat, aided by the activities of the North Vietnamese guerrilla organization, the Viet Cong. Despite this, the COIN phenomenon has not been given sufficient attention and has often even been ignored within U.S. military doctrine. The turning point came after the defeat of Saddam's Iraq in 2003, when what was originally a conventionally oriented war was transformed into an unconventional war. The regular

---

<sup>9</sup> GALULA, David. (2006). *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Westport: Praeger Security International.

<sup>10</sup> TRINQUIER, Roger (2006). *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*. Westport: Praeger Security International.

Iraqi army was replaced by fedayeen and former Baath Party members in the fight against the Americans and the new Shiite government, using unconventional methods of warfare for which the Americans were absolutely unprepared and untrained. The U.S. military leadership was therefore forced to address this problem quickly and effectively, leading to Army Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency.<sup>11</sup> This manual established the doctrine and fundamental principles for military operations in the COIN environment. It is based on lessons learned from previous counterinsurgencies and contemporary operations. The Americans greatly emphasized the enormous experience of the French Army gained in the wars in Indochina and Algeria, as well as the experience of the British Army gained during the Anti-British National Liberation War in British Malaya (Nagl 2005).<sup>12</sup> Two of the authors who contributed extensively to the writing of this manual were General David H. Petraeus and Colonel John A. Nagl. General Petraeus is probably best known for serving as the commanding general of all coalition forces in Iraq under Multi-National Force - Iraq between 2007 and 2008. Nagl is a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army, who has dedicated his theoretical work to the COIN phenomenon and is rightly considered one of America's foremost COIN theorists with his books *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* and *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice*.<sup>13</sup> In these two publications, Nagl discusses modern trends in conducting COIN operations, referencing classics such as Galula and Thomas Edward Lawrence.

However, there are few scholarly books directly related to the Malian issue under study. By this, the authors mean in particular the issue of French military involvement in the country, including the activities of TF Takuba. This is understandable, as it is still a topical and constantly evolving issue, which is also characterized by its changing dynamics. The authors here had to draw specific information mainly from scholarly publications, especially academic journals and internet articles dealing with the researched and security and military issues in general. Here, fortunately, the volume and quality of information directly related to the issue under research was really rich, allowing the authors to diversify their source framework considerably. As far as Task Force Takuba is concerned, there is a wide range of information here as well. Unfortunately, however, due to the topicality and constant development of this issue, these are mainly internet articles, the content of which had to be triangulated frequently to verify the validity of the information contained therein.

### **Research strategies and data collection**

Based on the theories presented in the previous chapter, a hypothesis was formulated along with the research questions, which will then be tested through an in-depth analysis of the case. A single-case comparative analysis was chosen as the method to identify the differences and impacts of the French COIN activities in the given periods. The analysis focuses on the state of Mali in West Africa and temporally covers the period before and

---

<sup>11</sup> Department of the Army. (2006). *Army Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army Headquarters.

<sup>12</sup> NAGL, John A. (2005). *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. and

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* and NAGL, John A. (2015). *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice*. London: Penguin Books.

after the coup d'état of 18 August 2020. In particular, the operations of the French Armed Forces in Mali will be analysed, as well as the way in which cooperation with the Malian forces in the fight against insurgent groups has been transformed as a result of the coup d'état of 18 August 2020. Furthermore, it will be analysed how the mandate and objectives of the international Task Force Takuba, which started its operational activities in Mali at the beginning of 2021, are being implemented.

As it is necessary to focus on a wide range of publications and scholarly articles dealing with the French COIN strategies and especially their operation in a specific region to understand the case in depth, the article will draw primarily on secondary sources. In addition, it will of course make use of local and international news articles, which will mainly provide us with a closer look at particular critical events and their course. Although they will not play a dominant role, the article will also refer to primary sources in the form of statements by individual political leaders or, for example, official statements by the French Ministry of the Armed Forces, which will provide important insights into the attitudes of the various actors operating in the environment.

## THE BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

The state of Mali is defined by borders dating back to the colonial period and by the considerable geographical differences between the north (deserts and scrublands) and the south (savannahs and riverine wetlands). Although the majority of the population is Muslim, there is strong ethnic and linguistic diversity. Perhaps the most obvious difference, however, is between the inhabitants of the north and the south. The north is predominantly Tuareg and Arab, who make up about 10 % of Mali's total population.

After gaining its independence, the country turned to the Soviet Union for military assistance, however, during the Cold War era France also played its role as a partner of Mali. In 1992, the military government was overthrown, and the country turned to democracy, but the security situation in the region continued to deteriorate. Poor relations between the government and the Tuareg, combined with the spread of jihadist terrorism led by fighters exiled from Algeria and trans-Saharan smuggling, have resulted in a significant increase in conflict tensions in the region. The ignition of the conflict in Mali was triggered by the uprising of the Tuareg ethnic group in the north of the country in 2012, which resulted in massive population movements. Military officers subsequently overthrew President Toure in a coup d'état in March, claiming that the existing government was incapable of responding effectively to the growing separatist Tuareg rebel uprising.<sup>14</sup>

However, this action this action ensured the control and safety only in the south of the country. In the north, a Tuareg political organization called the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) seized power and joined forces with the jihadist groups al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) and the Tuareg group Ansar Dine (AAD) and declared independence.<sup>15</sup> During

---

<sup>14</sup> BUSSEMAKER, Nathalie and FELTER, Claire. (2020, August 12). What to Know About the Crisis in Mali. Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed from: <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-know-about-crisis-mali>. (10. 6. 2021).

<sup>15</sup> See HEISBOURG, ref. 13.

the months of June and July, rebel groups continued the conflict, seizing more territory in the north of the country.<sup>16</sup>

Given the gravity of the situation and the threat to the territorial integrity of the state of Mali, the UN Security Council agreed on a set of resolutions that, as recently as December 2012, allowed for the deployment of an African-led international mission in support of Mali under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.<sup>17</sup> This mission, called the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), involved mainly countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The proposed plan for an EU-led training operation was to begin in autumn 2013, after the waters of the Niger river had receded during the dry season. The armed rebel forces in the north of the country, of course, did not wait for the arrival of their enemies and continued to extend their influence southwards.<sup>18</sup>

In 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was elected president with a promise to begin peace talks, however, fighting between militias and the Mali government continued during 2014.<sup>19</sup> A settlement with several rebel groups was made in 2015, offering greater autonomy to the sparsely populated north aimed at ending years of civil conflict, although analysts criticize the deal for failing to include other armed forces. Islamist extremist groups, some linked to al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State, have taken advantage of the turmoil created by the Tuareg rebellion to undertake their own operations, similar to local militias formed to defend themselves amid the worsening security situation.<sup>20</sup>

Much of the north was recaptured by the French and Malian forces in January 2013. International donors pledged more than \$4 billion on 15 May to assist Mali in regaining its standing. The rebels and the Malian government then signed a peace agreement on 18 June 2013 that paved the path for elections. In July, the United Nations deployed a 12,600-strong military and police force to help stabilize the country. In a runoff election on 11 August, the Malian people peacefully elected Keita as their new president. Prior to the coup, Mali's democracy was regarded as a model for other West African countries.<sup>21</sup>

Despite efforts to de-escalate the conflict, there was a rapid increase in armed groups not included in the negotiations during 2016. In 2017, multiple attacks by extremist organizations and conflicts between insurgent groups and communal groups have continued to cause violence and insecurity. Keita's re-election in 2018, which was characterized by low turnout and suspicions of fraud, intensified public outrage, particularly among the country's youth. Nearly half of Malians are impoverished, and many lack access to education and jobs. The economy, which is based on gold mining and agriculture, is sensitive to commodity price fluctuations and rising desertification. Armed organizations have tapped into significant anger of the state as a result of widespread

---

<sup>16</sup> REID, Kathryn. (2020, August 19). Mali conflict explained: Facts, FAQs, and how to help. World Vision. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/3D1xbdC>. (10. 6. 2021).

<sup>17</sup> UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL. (2012). Resolution 2085. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/39QJCwf>. (10. 6. 2021).

<sup>18</sup> See HEISBOURG ref. 13.

<sup>19</sup> See REID, ref. 16.

<sup>20</sup> See BUSSEMAKER, ref. 14.

<sup>21</sup> BERHAMASCHI, Isaline. (2014, August 18). The fall of a donor darling: the role of aid in Mali's crisis. Cambridge University Press. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/3D1xbdC>. (10. 6. 2021).

corruption and security forces' violations of human rights. Approximately 200,000 additional residents were displaced during 2019.<sup>22</sup>

### Setting the Conflict in a Regional Context

If we look at the conflict in Mali on a regional scale, it is not an exceptional phenomenon. The typical internal conflict between southern and northern populations can also be seen in other countries (Chad, Mauritania, Niger).<sup>23</sup> However, it is important to note that despite certain similarities and correlations, each of these conflicts has its own specificities. Some actors in the conflict (mostly among terrorist organizations) also operate in the neighbouring countries. Trans-Saharan smuggling, jihadist fighters and ineffective governments are factors that influence instability throughout the Sahel region.<sup>24</sup>

If one of the states in the region provides a space for terrorist organizations to gain influence, there will be an increase in the operations of these organizations in the neighbouring states, which will ultimately cause the process of destabilization of the region to become cyclical. Thus, the defeat of terrorist organizations in one country may only temporarily move them to another territory. Jihadists operating in Mali have received support in the form of firearms, mainly from Libya, and have subsequently been able to gain greater combat capability and influence through kidnapping, the seizure of Malian army supplies and other activities, which in turn has given them the opportunity to expand their operations further into the region.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the French intervention in Operation Serval, jihadist groups have launched offensives on several fronts, not just in Mali but across the entire Sahel region. French military operations in Mali have thus to some extent provoked jihadist offensives in several other countries in the region, and the conflict has also affected other Western forces operating in the region, such as the United States (US). The result has also been an attempt to create operation (Barkhane) whose area of operations would cover not only Mali, but the vast majority of the Sahel region in which the various enemy organizations operate.<sup>26</sup>

Another element that is evident throughout the region is the massive displacement caused by violence. By 2012, 362,000 people had been displaced in Mali, a third of whom had fled to neighbouring countries, mainly Mauritania, Niger, and Burkina Faso.<sup>27</sup> Similar population displacement affected the region throughout the conflict, with roughly 200,000 people in 2019. Massive population displacement, which could destabilize the entire region, is a major cause of concern for other West African countries.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> See BUSSEMAKER, ref. 14.

<sup>23</sup> See HEISBOURG, ref. 13.

<sup>24</sup> See BUSSEMAKER, ref. 14.

<sup>25</sup> See HEISBOURG, ref. 13.

<sup>26</sup> See SHURKIN, ref. 6, pp. 36-60.

<sup>27</sup> See REID, ref. 16.

<sup>28</sup> See BUSSEMAKER, ref. 14.

## Parties

The primary actors in the conflict are undoubtedly France, or rather the French government, which intervened in its former colony in an attempt to prevent the Islamists from taking over Mali. French activities in the region have faced more local and international support, but some security measures have been put in place, such as increased protection for citizens near the major monuments in Paris. The second actor is the Malian government, which, with the help of France and other allies, is trying to gain and maintain control of the country's territory. The third primary actor, standing in opposition to those already mentioned, is the MNLA. The organization's military leader is Mohamed Ag Najem, a Malian Tuareg who served under Gaddafi as a senior military officer until the regime's fall. The MNLA's goal is the independence of Azawad (the northern part of Mali referred to as the Tuareg homeland).<sup>29</sup>

However, the above-mentioned actors are not the only ones involved in Mali or other states in the region. Other actors are mainly terrorist groups such as AQIM, which is the successor to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which emerged from the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria. Until 2012, it numbered only a few hundred people, but they are very experienced fighters, most of whom have received military training in Afghanistan. Other secondary actors include AAD, which is not fighting for independence but for the introduction of the sharia law throughout the country. It is led by the Tuareg nobleman Iyad Ag Ghali and professes the Wahhabi sect of Islam. The MOJWA, an armed terrorist organization with a Salafist jihadist ideology founded in Mali in 2011, is also active in the conflict.<sup>30</sup>

## Incompatibility

North-South relations have been strained since the end of the colonial period, as with most countries in the region. The northern population has found itself under the rule of the southern population, which has led to uprisings by the Tuareg nomadic communities, the first of which took place in the 1990s, subsequently in 2006-2008 and in 2012. The discontent among the northern population is, among other things, triggered by narratives of massacres, poisoning of wells, and forced displacement in 1963 and other practices directed against the Tuareg communities. In addition to the predominantly political conflict, after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and the surge of Islamist fighters, a religious and ethnic aspect has also been added. The harsh enforcement of the sharia law on the Malian population and the destruction of religious monuments has brought further unrest and greatly contributed to the creation of a conflict environment in the country.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> TRAN, Mark. (2013). Mali: a guide to the conflict. The Guardian. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/3AXTiRv>. (14. 6. 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

## FUNDAMENTAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FRENCH MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN MALI AND THE SAHEL REGION

The French military presence in the African Sahel is first and foremost a consequence of France's historically longstanding interests in this particular region, which are undoubtedly a remnant and logical continuation of the French colonial policy in a region where French colonial rule previously existed.<sup>32,33</sup> With the decolonization of most of France's Empire in West and Central Africa in 1960, France negotiated bilateral defence and military cooperation treaties with its former colonies to maintain a permanent military presence.<sup>34</sup> The key permanent French bases are Dakar (Senegal), Libreville (Gabon), Djibouti (Djibouti), and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire). Smaller permanent bases are in Néma (Mauritania), Gao (Mali), Agadez and Arlit (Niger), and Zouar (Chad).<sup>35</sup>

In the second place, the aforementioned French military presence could be explained as a pragmatic response to the growing security instability of the entire region. Indeed, since 2012, the Sahel states have been seen as prominent producers of internal, regional, and even global security threats, posing a direct threat to internal security in France and Europe in general.<sup>36</sup> This is indeed a wide range of diverse security threats. However, for the purposes of this article, it is worth mentioning, in particular, terrorism, insurgency, ethnic and religious conflict, internal instability and corruption in the various regional states, and irregular migration, which contributed greatly to the phenomenon of the European migration crisis of 2015.<sup>37</sup> With the growing security challenges, France has increased its military aid and support to the countries of what is now called the Sahel G5, created in 2014 for security cooperation between Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad.<sup>38</sup>

Of all the countries in the Sahel region, the situation was the most severe in Mali in early 2012. Tuareg insurgents of the MNLA, aided by AQIM, AAD and MOJWA, expelled the Malian army from the northern parts of the country.<sup>39</sup> The Malian government has been largely ineffective in addressing these secessionist tendencies of the Tuareg, as well as in combating terrorist and insurgent groups, leading to the coup d'état mentioned in the previous chapters. In response to the aforementioned events in Mali, two major military COIN/counterterrorism operations were initiated by the French army: Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane, while only Operation Barkhane is underway at the moment, which is a synthesis of operations Serval and Epervier. These will be discussed in the

---

<sup>32</sup> ERSTAD, Henriete U. and Osland Kari M. (2020). The Fragility Dilemma and Divergent Security Complexes in the Sahel. *The International Spectator* 55(4), 18-36.

<sup>33</sup> CHAFER, Tony. (2020). France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43(4), 482-507.

<sup>34</sup> GRIFFIN, Christopher. (2016). Operation Barkhane and Boko Haram: French Counterterrorism and Heisbourg, Francois. (2012). *A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali*. *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*. 55(2), 7-18.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pp. 7-18.

<sup>36</sup> CHARBONNEAU, Bruno. (2017). Intervention in Mali: building peace between peacekeeping and counterterrorism. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35(4), 415-431.

<sup>37</sup> See ERSTAD, ref. 32, pp. 18-36

<sup>38</sup> See GRIFFIN, ref. 34, pp. 7-18

<sup>39</sup> See CHARBONNEAU, ref. 36, pp. 415-431.

following chapters, where they will be briefly described, as they are undoubtedly significant milestones that have shaped the Malian conflict and regional security dynamics to this day.

The reasons for the French military involvement, as well as the political and military involvement of other already mentioned actors, such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), have persisted virtually unchanged to the present day. The region is still a traditional and vital sphere of interest for France, and the security threats, led by insurgency and terrorism, addressed in the opening paragraph of this chapter, have persisted in defiance of all efforts from 2012 to the present.

### **FRENCH-LED MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE PERIOD BEFORE THE COUP D'ÉTAT**

In 2008, France announced the implementation of its Plan Sahel in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, with the goal of combating terrorism and assisting local development programmes. It committed €58 million to the programme, which has already been expanded to additional Sahel countries in order to improve security coverage. A rapid response force (Operation Sabre) and a permanent military presence in Dakar (Senegal) and Libreville (Gabon) were also part of the Plan Sahel. The Plan Sahel inspired subsequent projects, most notably the EU's Strategy for Security and Development (€600 million for good governance, development, and conflict prevention programmes), launched in 2011. The French and US programmes, on the other hand, have turned out to be nearly entirely security-oriented, obviating the need to address other issues that they had first promised to address.<sup>40</sup>

Despite all of these efforts, Mali only started addressing security and development challenges between 2010 and 2011. The Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development in Northern Mali (PSPSDN) was created with the financial support from the international community to help the north's economic development and prevent further destabilization. The PSPSDN, led by Mohamed Ag Erlaf, Tuareg Ifoghas from Kidal who served as a minister in the 1990s, has been a key source of growing discontent in northern regions. The PSPSDN was created with a €50 million budget to address both security and development challenges. The program's goal was to build health centres, schools, grain banks, and water supplies while also strengthening the army's capabilities.<sup>41</sup>

The programme, however, turned out to be nearly entirely military-oriented and largely administered through a southern diagnosis of the problems, which included southern military formations, excessive centralization, and a lack of local consultation. The PSPSDN has been hotly disputed and challenged, particularly by a Tuareg advocacy group. Local communities were disappointed by a programme that they had hoped would be a historic commitment to northern populations, based on the 1992 Pacte national agreement and the 2006 Algiers peace deal. The construction of Secure Development and Governance Poles without local engagement, as well as the disproportionate expenditures committed to security programmes rather than development, are very troubling. Finally, the

---

<sup>40</sup> THIAM, A. (2015). Mali: ATT lance sa stratégie anti-Aqmi de développement du nord'. Jeune Afrique. Accessed from <https://bit.ly/2Y2ygmf>. (10. 6. 2021).

<sup>41</sup> DAMME, Thibault and Chauzal, Grégory. (2015). The roots of Mali's conflict. CRU report. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/3onb39a>. (10. 6. 2021).

northern populations saw the initiative as a new attempt by Bamako to dominate northern territories and impose an exogenous political system, intensifying northern anger.<sup>42,43</sup>

The 2012 crisis also highlighted the gap between international security efforts and Malian security apparatus capabilities. The effectiveness of international assistance in solving the security crisis or promoting local military ownership has been called into doubt. The speed and simplicity with which rebel forces seized northern cities between January and March 2012 revealed both the deficiencies of previously established security programmes as well as the limitations of accessible intelligence information on terrorist organizations' capabilities and operations.<sup>44,45</sup>

The national government and its international partners have undermined local ownership of security programmes by marginalizing connections and good relations with local communities, which explains why local residents prefer rebel forces. Indeed, Islamist groups have served as a social security provider, filling duties that the Malian government has been unable to complete for the northern people, including medical and food help, education, and fuel.<sup>46</sup>

To conclude those events, we can say that in the run-up to the 2012 crisis, regional political and security involvement in the Sahel played a key role. Foreign governments have a substantial share of the blame for insecurity in the Sahel by fuelling rebellions with political support, economic aid, and military supplies, or by fomenting internal tensions within northern populations. Northern Mali has been particularly exposed to foreign meddling due to its open political and social ecosystem. The Malian state's weakness, as well as the ignorance by which southern authorities viewed northern concerns, invited foreign intervention. Furthermore, Algiers and Tripoli saw Mali as a vital location for their leadership conflicts.<sup>47</sup>

### Operation Serval

As mentioned several times in the text, in January 2012 several armed groups in northern Mali, led by the long-troubled Tuareg, declared independence, and launched an armed offensive against the government. The Tuareg insurgency was subsequently sidelined by more radical groups. These included AAD, AQIM and MOJWA. AQIM, in particular, has long been a "scarecrow on the wall" for France, having been responsible for the kidnapping of French citizens and the 2011 bomb attack on the French embassy in Mauritania.<sup>48</sup> France therefore immediately used UN Security Council Resolution 2085<sup>49</sup> and official requests for military support from the Malian government to crack down on AQIM and its allied Islamist groups in northern Mali. The aim of the mission was to prevent Mali from becoming a failed state in which regional Islamist terrorist groups would have a strong influence and

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> ARONSON, Samuel. (2015). AQIM's Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel. *Combating Terrorism Center* 7(4), 1-28.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. pp. 1-28

<sup>45</sup> See DAMME, ref. 41

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See GRIFFIN, ref. 34, pp. 7-18

<sup>49</sup> See UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, ref. 17

use Mali as a base for expansion into neighbouring states in the region.<sup>50</sup> This was the case with al-Qaeda and Afghanistan.

France deployed a total of one full army brigade of approximately 4,000-4,500 troops to suppress the insurgency and the activities of terrorist groups in northern Mali in January 2013, as part of its military intervention.<sup>51</sup> The ground troop operation was preceded by an air campaign by the French Air Force operating from regional French military bases. Operation Serval was incredibly successful, as it was the classic, conventionally tuned, high-paced manoeuvre warfare that the French military was built for. The French quickly succeeded in retaking the northern part of Mali and driving the jihadist groups out. It was therefore more of a single-issue counter-terrorist military operation than a systematic counter-insurgency operation.

There were several reasons why the French military command approached Operation Serval as a short-term anti-terrorist operation instead of a COIN operation. The French army had only a limited number of soldiers and military equipment available locally in the given timeframe, and the equipment used was not adapted to the climatic conditions of the sub-Saharan battlefield and was, moreover, obsolete, given the budget cuts the French army was witnessing at the time.<sup>52</sup> The operation was also under considerable political pressure from the Élysée Palace.<sup>53</sup> There was some pressure to get the operation under way as soon as possible.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, in addition to the climatic conditions of the battlefield, the army command of Operation Serval also had to contend with, at the very least, highly improvised logistical arrangements for the entire operation, as there was insufficient time to establish a reliable supply line and facilities for military personnel. There was thus a clear absence of future vision, plans and mechanisms to see beyond the operation itself and thereby prevent the problem from re-emerging - that is, the resumption of hostilities in the north.

Although it was not intended so, the operation had far-reaching implications for COIN issues. It clearly demonstrated that the fast-paced manoeuvre warfare driven by the high-risk, high-reward philosophy for which the French Army is trained, combined with a clear-hold strategy, can be highly effective against insurgents than the often highly complex COIN operations.

### **Operation Barkhane**

In early 2014, Islamist groups that managed to survive or recover from the French army's 2013 Operation Serval counterattack began a brutal asymmetric campaign against French, Malian, and U.N. forces stationed in Mali.<sup>55</sup> Thus, by early 2014, France found itself in the Sahel region on several fronts and had a total of three fairly large-scale military operations underway in the region: the Serval in Mali, Epervier in Chad, and Sangaris in

---

<sup>50</sup> See SHURKIN, ref. 6, pp. 36-60.

<sup>51</sup> See GRIFFIN, ref. 34, pp. 7-18

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. pp. 7-18

<sup>53</sup> BOEKE, Sergei and Schuurman, Bart. (2015). Operation 'Serval': A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013-2014. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38(6), 801-825.

<sup>54</sup> WING, Susanna D. (2016). French intervention in Mali: strategic alliances, long-term regional presence? *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27(1), 59-80.

<sup>55</sup> See SHURKIN, ref. 6, pp. 36-60.

the Central African Republic.<sup>56</sup> On 1 August 2014, therefore, the French launched a new Operation Barkhane, which merged the two previous missions Serval and Epervier.

The area of operation that Operation Barkhane has covered since its inception is not just concentrated on Mali, but almost the entire Sahel region from Mauritania to Chad. At the beginning, the Barkhane command had around 3,500 troops at its disposal, but over time this number has grown to over 5,000 military personnel. A regional military base in Gao was established for operations in Mali, which has consistently hosted approximately 1,000 troops since the beginning of the operation. The dramatic increase in the number of personnel involved in the operation can be defined, especially compared to Operation Serval, by the increased complexity of the operation. In the case of Barkhane, it has been a systematic regional effort from the outset, with a long-term view, the aim of which is not simply to drive armed Islamist groups out of the single country again, but:

*“France’s Sahelian strategy aims at helping its partner states acquire the ability to ensure their own security autonomously. It rests on a global approach (politics, security, and development), the military aspect of which is carried by Operation Barkhane, led by the French military.”<sup>57</sup>*

This statement could be interpreted as meaning that France wants to put itself from the beginning in a situation where the security situation in Mali is proportional to the fact that the Malian troops themselves will continue to take care of the security in the country. Local problems will therefore be left to the home state, which will be able to take care of them effectively on its own. Individual security operations would thus be carried out by the Malian Armed Forces, which consist of the Army, the Republic of Mali Air Force, and the National Guard. In terms of internal security, we are also talking about the Gendarmerie and local police forces.

Insurgent and terrorist groups, such as Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM), that often overlap, have used and relied on the maximum use of irregular warfare (guerrilla) tactics since the beginning of the conflict. In other words, they try to avoid direct confrontation with the French army and instead focus on hit and run tactics, ambushes using small arms and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), attacks using vehicle borne IEDs (VBIEDs), subversive operations and terrorist attacks. Two freedoms are key to the success of these groups - freedom of movement and freedom of action. Freedom of movement allows these groups to move safely from their bases to their target destinations. Freedom of action is particularly linked to the civilian population in Mali - this allows them to gain intelligence, recruit new fighters, obtain food and supplies, and in some cases even provide sanctuary for the insurgents.<sup>58</sup>

French COIN efforts during this period could be defined through the actions taken by the French military in the fight against insurgent and terrorist groups.<sup>59</sup> In particular, the main appeal was to prevent the insurgents from accessing villages through the deployment of static forces that operated in populated areas to protect the civilian population.

---

<sup>56</sup> See GRIFFIN, ref. 34, pp. 7-18

<sup>57</sup> See SHURKIN, ref. 6, pp. 36-60.

<sup>58</sup> FOURNIER, Ismaël. (2020). Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Dynamics in Mali. Canadian Military Journal 21(1), 4-13.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. pp. 4-13

Without access to villages, the insurgents were denied the ability to blend in with the local population, lost its support for their cause, were disrupted in their recruitment efforts, and did not receive the intelligence valuable to their operational activities. In order to put the insurgents under even more pressure, the French, through Special Forces units, conducted raids on their operational bases, disrupted their lines of communication through conducting intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR) operations, and conducted day and night raids.

Despite the French efforts, however, armed Islamist groups have managed to effectively exploit the unaddressed local ethnic conflicts in central and northern Mali since 2015, drawing large numbers of new fighters to their side. Their struggle has therefore evolved into overlapping insurgencies on the part of several communities.<sup>60</sup> Jihadist groups such as AQIM have thus exploited the absence of government rule from Bamako. This fact also relates to the very symptoms of insurgency that we are witnessing in the Malian conflict. These are symptoms of communal violence and a lack of government presence. Insecurity at the local level undermines the government's legitimacy, contributes to volatile security dilemmas between several of the country's ethnic groups, and allows jihadists to coerce vulnerable communities and co-opt their grievances to build support.<sup>61</sup> For example, jihadists have exploited the conflict between the Dogon and Fulani ethnic groups, using massacres committed against the Fulani to recruit new fighters from their ranks.

## FRENCH-LED COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE PERIOD AFTER THE COUP D'ÉTAT

The French presence in Mali increased steadily during 2020. After the August coup, in October to be precise, 5,100 troops were present in Mali, supported by 7 fighter aircrafts, 3 Reaper drones and 22 helicopters. Barkhane also receives assistance from a number of European countries, most especially in the form of helicopters, as well as logistic and intelligence support from the US. Operation Takuba, which will include hundreds of special operations soldiers from many European countries, is France's attempt to further internationalize Barkhane and shift some of the COIN burden to the allied states.<sup>62,63</sup>

Given the statements of the French Ministry of the Armed Forces, the current goal of the French forces is to bring the situation to a state where it can leave matters to local forces - it does not aspire to carry out pacification in the Sahel or defeat the jihadists. This does not mean that France has abandoned the global approach, only that the French military has recused itself from most of what that entails. Among these entities are the French Development Agency, the Coalition for the Sahel, and the G5 Sahel, which, with French encouragement, are working to improve governance alongside its security sector reform work. At the Pau Summit in January 2020, one of the themes that the French side

---

<sup>60</sup> BODIAN, Mamadou and Marenging, Miriam and Tobie, Aurélien. (2020). The Challenges of Governance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/2Y7ftWA>. (12. 6. 2021).

<sup>61</sup> HIRSCH, Connor. (2020). Counterinsurgency in Mali: The Case for a Surge. Small Wars Journal. <https://bit.ly/2WqxFKs>. (13. 6. 2021).

<sup>62</sup> BRYANT, Lisa. (2020). Mali's New Leadership Raises Questions About French Counterinsurgency Mission." VOANews. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/3CXakzG>. (13. 6. 2021).

<sup>63</sup> See SHURKIN, ref. 6, pp. 36-60.

underlined was improving governance. France underlined how much it relies on the G5 Sahel to organize and improve the efforts of Sahelian governments. In June, French President Emmanuel Macron emphasized that France was working as a partner, not an invader. At the June conference, the French emphasized that the Sahel Coalition's policy included progress on four pillars: counter-terrorism action, military capacity building, help for the return of State and government authorities across the region, and official development aid.<sup>64,65</sup>

The French emphasize the necessity of establishing and strengthening legitimacy as well as gathering public support, or winning hearts and minds. Even when it comes to cooperating with militias, the French have largely abandoned the political strategy advocated by COIN theorists in the 1950s in favour of a supposedly apolitical, technical approach. At the national level, the French government strives to avoid intervening in Malian politics. Interference by the French is sporadic and incremental. The French did not intervene in the July 2020 coup d'état that deposed President Keita, and there is no evidence that they have interfered in the subsequent political transition, other than encouraging it.<sup>66</sup>

As far as military interventions under the Barkhane banner are concerned, the French army is currently carrying out, primarily, three types of activity. The first and most obvious are combat operations, which often appear to take the form of classic cordon-and-search operations, facilitated by a high degree of mobility. These operations have the immediate objective of neutralizing terrorists and seizing essential military type material, such as weapons and ammunition. They also serve the operational objective of forcing the adversary to remain on the move and to take and maintain the initiative - an imperative of the French doctrine.

Holding the territory, however, is out of the question given the available manpower. Ideally, local security forces would do that for them. Their inability to do so represents a major problem. Their numbers are rather low and they lack the kind of mobility that would help offset their numbers. The second activity is civil-military engagement in the form of digging wells, providing medical services, handing out footballs, etc. Judging at least by the French army's social media accounts and messages on the subject, the French are trying to promote these good deeds to the French and Sahel public. The training of local forces is the third major activity, which includes more frequent accompaniment of Malian troops in the field. Furthermore, Operation Takuba was launched to compensate for the Barkhane mission's shortcomings to date and to attract European partners to deploy special forces to accompany Malian troops. To avoid posing as a big colonial brother, the term for training foreign forces was altered from "operational military support" to "operational military partnership".<sup>67</sup>

In late May, President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctan Ouane were arrested by the Malian army, interrupting the army's further transition to democratic elections following the August coup. The former Vice-President, Colonel Assimi Goita, who led the coup, was declared President. On 3 June 2021, France declared that it was suspending military

---

<sup>64</sup> See BRYANT, ref. 62

<sup>65</sup> See SHURKIN, ref. 6, pp. 36-60

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. pp. 36-60

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

operations with local troops in Mali, in an effort to put pressure on the military junta there to restore the civilian-led rule. The French Ministry of the Armed Forces has announced that French forces will continue to operate independently in the country and that a further assessment of the situation will take place in the near future. President Emmanuel Macron has said that if there is any sign of negotiations with representatives of terrorist groups after the latest junta takeover, the result could be a French withdrawal from the country. France thus refuses to continue to operate in a country where there is no democratic legitimacy.<sup>68</sup>

## TASK FORCE TAKUBA OPERATIONAL IMPACT LEVEL

On 19 January 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that France intended to adjust its operations in the Sahel and Mali through greater internationalization of the wider conflict. This immediately raised concerns among the Sahel G5 governments that the French wanted to gradually withdraw from the Sahel, which would leave local security forces and U.N. forces in a precarious situation as they would have to continue to deal with the escalating security situation on their own. However, Macron assured the regional heads of states at the Sahel G5 summit in Chad that no dramatic withdrawal of French troops would take place. France will, however, seek to move towards a more minimalist operational model that will include an increased emphasis on conducting operations using small detachments of European SF. This will make it possible to maintain the high level of support provided to local security partners, while reducing the burden on the 5,000 or so French troops operating in the region.<sup>69</sup>

In order to understand France's efforts to achieve greater internationalization of the conflict, we must first summarize what Operation Barkhane has or has not achieved in Mali and the wider Sahel region so far. During the 2020s, in the aftermath of the coup d'état, French and Malian forces have achieved a wide range of tactical successes in the fight against insurgents and terrorists. Tactical successes have been achieved before, but political solutions and the high resilience of jihadist groups remain a challenge that is difficult to address in the Malian environment. Coordination with Malian security forces has improved dramatically, leading to several fairly successful offensive operations in the central and northern provinces of the country.<sup>70</sup> Notable examples include a French-Malian joint operation in January 2021, which succeeded in eliminating 100 insurgents, capturing 20 POWs, and seizing large quantities of military material and equipment.<sup>71</sup> However, in defiance of these tactical successes, broader strategic COIN success is certainly not forthcoming. In the Sahel region, there has even been a 44 percent increase in security incidents and a 57 percent increase in deaths between 2020 and 2021 compared to previous years.<sup>72</sup> The deteriorating situation underscores the current shape

---

<sup>68</sup> SALAUN, Tangi. (2021). Pressuring junta, France suspends joint military operations with Malian forces. Reuters. Accessed from: <https://reut.rs/39RBCea>. (13. 6. 2021).

<sup>69</sup> PANGAEA-RISK. (2021). Sahel: France Reshapes Security Engagement with Task Force Takuba. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/3CYI0No>. (14. 6. 2021).

<sup>70</sup> PALASSOE, Florent C. (2021). "Counter-terrorism in the Sahel: Can Task Force Takuba be a Game Changer for France." Global Risk Insights. <https://bit.ly/2ZMYNEU>. (14. 6. 2021).

<sup>71</sup> See PANGAEA-RISK, ref. 69

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

of COIN operations in Mali, where any tactical success is only temporary. Militants from Islamist groups, under the pressure of these intense tactical operations, will simply withdraw from the area where there is an increased activity by the French and coalition forces at any given time and return as soon as the security forces leave the area focusing on controlling rural areas and roads.

Under these conditions, France has taken several steps to shift the frame of the operation from a unilateral to a multilateral effort. One of these steps was the formation of the French-led Task Force Takuba (TF Takuba). This special task force formally falls under the command of the broader geographically oriented Operation Barkhane. It is primarily made up of SF soldiers from France, Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, and the Czech Republic (601<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group from Prostějov), with a contingent of Greek and Italian Special Operations Forces (SOF) expected to join them during 2021 (Ribera 2021). Political or minimal military support to TF Takuba is provided by Belgium, Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway.<sup>73</sup> With its main bases in the cities of Gao and Menaka,<sup>74</sup> located in the same regions of Gao and Menaka in north-eastern Mali, TF Takuba's main mission is to operate in the problematic Liptako-Gourma region, which borders Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This region is particularly problematic due to the fact that it is bordered by the three aforementioned countries. Border areas are generally very favourable for guerrilla operations as they can spread their operations over a larger area, with one of the bordering states serving as a retreat point. Jihadist groups operating in the Liptako-Gourma region are aware of this fact and take full advantage of this geographical phenomenon.

Although TF Takuba has only been in the country for a short period of time, compared to the protracted Operation Barkhane, we can already identify a number of positive impacts that its operations have brought about in the political, security, diplomatic and social spheres.

In the political sphere, the TF, thanks to its internationalist composition, has the opportunity to reduce the colonialist arguments built against the French presence in Mali, while legitimizing the domestic political representation in the eyes of the Malian public.<sup>75</sup> However, the TF is rather time-bound in this area. If it quickly succeeds in building an autonomous SOF element within the Malian army that will actively and above all independently (with possible support from European SF) undertake COIN operations against insurgent and terrorist groups operating in the Liptako-Gourma region, this can certainly lend a degree of legitimacy to the transitional government.

It is clear from the nature of TF Takuba as a military group that most of the positive impacts of its operations to date will be in the security/military domain. Military advisory activities are likely to have the greatest impact on the longer-term autonomy of the Malian military and therefore on the security of the country (Nagl 2005). This thesis is most strongly supported by the fact that for the first time in the long duration of the conflict, COIN efforts of European and Malian SFs are being intertwined in joint operations. However, it cannot be expected that through the intensive military advisory

---

<sup>73</sup> RIBERA, Maria G. (2021). Task Force Takuba: Special Forces in the Sahel. Grey Dynamics. <https://bit.ly/3B1C8Cr>. (14. 6. 2021).

<sup>74</sup> THEDEFENSEPOST. (2020). Elite European Anti-Jihadist Task Force Takuba Takes First Steps in Sahel. Accessed from: <https://bit.ly/2ZBNtLA>. (14. 6. 2021).

<sup>75</sup> See DE CASTANEDO, ref. 75

activities of the European SOFs, which will indeed increase the capabilities of the Malian forces in the short term, the capabilities of the rebel and terrorist groups will not be weakened at the same time (Nagl 2015). On the other hand, the training and involvement of Malian troops in TF Takuba operations can be expected to have a positive effect on the sense of increased security among the Malian population living along Mali's northern and north-eastern borders.<sup>76</sup>

On a diplomatic level, TF Takuba is undoubtedly the result of French pressure on European states to increase their presence in the Sahel region where security, migration and humanitarian issues need to be addressed.

TF Takuba has and will undoubtedly have positive effects in the social sphere as well. The successful implementation of COIN operations will result in an increased sense of security in the eyes of the Malian population.<sup>77</sup> However, when one considers the general socio-economic and security problems that have long plagued Mali, it is difficult to imagine TF Takuba, with its inherently limited capabilities, being able to address and effectively resolve these issues and the social drivers of conflict.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> See NAGL, ref. 4

<sup>78</sup> See DE CASTANEDO, ref. 75

## CONCLUSION

Military advisory activities and the resulting training of Malian soldiers are likely to be a significant contribution to the long-term autonomy of the Malian army, a desirable effect that TF Takuba's presence in this area is greatly assisting. TF Takuba's contribution to the gradual formation of an autonomous segment of the Malian Special Forces is also a very important aspect. They are now routinely operating alongside their European counterparts, thus gaining skills and valuable experience, which they will then be able to apply in their independent COIN tasks. It is important to note that this coherence did not exist before. The military advisory activities carried out by TF Takuba and the deployment of elite European units now provide the Malian Armed Forces with an effective tool to conduct COIN operations against insurgent and terrorist groups operating in the northern and north-eastern provinces of the country. Nevertheless, cooperation is likely to be ongoing for an extended period of time, given the need to increase the recruitment capacity of the Malian military in order to achieve greater independence from the foreign military element in the provision of internal security in the country in the future.

TF Takuba also represents a significant capability enhancement for Operation Barkhane Command to conduct COIN operations of a special nature. In particular, night aeromobile raids using Swedish Black Hawk helicopters. However, TF Takuba's air capabilities to conduct its operations are still a weakness. TF Takuba's contribution in this area to Operation Barkhane is very small. Nor can TF Takuba's operations alone be expected to result in deterring insurgent and terrorist groups from conducting their activities in the border areas in the north and north-east of the country, where they have a strong base and space to manoeuvre. It is therefore safe to say that, to date, TF Takuba's operational activity has not had a major impact on the suppression of insurgent tendencies in Mali.

The various French military missions carried out in the pre- and post-coup period on Malian territory, in addition to fighting insurgent and terrorist groups as part of their COIN aspect, have also helped the Malian armed forces and the Malian government to gradually gain the legitimacy they have so far sorely lacked in the eyes of the local population. TF Takuba's own activities, however short-term, have also had a strong political overlap, particularly in terms of the local population's perception of the long-standing French military presence in Mali. TF Takuba has limited to some extent the colonialist arguments against France by encouraging other European states such as Denmark, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and others to get involved. The diversity of partners that are gradually entering or planning to enter the conflict thus gives the much-needed legitimacy to the Malian transitional government, which in turn increases its legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.

From an international perspective, TF Takuba also embodies to some extent the French desire to develop pressure on the international community and to increase not only the military but also the political engagement of European states in the Sahel region with regard to migration, security, and humanitarian problems, which may have implications for security in Europe itself. The share of responsibility is expanding, and it is likely that states will be increasingly motivated to participate in addressing the obstacles that emerge in the course of the conflict.

In summarizing the various findings, we can conclude, at least as of the time this article was written, that the post-coup nature of the Malian transitional government and Malian army's relationship with the French Operation Barkhane command has become more cooperative than the previous government, which was overthrown in the debated coup d'état of 18 August 2020. Although there has been no significant improvement in the security situation and a reduction in violence in the country after the coup, the government has taken a proactive approach to its own shaping of internal security in Mali. Any positive results of this close cooperation between the Malian transitional government and the French military together with other Western allies can therefore only be expected to emerge in the future after a longer period of time. In retrospect, we can say that although our hypothesis has not yet been fully confirmed, the current situation related to TF Takuba's involvement within Operation Barkhane has laid a strong foundation for increased autonomy of the Malian military, which should be a powerful tool in the future to counter insurgent tendencies and improve the security situation in the country.

**List of abbreviations used:**

AAD	Ansar Dine
AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
COIN	Counterinsurgency
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance
JNIM	Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin'
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MOJWA	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
PSPSDN	Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development in Northern Mali
SF	Special Forces
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TF Takuba	Task Force Takuba
ULRI	Light Reconnaissance and Intervention Unit
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VBIED	Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device