

→ **WILL THE SAHEL BECOME
'AFRICA'S AFGHANISTAN'?**

Prof. Jeremy Keenan
Sahara Focus
21 July 2021

ALACO

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE AND INVESTIGATIONS

Will the Sahel become 'Africa's Afghanistan'?

21st July 2021

Oliver Gorton, Director

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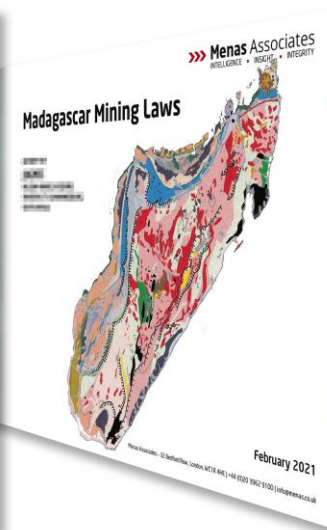
- A study of how family wealth is held and inherited in Saudi Arabia
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- A study of the Gum Arabic market in the Sahel



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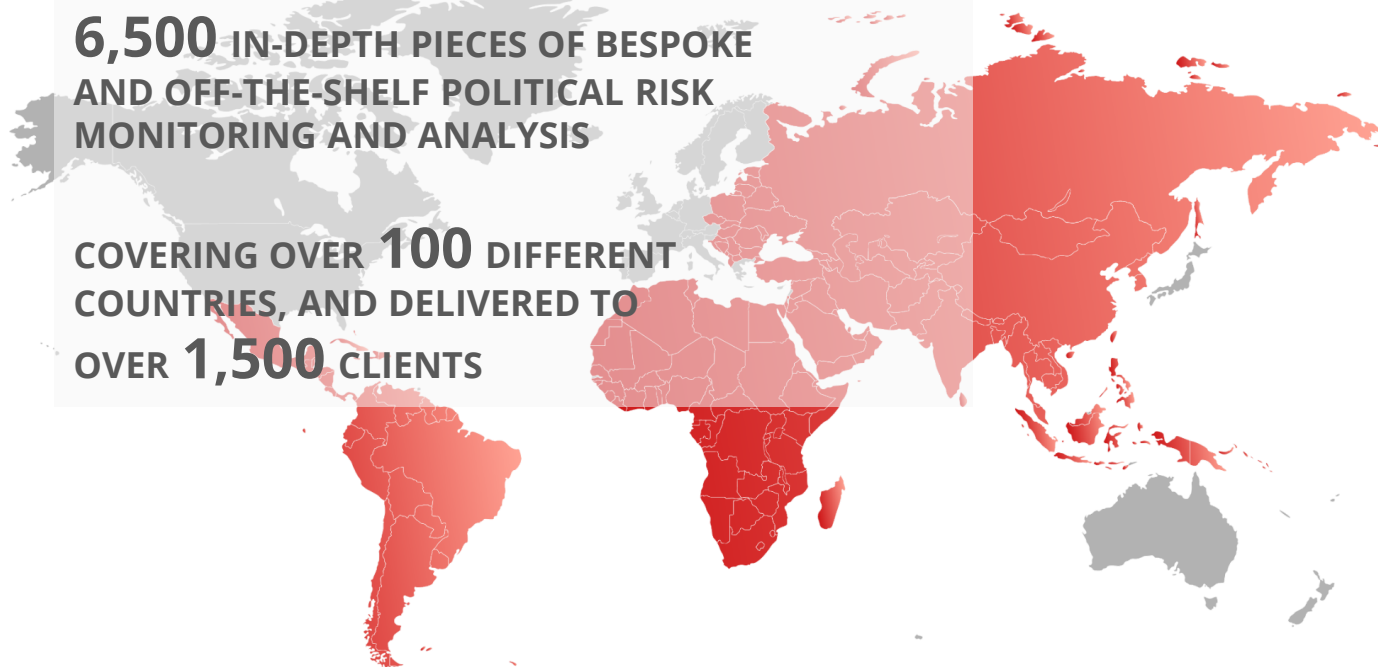




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Politically independent monthly news and analysis of strategic developments in the Sahara region

Sahara Focus - June 2021



COUPS IN CHAD AND MALI WERE THE FINAL STRAW FOR FRANCE'S PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON

The Sahel becomes a global crisis as France throws in the towel

After France endorsed General **Mahamat Déby**'s military coup d'état in Chad – following his father's assassination on 18 April – it has had to deal with Mali's second coup in nine months on 24 May. This has proved too much and – after months of hints, suggestions and inuendo in both government circles and the media about withdrawing from the Sahel – President **Emmanuel Macron** has finally thrown in the towel.

Mali's second coup is the final straw

Mali's 24 May coup – which occurred just as **Sahara Focus - May 2021** was going to press – was the metaphorical final straw. There was no French support for the antics of coup leader

Colonel **Assimi Goïta**, as there had been for Mahamat Déby and his cronies five weeks earlier. Macron immediately threatened to withdraw France's Operation Barkhane troops from joint military operations and on 3 June, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release said that France was suspending its military cooperation with Mali.

The reasons for Goïta's move, its immediate consequences for Mali and the reaction in Mali and elsewhere to France's decision to withdraw all military support from Mali are explained in more depth below (See **Mali**).

The 3 June statement made it clear that Operation Barkhane would act alone on the

ground and immediately cease all aid to the Malian armed and security forces, including within the framework of Operation Takuba, the 'task force' made up of European Special Forces dedicated to providing combat support for Malian units. It made no mention, however, of the imminent withdrawal of France's 5,100 soldiers engaged in fighting jihadists in Mali and the rest of the Sahel. That shock announcement was made a week later on 10 June.

France to end Operation Barkhane

President Macron hosted a small Defence Council meeting at the Elysée Palace on 9 June to discuss France's military operations in Mali and the Sahel and decided on France's partial

withdrawal from the entire Sahel region. No immediate details of the withdrawal were given in the shock 10 June announcement but subsequent statements said that France's 5,100 troops would be halved by 2023, with the remaining 2,500 or so troops being integrated into a broader international mission, notably the EU's participation in the Takuba Task Force. Further details will be finalised by the end of June after consultations with the US, European states and the five Sahel countries: Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

Contrasting reactions in Mali

Le Monde's Bamako correspondent reported that the announcement came as a 'brutal

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Sahel	Mali	Niger	Chad	Mauritania	Burkina Faso
8	8	8	9	10	10
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ The Sahel becomes a global crisis as France throws in the towel➤ Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ A coup within a coup	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ The latest jihadist attacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ More than half of Lake Chad province's civilians are displaced➤ Disputes over the establishment of the ChF➤ Clashes between soldiers and recruits highlight problems of ethnicity		<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ At least 160 killed in worst attack in recent years



SPEAKER

Prof. Jeremy Keenan is a recognised global expert on the Sahara-Sahel where he began his studies in 1964. He :

Has ten books and over 350 publications to his name

Prague University has calculated that historically he has written more on the Sahara than any other academic (including all of the French ones)

Plus, he has also written over 4.9 million words on the region for Menas Associates' regular reports and ad hoc consultancy projects, including the monthly ***Sahara Focus*** and weekly ***Algeria Politics & Security***

Regularly briefs the British and US governments, the EU, UN, NATO, as well as international agencies and numerous media organisations — including the BBC, RFI, France24, VOA, Reuters, etc. — on these issues.

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WHY ARE WE HERE TODAY?

Because the Sahel crisis has suddenly become a major international issue as a result of France's sudden decision to withdraw from the region.

The implications of this decision are immense and, for some, possibly too ghastly to contemplate.

A worst-case scenario is that the Sahel and much of West and Central Africa may become engulfed in a cataclysmic orgy of violence, human displacement, suffering and chaos, in which the major players could be an assortment of jihadists — offering varying degrees of allegiance to Al Qa'ida and/or Islamic State — and Russia.

Today, I will try and analyse this situation a little more dispassionately.



SAHEL





SAHEL





FIRST

- President Emmanuel Macron's 10 June announcement to withdraw from the Sahel is not a total, but a PARTIAL withdrawal.
- Details are still sketchy, but it looks as if it will involve the closure of some bases — such as Kidal, Tessalit and Timbuktu — but hold on to enough to prevent a Russian takeover of the region.
- It also involves a 2,500-3,000 reduction in the number of French troops from the current level of 5,100.
- The timeline for this is currently sometime between now and early 2022.



SECOND

- The withdrawal does not come as a total surprise.
- France has talked about preparing an exit strategy for several years.
- Macron even bad-naturedly threatened it at the January 2020 summit meeting of G5S leaders in the French town of Pau
- It was held after 13 French soldiers had been killed in a helicopter crash on 25 November 2019
- It was intended to ascertain the G5S states' position on France's presence at a time when anti-French feelings in the Sahel were escalating.
- It was postponed from 15 December to 13 January following the death of 71 Niger soldiers at Inates on 10.12.19.
- But there was no further postponement following the death of another 99 soldiers at Chinagodrar on 09.01.20



REASONS FOR MACRON'S SEEMINGLY SUDDEN DECISION

- 19 April 2021: Chad's President Idriss Déby was assassinated by some of his own generals and his son assumed power in a military coup
- 24 May 2021: Mali's second coup in nine months with Col. Assimi Goïta's '*coup within a coup*' because he opposed the lack of military control over the transition
- 3 June: France announced it was suspending its military cooperation with Mali.

- Macron's concern over his declining popularity and the chances of winning re-election in the April 2022 presidential elections:
 - French public is becoming disillusioned with the lack of success in the Sahel
 - So far 55 French soldiers have been killed.
- June's regional elections saw Macron's La République En Marche! party receive a drubbing. It won no regions in mainland France – only Guadeloupe.
- Because it is new it has no local base and therefore only won 11% of the first round votes which naturally set off alarm bells.



OTHER REASONS FOR MACRON'S DECISION

- Increasing anti-French sentiment in the Sahel
- Growing criticism of France's regional strategy
- What has gone wrong with the French strategy and why have:
 - the 5,100 French Barkhane force
 - 14,000 + UN (MINUSMA) peacekeepers
 - 5,000 G5S troops (theoretically)
 - the European military Training Mission (EUTM) (22 EU states + 3 non-members)
 - several small Western military contingents, plus
 - US intelligence and aerial surveillance supportbeen unable to contain, let alone defeat, the jihadist expansion in the region?



3 MAIN REASONS FOR FAILURE OF FRENCH STRATEGY

- France's insistence on a military counter-terrorism strategy
- Its intelligence failures regarding the complex ethnic cleavages
- Algeria's assistance to the jihadists in the Sahel



MILITARY COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGY IS NOT THE ANSWER

- France has refused to veer from its insistence on a military counter-terrorism strategy to defeat jihadism in the region.
- Despite mounting evidence showing that a military counter-terrorism strategy is not the answer, and that the solution lies as much with resolving the long term problems — under-development, poverty and poor governance — as it does with military muscle.



FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND REGION'S COMPLEX ETHNICITY

- The overriding question is why the French forces — with their long colonial and post-colonial experience of the region, and with a vast battery of experts — could not have anticipated the effects of their counter-terrorism strategy on local communities.
- France's branding of certain ethnic groups as 'terrorists' and its subsequent encouragement of their traditional enemies to form auxiliary militias has been a major contributory factor in the escalating inter-ethnic and inter-community conflict and killings. This is especially true in Central Mali and in the Three Borders region between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.



ALGERIAN ASSISTANCE TO TERRORISTS

- President Macron was told by his commanders that they *'could not win the war with one arm tied behind their backs'*

They were referring to:

- Algeria's covert assistance to the main regional terrorist group — Iyad ag Ghali's Ansar al-Din (later JNIM) — and especially by providing them with a sanctuary or rear base in Algeria.
- Jihadist fighters only had to cross the Algerian border to be safe from the pursuing French military patrols.



ADDITIONAL REASONS FOR FAILURE

- Endemic corruption, bad governance, and political instability
- The weakness of Mali's and Niger's armies — e.g. extrajudicial killing of civilians (c. 600 in early 2020) — feeds jihadist recruiting
- Weaknesses of the G5S forces which are targeted for weapons, vehicles, and equipment



IMPLICATIONS OF FRENCH WITHDRAWAL

- It will leave MINUSMA badly exposed: e.g. when the UN Aguelhok camp was attacked in April the intervention of French planes turned the battle
- The mere presence of Barkhane forces is a deterrent - unlike the G5S which are an attractive target for the jihadists
- UN General in Timbuktu: *'Departure of the French will leave a void. Barkhane carries out zone control. It is a mobile force which hinders the movements of the jihadists. The G5 will not be at the same level, Takuba is carrying out targeted and one-off operations, so the French withdrawal will leave the field open to the jihadists. They will spread over a bigger area, and where they attack once a month, they will be able to attack three times [...] the populations will be more subjected to their law.'*



WHO WILL FILL THE VOID?

France proposes '*internationalising the war*'. **But Who?**

Europeans (Takuba Force)

- Europeans are unenthusiastic: Sahel is France's back-yard and responsibility
- Takuba – disjointed because of its on-off operations
- Greater committal to training rather than combat

US – ditto. (Biden Administration policy is still being formulated)

- Around 800 troops in the region (e.g. at AB201 and Dirkou CIA)
- Contribution of intelligence, training and aerial surveillance but not combat?
- France's Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly met her US counterpart, Lloyd Austin, in Washington DC on 9 July. They signed a new special force cooperation roadmap. Could result in more US involvement in operational combat against armed groups alongside the Europe's Takuba force.



AB201 DRONE BASE – NORTHERN NIGER





MQ-9 REAPER DRONE'S RANGE - 1,850 KMS





WHO WILL FILL THE VOID? (*continued*)

G5S

- Nigerien, Malian and Burkina Faso armies simply not up to it
- Mauritania is not involved because it has a similar agreement with the jihadists that Algeria has
- Chad's experienced and battle-hardened battalion in Three Borders region could be withdrawn because of domestic threats from the Central African Republic (CAR) and Libya.



POSSIBILITY OF ALGERIAN DEPLOYMENT OF ARMY INTO SAHEL

- Huge French and US pressure on Algeria — amend its Constitution + new National Assembly — to deploy its forces to Mali
- The regime is divided and under severe pressure.
- The powerful generals are also divided with many seeing the deployment as a 'lose-lose' situation
- Hugely unpopular amongst the population: fighting for France against Muslims, etc
- Questions over army morale and its effectiveness
- President Tebboune's latest statements appear to favour diplomacy
- The return of the experienced Ramtane Lamamra as Foreign Minister
- Reports of the French preparing a base at Hombori for the Algerians
- Arrangements with Morocco to cross Western Sahara and Mauritania





ALGERIA FACES A CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN MALI

This is because of its longstanding relationship with the jihadist groups and takes us back to the very origins of the Sahel war:

Dual strategy:

- It wanted to relocate 'terrorism' from northern Algeria to Mali - evidence from around 2006 and then when AQIM was moved into northern Mali around 2008.
- 2012 Islamist incursion into Mali.



WHAT HAPPENED

- Libya 2011 revolution and fall of Muammar Qadhafi's regime
- Return of heavily armed Tuareg fighters from Libya to Niger and Mali
- Creation of the MNLA which demanded independence of Azawad.
- This Irredentism posed a threat to southern Algeria from Tuareg unrest
- DRS strategy: create more 'terrorist' groups (Islamic extremists) to first ally with MNLA, and then subsume it politically and militarily (i.e. successfully discredit MNLA internationally)
- It created MUJAO and Ansar al Din in late 2012 + AQIM (i.e. 3 Islamist groups). + MBMs Al-Mulathameen (which then merged with MUJAO to become Al-Mourabitoune)
- All the leaders were strongly linked to the DRS: Abdelhamid Abou Zaid, Yahya Djouadi, Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, Ahmed Al-Tilemsi, Sultan Ould Badi, MBM, and Iyad ag Ghali who is *'Algeria's man in Mali'*
- 2012 incursion into Mali was supported with logistics and weapons by General Abdelkader Aït-Ouarabi (a.k.a. General Hassan) who was imprisoned re the In Amenas attack in 2013
- Algeria is largely responsible for moving and supporting these jihadists groups and moving them into Mali. It faces awkward conflicts of interest but, without Algerian forces, the replacement force will be very thin.



POSSIBLE / LIKELY SCENARIOS

- Other foreign interests will take advantage of chaos: Morocco, Turkey, Russia & China, UAE interests etc.)
- Jihadists' expansion into West Africa and an intensification of their activity
- Possible link up between EIGS and ISWAP (IS allegiance vs. Al Qa'ida)
- Continued political instability in Mali and possibly also in Chad and wider Lake Chad Basin
- Continued security degradation in Nigeria: spreading southwards base in the Northeast
- New Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali — linked with Iyad and JNIM — would be a threat to Algeria (viz. 2012) and could lead to military intervention (will it annex Kidal region?)
- Disintegration of the Malian state
- Increased Russian presence - threat to Chad from the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group activities in CAR and Libya
- Libya chaos merges with that of Chad – plus expansion into West and Central Africa.
- Premonition of this is the opening of the International Counterterrorism Academy (AILCT), in Abidjan which is funded by France and the EU
- This is a nightmare for Europe



EUROPEAN CONCERNS OVER INCREASED MIGRATION

Push-Pull factors – all these scenarios increase the Push factor.

Problems on North Africa coast (e.g. Algeria coastal security sympathetic to harragas)

How to reduce the Push pressures:

Need for massive development and job creation throughout Sahel and sub-Saharan (West) Africa

Money not an issue but can't have development without security

Security cannot be provided by the 'conventional' means (i.e. by France's proposed internationalisation of Sahel war)

Only solution is to negotiate with jihadists – the key man is Iyad ag Ghali (tentative moves already made through back channels)

This is where Algeria could be useful



Q&A



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