

OPERATION

Barkhane

the risks of an enemy-centric approach

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Abstract

In August 2014, France authorised Operation Barkhane, aimed to ‘fight the cross-border terrorist threat’ in the Sahel, alongside the Sahelian armies. Six years later, instability has spread throughout the Sahel, while Operation Barkhane has increased its troops from 3,000 up to 5,100. This raises the question of what kind of counterinsurgency strategy Barkhane pursues in the Sahel. By using the analytical framework of ‘counterinsurgency’, this thesis analyses Operation Barkhane’s counterinsurgency and concludes that it is enemy-centric in nature. The thesis shows the complications of Operation Barkhane’s enemy-centric counterinsurgency strategy by using Barkhane’s operations in Burkina Faso as a case study. The case of Burkina Faso highlights the problematic preoccupation with the military aspect which decontextualises the ‘enemy’, focuses on the symptoms of the Sahelian crisis instead of on the root causes, and renders a cooperation with the Sahelian governments unproblematic.

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1. Introduction

Throughout 2012, a northern Tuareg and Islamist offensive unfolded in Mali and made its way southward. Arguing that the insurgents would soon overtake the capital, Bamako, if nothing would be done, the Malian (transitional) government decided to request a military intervention from its former coloniser, France. Then-President François Hollande immediately responded to this request, leading to the birth of French Operation Serval, which started on 11 January 2013, and ended on 31 July 2014 (Chafer, Cumming, & Van der Velde, 2020; Wing, 2016). Hollande stated that the ‘terrorist threat’ jeopardised the very existence of this friendly nation and African partner (Charbonneau & Sears, 2014; Le Monde, 2013). Around 4,500 French troops were sent to Mali (Jesse, 2019). The directions given to the French army were to “stop the offensive toward Bamako and thus preserve the existence of the Malian state; to destroy¹ and disorganise the terrorist network; to help in re-establishing the territorial integrity and unity of Mali; and to seek hostages, notably ours” (Assemblée nationale, 2013, cited in Charbonneau & Sears, 2014, p. 200). On 14 July 2014, Hollande declared that Operation Serval had “perfectly accomplished its mission”, and that “thanks to Operation Serval, there is no longer a terrorist sanctuary for terrorist groups in Mali” (Hollande in Le Monde, 2014). Serval was widely applauded, not only within France but also by the international community and among the Malians themselves (Charbonneau & Sears, 2014, p. 9). Accompanying this celebration came the announcement of a new operation called ‘Barkhane’. France believed it to be necessary to employ another operation in the ‘fight against terrorist groups’:

The goal is to prevent what I call the all-traffic highway from becoming a permanent crossing point, for re-establishing jihadist groups between Libya and the Atlantic Ocean, which would then lead to serious consequences for our security. Our security is at stake. (French Defence Minister Yves-Jean Le Drian in Le Monde, 2014)

In other words, France asserted the necessity of another operation to assist their Sahelian partner countries in this threat that, according to France, does not only constitute a threat to Mali and the Sahel² region, but also to France and Europe (Powell, 2017). On 1 August 2014, France launched Operation Barkhane, a French-led, trans-Sahelian, long-term counterterrorism operation (Wing, 2016). Hollande announced that the operation would constitute 3,000 French soldiers, as well as drones, helicopters, and fighter planes, and would be conducted in partnership with the G5 Sahel (Le Monde, 2014). The ‘G5 Sahel’, which refers to the

¹ In military language this means to neutralise 60 per cent of the enemy forces (Charbonneau & Sears, 2014).

² Officially, the Sahel is a “semiarid region of western and north-central Africa extending from Senegal eastward to Sudan” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). However, the French and international efforts against instability and terrorism in the Sahel are in fact focused on the western Sahel, specifically on Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (besides Chad and Mauritania).

institutional framework created for regional cooperation on 16 February 2014. The G5 Sahel includes five countries: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad. Barkhane currently operates in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad³ (Barkhane Press Pack, February 2020). The number of French soldiers deployed as part of Operation Barkhane has increased over the years, resulting in 5,100 troops stationed in the Sahel since February 2020 (France Diplomacy, February 2020).

News articles regularly appear stating that Operation Barkhane, sometimes in joint operations with Sahelian armed forces, has ‘neutralised x amount of terrorists’. The latest killing that was celebrated as a big success for Operation Barkhane is the killing of Abdelmalek Droukdel, leader of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) on 3 June 2020 (Gardner, 2020). Yet, despite Barkhane’s aim to ‘fight terrorism’ and prevent the ‘terrorists’ from re-establishing safe havens in the Sahel (Barkhane Press Pack, 2020), extremist violence has increased in an unprecedented manner; the number of fatalities caused by violent extremist attacks has seen a fivefold increase between 2016-2019 (UN News, January 2020). Moreover, while once contained in northern Mali, this violence has rapidly spread not only to central Mali, but also to Niger and Burkina Faso (Demuyne & Coleman, 2020).

This contrast between Barkhane’s aims and the increase and spread of violent extremism in the Sahel raises questions concerning France’s exact counterinsurgency strategy underlying its ‘fight against terrorism’, and the risks that this strategy brings about. The fact that Operation Barkhane is a counterterrorism operation heightens the importance of asking these questions, considering the existing criticism on counterterrorism operations in the academic literature. For example, the concept of counterterrorism not only risks oversimplifying a complex reality – identifying groups as ‘the terrorists’ indicates a clearly-defined and delegitimised enemy –, it also enables the actor fighting ‘the terrorists’ to decide who is and who is not a legitimate political actor (Charbonneau & Sears, 2014; Gilmore, 2011; Wing, 2016).

While Operation Barkhane has been critically discussed in the academic literature, this thesis aims to enrich this existent body of literature in two novel ways; firstly, it systematically analyses Operation Barkhane’s strategy and actions through the analytical framework of counterinsurgency. To do so, it uses the concepts of ‘population-centric counterinsurgency’ and ‘enemy-centric counterinsurgency’ and their components. Secondly, after concluding that France, through Operation Barkhane, conducts an enemy-centric counterinsurgency, the thesis

³ See appendix for an overview of Operation Barkhane in the four Sahelian countries.

critically assesses Barkhane's underlying assumptions by using Burkina Faso as a case study. Despite being part of Barkhane's military efforts in the Sahel, Burkina Faso is significantly understudied in the literature on Barkhane, which instead usually focuses on the Sahel region or Mali. Several aspects may explain why Burkina Faso is understudied in relation to Barkhane. Operation Barkhane has intervened much less in Burkina Faso as compared to Mali, and its efforts have concentrated on the north of the country⁴, which is part of Liptako-Gourma region⁵. Moreover, only in December 2018, an intergovernmental defence agreement was signed between Barkhane and the Burkinabé armed forces (Relations bilatérales, 2020). Burkina Faso has been reluctant towards French intervention due to its political and historical sensitivity⁶.

Nevertheless, Burkina Faso is a particularly interesting case to study in relation to Operation Barkhane, not least because France operates in its territory without a UN peacekeeping mission like MINUSMA⁷ being present. This makes one wonder what France's strategy and aim actually are when intervening on Burkinabé territory. This is especially important to investigate as, by intervening, Barkhane becomes part of the conflict dynamics in Burkina Faso. While in 2016, a report by International Crisis Group still called Burkina Faso an example of peaceful coexistence, today, the security situation has deteriorated to such an extent that in 2019, the UN stated that "Burkina Faso has become one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in Africa" (United Nations, 2019, para. 7). Although the Barkhane Press Pack (February 2020) indicates a regional, Sahel-focused strategy, Burkina Faso should not be understood merely as an extension of the conflict in Mali. Indeed, the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region shares characteristics that make the area susceptible to instability and insecurity, and the spill-over effects from Libya and Mali should not be underestimated. Yet, the reason why conflict dynamics "have become entrenched [in Burkina Faso] are related to structural issues in Burkina's internal geopolitics, political economy, and state formation" (Idrissa, 2019, p. 4). Consequently, contrasting the case study of Burkina Faso with the (regional)

⁴ Within Burkina Faso, France has stationed its special forces in the capital Ouagadougou and it has mainly conducted operations within the north, a Burkinabé region⁴ particularly plagued by extremist and intercommunal violence⁴ (ACLEDE, 2020; ECFR, n.d.; Sarfati, 2020, p. 3).

⁵ This region spans the tri-border region between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The Liptako-Gourma region is key in Barkhane's 'fight against terrorism', due to the porosity of borders and therefore the "cross-border dimension of the terrorist threat" (Barkhane press pack, February 2020, p. 3).

⁶ See for example Le Monde, 2019, "Au Sahel, la France veut éviter la contagion djihadiste en protégeant le verrou burkinabé » https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/10/03/au-sahel-la-france-veut-eviter-la-contagion-djihadiste-en-protecteant-le-verrou-burkinabe_6014077_3212.html

⁷ "Set up by UN Security Council Resolution 2100 on 25 April 2013, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is a leading force in the resolution of the conflict in Northern Mali" (Barkhane Press Pack, February 2020, p. 5).

counterinsurgency strategy of Operation Barkhane, will greatly advance a critical assessment of Barkhane's strategy on the ground. Furthermore, the fact that through its interference, Operation Barkhane becomes part of the Burkinabé conflict dynamics, shows that this thesis is not only relevant on an academic, but also societal level. This thesis' assessment contributes not only to the debate on the effectiveness and legitimacy of Operation Barkhane itself, but also of western or foreign military interventions⁸ in general.

Consequently, this thesis will ask the following research question: *Which assumptions underlie Barkhane's counterinsurgency strategy, and how does this strategy play out in the context of Burkina Faso in the period 2017-2020?* The thesis answers this question through the following subquestions: What are the different forms of counterinsurgency and their implicit assumptions? What kind of counterinsurgency does Operation Barkhane employ? Which conflict dynamics have contributed to the deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso? And lastly, how does Barkhane's strategy play out on the ground in Burkina Faso?

The structure of the thesis is as follows; following the introduction, the thesis discusses the theoretical framework of counterinsurgency (COIN). It distinguishes between 'enemy-centric' and 'population-centric' counterinsurgency and subsequently elaborates on the concept of 'counterterrorism' in relation to counterinsurgency. The third chapter constitutes a literature review on Operation Barkhane. The fourth chapter first provides an overview and analysis of Operation Barkhane, which it then uses to argue that Operation Barkhane constitutes an enemy-centric counterinsurgency strategy. The fifth chapter provides contextual information on Burkina Faso's conflict dynamics with the help of Edward Azar's (1990) theoretical framework of a 'Protracted Social Conflict'. This contextual information helps to advance the sixth chapter, which critically assesses Barkhane's enemy-centric counterinsurgency strategy in the case of Burkina Faso. The seventh chapter constitutes the conclusion. The thesis concludes by looking at the wider implications for Operation Barkhane and similar operations based on the thesis' assessment.

Methodologically, this thesis conducts a literature review, including journal articles, newspaper articles, and French government statements and documents. For the theoretical chapter on counterinsurgency, I use different academic sources to discuss the concepts of 'counterinsurgency', 'population-centric counterinsurgency' and 'enemy-centric counterinsurgency'. In addition, I discuss counterterrorism and the War on Terror, as Operation

⁸ This includes terms like 'counterinsurgency', 'military interventions', and 'counterterrorism operations'. The thesis will go into the overlap and differences between these words in later chapters.

Barkhane is a counterterrorist operation framed within the ‘War on Terror’ (Wing, 2016). The thesis uses different scholarly sources in order to present a comprehensive overview of the literature on the often conflated and not clearly delineated concept of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. To analyse Operation Barkhane’s counterinsurgency strategy, the thesis uses mainly the ‘Operation Barkhane Press Pack, February 2020’ and French government statements and documents, such as a press releases⁹ and transcripts of speeches¹⁰. Besides, it uses news articles that report important statements by for example former President François Hollande, Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly, or former Minister of Defence Jean-Yves le Drian. In determining what kind of counterinsurgency Barkhane conducts, this thesis mainly looks at its discourse¹¹, as well as at Operation Barkhane’s aim and strategy. The former refers to what Barkhane aims to achieve, including what its end goal is, while the latter refers to the actions Barkhane undertakes to achieve these aims. Although this thesis is limited by the lack of clarity and transparency of this exact strategy, Guichaoua’s (2020) paper is of great help in providing a unique insight into this strategy. Guichaoua (2020) has conducted many interviews with key actors in the Sahelian crisis, including French state and military actors since 2012.

Regarding the chapter on Burkina Faso’s drivers of conflict, it is important to recognise that the conflict dynamics in Burkina Faso are extremely complex and intertwined, and that it is not possible to analyse these conflict dynamics in great depth in this thesis. Yet, in order to aid the analysis and structure of this chapter, Edward Azar’s (1990) Protracted Social Conflict theory is used. Furthermore, the chapter’s analysis is greatly aided by Idrissa’s (2019) research paper *Tinder to the Fire: Burkina Faso in the Conflict Zone*, one of the few scholarly resources that adequately analyse the different conflict dynamics at play in Burkina Faso. Moreover, this chapter uses interview data¹² acquired during an internship at the Clingendael Institute to help explain the drivers of conflict in Burkina Faso. In addition, this chapter uses journal and newspaper articles, as well as reports (e.g. UNOWAS, International Crisis Group) to analyse Burkina’s conflict dynamics.

⁹ For example, press releases and transcripts from the January 2020 Pau Summit and the June 2020 Nouakchott Summit, or the Joint Franco-Burkinabé Press Communication on the intergovernmental defence agreement (December 2018).

¹⁰ For example, speeches by Macron addressed to the Barkhane forces in Niamey, Niger and Gao, Mali.

¹¹ E.g. how does Barkhane understand the situation at hand? How does France justify its intervention? Where lies the centre of gravity (i.e. with the population or enemy)? How does it describe its enemy?

¹² This consists of 69 interviews with farmers and pastoralists in Burkina Faso in the provinces Boucle du Mouhoun, Est and Sahel.

The ontological property that is being studied is actions, agency and actors. The thesis studies Operation Barkhane's counterinsurgency, which involves strategy, discourse and actions, all produced by actors. Epistemologically, this thesis adopts a (social) constructivist stance. It does not approach the world in a mechanical way, but it aims to *understand* (France's/Barkhane's) actions, policies, strategy and therefore also conflict in itself as being influenced by actors' perceptions of the other and of the world they live in. In this regard, it is also important to acknowledge my own subjectivity. My own understanding of the Sahelian conflict and power dynamics are partly shaped by my own previous experiences. The conflict dynamics discussed in this thesis are based on an extensive literature review, yet I have never been to these Sahelian countries myself. Furthermore, the thesis builds solely on the work of others, who themselves are restricted by their own subjective worldview.

2. Counterinsurgency as a Theoretical Framework

As this thesis uses ‘counterinsurgency’ as its analytical framework to analyse and assess Operation Barkhane, this chapter will explain the concept of counterinsurgency, specifically ‘population-centric’ and ‘enemy-centric’ counterinsurgency. However, it is important to note that Operation Barkhane does not describe itself as a counterinsurgency, but as a counterterrorism operation. Therefore, the second part of this theoretical chapter will elaborate on the relation between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, and show why Barkhane can nevertheless be understood as a counterinsurgency.

A. Population-centric and enemy-centric counterinsurgency

The concept of ‘counterinsurgency’ (COIN) has a long history, as the first counterinsurgency writings can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th century¹³ (Paul et al., 2016). Over the years, theorists have developed different ideas on the best way to conduct counterinsurgency. A key distinction made within the literature is the distinction between ‘enemy-centric’ and ‘population-centric’ counterinsurgency. Given that these different terms are often conflated or insufficiently defined, it is of particular importance to explain and define these concepts in this chapter. This will subsequently advance the analysis and assessment of Operation Barkhane’s counterinsurgency.

The difference between enemy-centric and population-centric COIN is essentially reflected in the terms themselves. For the enemy-centric approach, the centre of gravity is the enemy, whereas for the population-centric approach, this is the populace (Miron, 2019). The enemy-centric approach sees counterinsurgency as a variant of conventional warfare. Counterinsurgency is viewed as a contest with an organised enemy, and its primary task is to defeat the enemy physically and militarily (Kilcullen, 2007; Sierra & Garcia, 2019). One strand of enemy-centric COIN adheres to the so-called draining-the-sea approach, which holds that “brutality against civilian populations can be successfully pursued in counterinsurgency warfare and protracted wars of attrition to weaken the enemy quickly and end the conflict as soon as possible” (Paul et al., 2016). The way in which the Sri Lankan government wiped out the Tamil Tigers is an example of such a hard-line approach. Although some erroneously conflate the enemy-centric approach with the use of excessive and indiscriminate violence, enemy-centric COIN consists of many variants. This includes “soft line” and “hard line” approaches, kinetic and non-kinetic methods of defeating the enemy, decapitation versus

¹³ When scholars and military officers started to analyse conflicts between colonial powers and insurgents, such as the Boer Wars by the British and the Filipino Insurrection by the Americans.

marginalisation strategies, and so forth (Kilcullen, 2007). Miron (2019) mentions annihilation, exhaustion, decapitation, deterrence by denial (in case of territory) as examples of enemy-centric strategies. For example, the counterinsurgent may attempt to influence the decision-making calculus of insurgent leaders through systematically attacking insurgents' strongholds. The idea here is that this enables an army to "erode insurgent combat power, overturn the narrative that the insurgency is winning, and ultimately compel the insurgent to compromise" (Paul et al. 2016, p. 1023). Here, military force becomes instrumental. Although some of the soft line enemy-centric approaches may overlap partly with population-centric approaches, the underlying philosophy differs. Enemy-centric COIN philosophy can be summarised as "first defeat the enemy, and all else will follow" (Kilcullen, 2007).

As mentioned, population-centric COIN relocates the centre of gravity from the enemy to the population (Miron, 2019). Galula (1919-1967) is deemed the first COIN thinker to acknowledge and emphasise the importance of protecting the population. Galula views protecting the population as more important than killing the enemy, which leads him to theorise that "military action is secondary to the political one, its primary purpose being to afford the political power enough freedom to work safely with the population" (Galula, 2006¹⁴, p. 63). The population-centric view sees the population as 'the sea' in which the insurgents 'swim'. If the population and its environment are sufficiently controlled, the insurgents will be deprived of the support they depend on for their success and existence, and will subsequently decline, be exposed, etc., thereby bringing the insurgency to an end (Paul et al, 2016). To achieve this aim, population-centric COIN focuses on "winning the hearts and minds" of the local population. "Hearts" refers to convincing the population that the counterinsurgency efforts are in their best interest. "Minds" refers to assuring the population that the counterinsurgents are able to protect them, thereby inducing them to support instead of resist the counterinsurgents (Ozdemir, 2019). To successfully win the hearts and minds, the counterinsurgent must be able to see issues and actions from the local population's perspective (Aylwin-Foster, 2005).

Population-centric COIN is sometimes misunderstood as prohibiting any use of force. In reality, the approach does use force, but contrary to the enemy-centric variant, force is used with *great restraint* and discrimination, only allowed in order to win the support of the population (Miron, 2019). Population-centric COIN is well-aware of how easily use of force may undermine the support for the counterinsurgent. Contrary to the underlying logic of enemy-centric COIN, population-centric COIN reflects the idea of "first control the population,

¹⁴ Galula's book was reissued in 2006.

and all else will follow” (Kilcullen, 2007, para. 3). Population-centric COIN therefore generally represents a comprehensive and multifaceted approach that takes into account the context and causes of an insurgency, due to its “implicit focus on the popular support base and the underlying grievances that gave rise to the insurgency” (Miron, 2019, p. 469). The 2009 U.K. army manual’s counterinsurgency definition exemplifies a population-centric approach: “Those military, law enforcement, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken to defeat insurgency, while addressing the root causes” (British Army, 2009, p. 6). Population-centric COIN thus emphasises the political aspect of the struggle, and requires a wide range of activities. As it relies on “winning the hearts and minds” of local people, it supports a host-state structure or government that is considered legitimate. According to Bell (2011, p. 318, in Ozdemir, 2019, p. 194), “in doing so, counterinsurgency posits itself as a more inclusive, culturally sensitive and humane way of war, while it simultaneously constitutes the population as its battlespace.” It is at this point that support for projects of economic, political, social and cultural transformation is a priority, independent from COIN, and in parallel to the last actions with which to reduce, almost completely, the insurgency (Sierra & Garcia 2019).

While enemy-centric COIN can be caricatured as unconstrained violence that severely alienates the population and population-centric COIN as costly and lengthy nation building that prohibits troops from using their weapons, the two are not mutually exclusive (Paul et al., 2016). They both involve the use of force, though to different degrees and for different purposes. Because of these aspects, some authors criticise the enemy-centric versus population-centric dichotomy, and instead argue for a balanced or mixed approach, or posit that each insurgency needs its own tailored counterinsurgency approach¹⁵. Furthermore, some scholars propose an improved counterinsurgency framework, such as Paul et al. (2016) in their journal article *Moving Beyond Population-Centric vs. Enemy-Centric Counterinsurgency*. Their historical analysis of 71 counterinsurgencies between 1944-2010 showed that the traditional population-centric versus enemy-centric dichotomy does not accurately reflect reality, as COIN campaigns often constitute population-centric as well as enemy-centric elements.

Despite these critiques, this thesis uses the concepts of population-centric versus enemy-centric COIN as the *philosophies* that underlie these approaches are radically different: either the primary focus is on the military defeat of the enemy (“and all else will follow”), or it is on “winning the hearts and minds of the population”, in which military action is secondary to political action, and used to obtain this overarching goal. Moreover, these different

¹⁵ See for example Griffith (2013) or Springer (2011).

philosophies do not only reveal the counterinsurgent’s certain understanding of the insurgency, but also influence which actions the counterinsurgent undertakes and prioritises.

Enemy-centric	Contemporary population-centric
Counterinsurgency is a contest with an insurgent enemy.	Counterinsurgency is viewed as a contest for legitimacy and control.
The main focus is on the insurgent forces and organization.	The main focus is on winning over the population support.
The primary objective is the defeat of the insurgent forces and destruction of its organization.	The primary objective is recovering government’s legitimacy through separation of the population from the insurgent.
Other objectives (context-dependent) include undermining the insurgents’ physical and moral capability and will to fight.	Minimum force is used against insurgents to protect the population.
Once the insurgent forces and organization are destroyed everything will fall into place.	Protected population will throw its support behind the [HN] government and therefore restore the latter’s legitimacy.

An overview of the two counterinsurgency approaches by Miron (2019)

B. Counterterrorism

Interestingly, Operation Barkhane does not refer to itself as a counterinsurgency, but as a counterterrorism operation (Barkhane Press Pack, February 2020; Karlsrud, 2019, p. 12). This can be understood within the wider global trends in international interventions. Karlsrud (2019) observes a shift in the guiding principles of these interventions. While liberal peacebuilding has been a guiding concept for many international interventions, particularly the ones deployed by the UN, Karlsrud (2019) notices that this concept is waning in importance. Western states are shifting their strategy from liberal peacebuilding to stabilisation and counterterrorism, a shift which can be partially explained by the lengthy involvements (counterinsurgencies) in Afghanistan and the impact of the financial crisis.

Despite Barkhane’s focus on counterterrorism, the operation can still be classified as a counterinsurgency. The definition of ‘counterinsurgency’ is often disputed and definitions in the counterinsurgency literature tend to reflect either a more population-centric or a more enemy-centric approach (Paul et al., 2016, p. 1020-1021). This is why Paul et al. (2016) do not attach much importance to the precise wording of such a definition. “For us, counterinsurgency is whatever one does when facing an insurgency. In our view, the term counterinsurgency does not and should not presuppose and approach to or theory of counterinsurgency, simply that there is an insurgency and there is someone wo wishes to fight it” (p. 1021). In order to avoid a definition that implies a certain COIN theory/strategy, this thesis adopts the same approach.

It then remains important to define insurgency, and link this to the Sahelian situation. Moore (2007, p. 3) defines *insurgency* as “a protracted violent conflict in which one or more groups seek to overthrow or fundamentally change the political or social order in a state or region through the use of sustained violence, subversion, social disruption, and political action”. The following excerpt indeed shows that the Islamist militant groups fighting in the Sahel as a whole can be classified as an insurgency, as they clearly seek to fundamentally change the political or social status quo:

JNIM¹⁶, ISGS¹⁷, and Ansar al Islam all work together today in the Sahel region. Their shared ideology – Salafi-jihadism – defines a set of common objectives that includes instituting shari’a-based governance, according to their interpretation, through weakening the state and removing Western influence” (Zimmerman, 2020, p. 4).

The classification of Barkhane as a counterinsurgency is confirmed by Charbonneau (2019), who states that “today’s military interventions are best understood as a form of counter-insurgency politics”. Furthermore, he deems Mali and the Sahel “a rich and evolving case for theorising these counter-insurgency politics” (p. 309). Although he does not specifically use the terms enemy-centric or population-centric counter-insurgency, the way he describes today’s military interventions (counterinsurgencies) and the case of Mali and the Sahel, do suggest that he understands these to be enemy-centric. This is reflected in his description today’s counterinsurgency politics (p. 310):

“counter-insurgency politics constructs, and seeks to impose, a distinctive type of rule and governance through military intervention. The latter incorporates political measures that are *subjected* to military logic. The objectives are to have these *political* measures *contribute to military* victory and to legitimise the use of military force. Counter-insurgency politics is the normalisation of the *use of military force* in the management of ‘the instability that results from manifestations of inequality and repression, to *control* it not to *resolve* it’.”

This excerpt reveals several characteristics corresponding to enemy-centric COIN yet conflicting with population-centric COIN. Firstly, the political measures *are subjected to* military logic, and *contribute to* military victory. This speaks of an enemy-centric approach, as enemy-centric COIN’s primary task is to defeat the enemy militarily (Kilcullen, 2007). In contrast, population-centric COIN’s military action is secondary to the political one, (its primary purpose being to afford the political power enough freedom to work safely with the population) (Galula, 2006, p. 63). Likewise, the “normalisation of the use of military force”

¹⁶ JNIM stands for ‘Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen’, and means ‘Group to Support Islam and Muslims’

¹⁷ ISGS stands for Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

again points to an enemy-centric centre of gravity. Secondly, militarily *controlling* instead of *resolving* the instability resulting from manifestations of inequality and repression hints at enemy-centric COIN. Whereas population-centric aims at addressing the roots of conflict (e.g. socioeconomic, political, religious inequality), enemy-centric COIN is rather about undermining the insurgents' means (which includes physical obliteration of the insurgent forces or moral subjugation) (Miron, 2019, p. 469, 466-467). This point is further supported by Charbonneau's (2019, p. 312) claim that "the focus on the terrorist symptoms obscures the 'root causes' of the conflicts related to issues of political rule and governance *inside* Mali". Charbonneau clarifies that this is "*not* the counter-insurgency doctrine of 'winning hearts and minds' to build liberal subjects" (2019, p. 312).

As the terms 'counterinsurgency' and 'counterterrorism' have frequently been conflated (Boyle, 2010; Rineheart, 2010), it is important to clarify the difference between them. Among the different perceptions are counterterrorism and counterinsurgency as interchangeable, mutually exclusive, the former being a strategy of the latter, or vice versa. Consequently, the following paragraphs seek to clarify the concepts and their relation based on reviewing the existent academic literature in a way that also links to today's understanding of counterterrorism within the international community.

Before defining counterterrorism, 'terrorism' itself needs to be defined. Terrorism, although extremely difficult to define due to its contested nature, can be understood as "a politically motivated *tactic* involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role" (Weinberg, 2010, p. 782). As a strategic choice, terrorism follows a three-stage method: *disorientation*, *target response*, and *gaining legitimacy*¹⁸ (Neumann & Smith, 2008).

What, then, is counter-terrorism? Rineheart (2010, p. 32) cites the definition found in the U.S. Army Field Manual (2006): "Operations that include the offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, pre-empt, and respond to terrorism." Although Rineheart (2010) praises the all-inclusive nature of this definition, he also points out that this inclusivity is problematic, as it

¹⁸ *Disorientation* seeks to sow within a population a general sense of insecurity and detract from the legitimacy of existing state structures, often through random acts of violence that prey upon the civilian population in general. *Target response* seeks to prompt a disproportionately harsh collective reprisal from a government, in order to radicalise the affected population and win international legitimacy, or to wrestle political concessions. *Gaining legitimacy* is where the terrorist group seeks to transfer legitimacy from the government to its own cause through skilful manipulation of the media, through grassroots social agitation, or through alternative media such as the internet. At this stage, ideology becomes crucial (Neumann & Smith, 2008, as cited in Pratt, 2010, p. 1).

“includes everything but essentially differentiates nothing” (p. 32). This type of definition may well result in a counterterrorism doctrine of “whatever we need, whenever we need it”, which does not only render it worthless but also highly problematic, as it may undermine both the effectiveness and accountability of such operations (p. 32). Pratt (2010, p. 1) states that

Counter-terrorism consists of actions or strategies aimed at preventing terrorism from escalating, controlling the damage from terrorist attacks that do occur, and ultimately seeking to eradicate terrorism in a given context. Counter-terrorism can be classified according to four theoretical models: *Defensive*, *Reconciliatory*, *Criminal-Justice*, and *War*. Generally speaking, each model contains differences in threat perception, how to guard against that threat, how to frame terrorism in the law and constitution, and which agents effect counter-terrorism.

Similarly, Rineheart (2010) notices that existing research on counterterrorism focuses on two of these approaches: the war (or military) model and the criminal justice model. The war model generally frames the “struggle against terrorism in military terms of an enemy-centric war where the armed forces of a state are primarily in charge of developing counterterrorism strategy” (p. 37). The criminal justice model advocates the “rule of law and democratic values which prevail in Western democracies” (p. 37). These two models appear to correspond to the hard power and soft power approach to counterterrorism, or, correspondingly, the direct and indirect approach. Rineheart (2010, p. 38) explains these two approaches as follows:

The direct approach would be an enemy-centric doctrine consisting of primarily offensive, hard power tactics such as Predator and Reaper drone strikes, special forces operations, increased policing and intelligence operations. These are useful tools if the goal is to isolate and destroy groups like Al-Qaeda. The indirect soft power approach would consist of population-centric methods, and would contain features such as capacity building, economic development, and counter-radicalization focusing on the underlying causes that allow terrorism to thrive.

Boyle (2010) notes that while the military war model has always been present within counterterrorism, it has generally been less prominent than law enforcement or intelligence. However, Boyle (2010) observes an increased salience of the military or war model of counterterrorism. Interestingly, he links this increase to the concept of the ‘War on Terror’:

One of the unexpected consequences of a declaration of ‘war on terror’ has been to militarize counterterrorism and give rise to a set of practices which make counterterrorism a form of warfare in its own right. [...] This emerging military model of counterterrorism relies on a combined package of air power, special forces, and the sophisticated use of intelligence to kill enemy operatives and disrupt terrorist networks.

This shift towards the militarisation of counterterrorism (thereby representing the hard or direct approach) is reflected in the different definitions used to describe counterterrorism. For

example, counterterrorism is described as an approach focusing on neutralizing terrorists and disrupting their networks (Colombo, 2019) or “to kill the insurgents and destroy their cadres” (Anderson, 2010, p. 1). Perhaps one of the clearest indications for the militarization of the definition of counterterrorism is U.S. Joint Publication 2-26 of October 2014. The first change addressed in the summary of changes¹⁹ is that the definition of counterterrorism (CT) is narrowed to “actions and activities to neutralize terrorists, their organisations, and networks; removes countering root causes and desired regional end states from the definition”²⁰.

Although some either see CT as a form of COIN or as something entirely different than COIN²¹, this thesis employs neither of them but take the approach of Pratt (2010) who argues that counterterrorism is a component of counterinsurgency. Pratt states that:

Counter-terrorism focus more narrowly on combating the tactics and strategy of terrorism and those who employ it, while counter-insurgency is a broader category of responses to political violence carried out by minority groups, both terroristic and otherwise. The latter subsumes the former.

Therefore, drawing everything together, if CT is a component of counterinsurgency, and a shift is observed towards more enemy-centric, militarised interventions, this would logically mean that counterinsurgencies have shifted from more population-centric to enemy-centric. This observed shift will be interesting in the analysis of Barkhane’s strategy in this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed enemy-centric and population-centric counterinsurgency, and has provided insight into the relationship between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, and the meaning of counterterrorism over time. It has shown that, although population-centric and enemy-centric COIN are not mutually exclusive, their underlying logic is radically different. Put simply, population-centric COIN advocates a “first control the population, and all else will follow” approach, while enemy-centric COIN follows the logic of “first defeat the enemy, and all else will follow”. While Barkhane is termed a *counterterrorism* operation, this chapter has explained how Barkhane can nevertheless be understood as a counterinsurgency. The fact that the definition of counterterrorism has seen a shift towards militarisation and hard power, makes

¹⁹ This summary of changes in the 2014 U.S. Joint Publication 2-26 includes revisions of the 2009 Joint Publication 3-26.

²⁰ CT activities and operations are taken to neutralize terrorists, their organizations, and networks in order to render them incapable of using violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals.

[The updated manual] narrows the definition of counterterrorism (CT) to actions and activities to neutralize terrorists, their organizations, and networks; removes countering root causes and desired regional end states from the definition.

²¹ See for example Colombo (2019) and Rineheart (2010).

the counterinsurgency strategy of ‘counterterrorism Operation Barkhane’ particularly interesting to analyse throughout this thesis.

3. Operation Barkhane in the academic literature

The French recent military intervention in the Sahel through Operation Serval and Barkhane have been critically discussed within academic literature. This chapter aims to highlight the main academic discussions and criticisms within this literature. As the thesis researches Operation Barkhane, the chapter’s main focus is Barkhane. Yet, because the French military intervention in the past decade started in 2013 with Operation Serval, which was subsequently transformed into Operation Barkhane²², the chapter will include some scholarly assessments of Serval. As there is a clear gap in the literature regarding Barkhane in relation to Burkina Faso specifically, this literature review discusses the literature concerning Operation Barkhane in general.

From Serval to Barkhane

While Operation Serval²³ was announced as a short-term operation to stop the Islamist militants’ rapid advance from northern Mali towards the south, Operation Barkhane significantly expanded the scope of French involvement in the Sahel, shifting from a targeted to a regional approach in the ‘fight against terrorism’ (Charbonneau, 2019; Wing, 2016). Barkhane’s aim is to “support the armed forces of partner countries in their struggle against terrorist groups” and “contribute to preventing the reappearance of terrorist sanctuaries in the region” (Powell, 2017, p. 62). France’s increased military presence in the Sahel over the past years also marks a shift in the French foreign policy. Whereas France had initially indicated its wish to reduce its (military) footprint in the Sahel, Operation Serval and subsequently Barkhane reveal a restoration or rebuilding of French involvement under the guise of multilateralism or through invitation by Sahelian governments (Kfir, 2018).

Assessments of the French military interventions greatly differ in how they perceive France's involvement. For example, in the case of Operation Barkhane, liberal arguments would assert that it supports global justice, is legal, and is the morally responsible thing to do. By contrast, a more critical view would see the operation as a French neocolonialist move to solidify its physical presence in the region (Wing, 2016).

²² See Charbonneau (2017).

²³ Operational between 11 January 2013 and 31 July 2014.

The success of Operation Serval is debated within the literature. Views that emphasise the success of the French military intervention often point to the success of Operation Serval in stopping Islamic militants' advance towards the south and driving them out of Malian territory (Hanne, 2016; Richards, 2019). Internationally, as well as in France and Mali, France received praise for its success. Malians gathered in the capital to celebrate the arrival of the French military, welcoming the French soldiers in the streets (Charbonneau, 2017). Former French President François Hollande called Mali a great example of victory over terrorism, as Mali had “regained all of its territory, is guaranteeing the security of its population, and even managed to hold presidential elections on schedule, elections that were recognized as indisputable” (Hollande in Wing, 2016, p. 70).

However, time has shown that Operation Serval's successes were momentary. Vandervelde (2016) attributes this failure to the inherent flaws present in French stabilisation approaches. Due to the militarised nature of its approaches, France saw Operation Serval as a struggle over territory rather than over ideas. Both Vandervelde (2016) and Reeve (2014) point at France's inability to understand the Malian situation as a protracted internal political crisis, rather than as an acute incidence of Islamist terrorism. While proponents may argue that France had driven out the ‘terrorists’, critics state that this has simply led to the dispersion of violent extremist groups across porous borders. After concluding the success of Operation Serval, France launched Operation Barkhane which constituted a much broader counterterrorism effort, thereby continuing the so-called ‘war against terrorism’. Recalling President Hollande's ‘mission accomplished’ and his announcement of a forthcoming reduction of troops, this significant expansion appears to point at a very different reality. France seemed to have concluded that a complete withdrawal would not be viable (Wing, 2016). Similarly, Bruno Charbonneau (Oxford Research Group, 2019, para. 6) argues that

despite the early tactical successes of Serval, as early as 2014 France assessed that it could not leave Mali. The situation was not stable and the fear was to see the jihadists make a comeback. But the French needed a success story, so they claimed ‘mission accomplished’ for Serval and transformed it into operation Barkhane.

Idahosa et al. (2018, p. 727) argue that Operation Barkhane itself was “a result of the regrouping of jihadists that were initially scattered and chased by the French troops”. Additionally, Wing (2016, p. 75) asserts that the transition from Serval to Barkhane conveniently allowed the French to “extract themselves from Mali's internal political problems while pursuing a regional strategy in the war on terror”. In sum, critics argue that Operation Serval did not address the key issues that had sparked the armed rebellion in northern Mali,

while Operation Barkhane is seen as at least partly a result of France's own flawed military strategy.

Operation Barkhane

As Operation Barkhane succeeded Serval as a French military intervention and thus represents a continuation of French militarised logic, it should not come as a surprise that scholars have questioned Barkhane's success and legitimacy. Although some authors highlight its successes²⁴, the academic literature is predominantly critical regarding Barkhane. The successes of Barkhane are mainly highlighted by France itself, and the limited papers that do mention Barkhane's successes echo France's understanding of success. According to Richards (2019), Barkhane has had some remarkable results. On 20 February 2019, French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly declared that the French army had successfully 'neutralised' over 600 'jihadists' in the Sahel since 2015 (L'Express, 2019). In addition, numerous operations have been carried out, weapons confiscated, and motorcycles and pickups destroyed or seized (Hanne, 2016). Military successes, the latest example being the neutralisation of Abdelmalek Droukdel, are celebrated as significant successes (Dellanna, 2020²⁵). This can be understood within the wider French strategy which is predominantly military in nature (Chafer et al, 2020, p. 503; Charbonneau, 2019; Kfir, 2018). This is not to say that France's action in the Sahel is entirely military. Indeed, Florence Parly underlines that a solution for the Sahel is not military but political (L'Express, 2019). Beyond France's political and financial support of other actors operating in the Sahel like MINUSMA, EUTM, and the G5 Sahel, Barkhane has conducted several civil-military actions, such as food and medical supplies to isolated villages, in support of the local population (Tertrais, 2016). Many external state and international actors in the Sahel, including the French military, acknowledge that a real solution to the Sahel's problems involves striking a necessary balance between soft security (including development initiatives and measures to improve governance), and hard security through military interventions. Nevertheless, 'hard' security measures continue to attract the most resources, which results in a continuation of a militarised (French-led) approach unable to resolve the fundamental underlying issues in the Sahel of governance and development (Chafer et al., 2020, p. 503; Dieng, 2019, p. 492-493).

²⁴ See for example Hanne, O. (2016). Barkhane : succès, atouts et limites d'une operation originale dans la Bande sahélo-saharienne. *Res Militaris*, 1-18.

²⁵ For other examples, see for instance: Latorraca, 2015; Le Monde, 2015; L'Express, 2019.

The academic literature underscores the serious consequences of such a militarised approach. Firstly, the focus on counterterrorism and thereby on ‘terrorist’ symptoms “obscures the ‘root causes’ of the conflicts related to issues of political rule and governance *inside Mali*” (Charbonneau, 2019, p. 312). Moreover, Wing (2016) argues that the framing of both Serval and Barkhane within the ‘War on Terror’, used to legitimise French military intervention, contributes to the decontextualisation of the conflict. The concept of the ‘War on Terrorism’ and its concomitant discourse risks “lumping together all terrorist or extremist groups and all insurgent or militia organisations” (Kilcullen, 2009, p. 285 as cited in Gilmore, 2011, p. 30). Phrases like “the fight against terrorism”, and “destroying the terrorists²⁶”, imply that there is a singular ideological ‘enemy’ force against whom one is fighting (Gilmore, 2011). Consequently, the use of the word ‘terrorist’ indicates a clearly defined enemy, but does not consider the usually far more complex reality. A consideration of this reality would include acknowledgement of the root causes of instability and ‘terrorism’ in the Sahel (Wing, 2016). Such root causes include among others widespread grievances regarding governance, poverty, inequality, stigmatisation, state security forces’ abuses, and communal violence (e.g. farmer-herder conflicts) (Dieng, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2017; UNOWAS, 2018). Similarly, Idahosa et al. (2018) underline that ‘fighting terrorists’ does not address radicalisation. This again reveals a focus on symptoms, not on causes. In his book *Une Guerre Perdue*, researcher and writer Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos identifies the failure to analyse the root causes of the problems in the Sahel as the main explanation for why Operation Barkhane has failed to succeed so far. With regards to Mali, Reeve (2014, para. 3) stresses the fundamental misdiagnosis of the Malian crisis as “an acute incidence of jihadist terrorism rather than a chronic or cyclical domestic political crisis”. Powell (2017) examines continuities in the logic of postcolonial French military activism in Africa. His analysis of past and present drivers of major French military interventions bring to light substantial structural continuities. One of these continuities involves the consistent construction of threats to France’s sphere of interest in ideological terms that favour grand narratives over local agency and issues. These grandiose interpretations have often only had indirect, if any, relationship to the reality on the ground. Operation Barkhane marks a continuity as its “grand narrative” is based on a traditional “failed state” paradigm, in which weak African states turn into sanctuaries for crime, trafficking and terrorism. This grand narrative does not provide an adequate understanding of the situation at

²⁶ For example, François Hollande stated that Barkhane is a military deployment with no other goals than “destroying the terrorists” (Hollande in Marchal, 2015).

hand, since, “rather than state failure or fragility per se, the governance strategies of the various states and regimes involved play an important role in both generating and shaping the nature of violence” (Powell, 2017, p. 63).

The second problematic aspect of Barkhane identified by scholars relates to France’s collaboration with governments that in fact play a significant role in creating and sustaining instability and insecurity. This second issue is not limited to a militarised counterinsurgency alone, but also exposes one of the problems inherent to counterinsurgencies in general. Powell (2016, para. 2) states that “despite [France’s] military successes [...] Operation Barkhane may be doing more harm than good, since it provides crucial support to the repressive governments that are at the heart of the Sahel’s problems”. Through its intervention, framed within the ‘War on Terror’, including discursive terms like Islamist, jihadist, Salafist and terrorist to express security considerations, France automatically and unproblematically legitimises not only itself and the international military actions, but also the governments of the Sahelian states where they intervene (Charbonneau & Sears, 2014, p. 9). Neutrality here is illusory (Vandervelde, 2016). Through cooperating with Sahelian governments in the ‘fight against terrorism’, a narrative is created in which France and the Sahelian governments are the ‘good guys’ and ‘the terrorists’, generally remaining unspecified, as the ‘bad guys’, the ‘enemy’. However, this assumption is unsubstantiated and does not accurately reflect reality. While significant parts of the Sahelian populations lack real political and civil rights, governments – often controlled by elites and / or the military – do not represent the people’s needs, even if elections are held (Kfir, 2018). This creates resentment and tensions. As Vandervelde (2016, para. 24) explains: “externalising the security problem as international Islamic terrorism and security regionalisation have diverted attention away from the longstanding failure of Malian and neighbouring governments to fulfil their domestic promises of governance and decentralisation to minorities”. By legitimising and funding the governments, and training and working alongside the government’s armies, Barkhane reinforces the very factors at the source of the instability that France has intended to contain (Powell, 2017, p. 47; Dieng, 2019, p. 495). Moreover, this approach strongly disincentivises African elites to bring about genuine political reform (Powell, 2017).

A third complication raised concerning Operation Barkhane is the fact that its presence and operations feed into the very recruitment narrative of its ‘terrorist enemy’. Violent extremist groups such as AQIM²⁷ use Western presence to recruit by stressing how they resist

²⁷ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

these imperialist aggressors. One may wonder whether the hard power counterterrorism strategies like decapitation is a prudent course of action in this regard. The French intervention may well give them purpose and greater coherence (Kfir, 2018; Wing, 2016). Considering the longstanding and extensive existence of ‘Françafrique’, the fact that it is France in particular which leads Operation Barkhane, may further reinforce the recruitment narrative. Subsequently, French military presence becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in which France fights terrorism while that same terrorism is perpetuated by the French presence (Wing, 2016).

Finally, an important part of the academic literature on Barkhane speaks of the reasons behind French interventions. France’s own legitimisation of its operation will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.A. It comes down to France identifying a multi-level²⁸ security and stability threat, to which it responds, by invitation of Sahelian states. In addition, France legitimises its intervention by emphasising the migration threat and the risk of a ‘domino effect’, meaning that if France does not intervene, chaos will set in and a “terrorist arc” from East to West Africa will develop (Powell, 2017).

Within the (academic) literature, French involvement in the Sahel region is often (at least partially) explained through its economic interests (see for example Idahosa et al., 2018; Kfir, 2018; Maïga & Adam, 2018; Medessoukou, 2018). Mentioned in particular is France’s uranium mining in Arlit, Western Niger. Indeed, France substantially relies on uranium extraction from Niger, as it accounts for 30 percent of French civilian and 100 percent of French military needs (Powell, 2017). However, Powell (2017) refutes the predominance of economic interests in explaining France’s intervention. Powell (2017) explains that, if France wanted to, it could easily import its uranium from other (non-African) countries. Moreover, Barkhane’s deployment costs outweigh the economic benefits from trade with Niger and Mali. Therefore, Powell (2017) investigates France’s reasons for intervention beyond the economic realm. Firstly, he explains that France aims to preserve or restore the regional political order that has long existed due to French interventions. Charbonneau (2017) explains that France has never truly left Françafrique. While for other countries, the decolonisation process marked the end of this era, decolonisation in Françafrique simply meant a restructuring of an imperial relationship in such a way that it would avoid accusations of neocolonialism (Chafer, 2001, p. 167; Charbonneau, 2017). Since 1960, when most of its African colonies gained independence, France has militarily intervened over fifty times in Françafrique (Powell, 2017). The French military infrastructure that has remained on African soil even after formal independence, has

²⁸ On the level of Mali, the Sahel, France, Europe, and consequently on an international level.

greatly facilitated French troops to swiftly deploy on the continent, one of the latest examples being through Operation Serval and Barkhane in the Sahel (Charbonneau, 2017). The idea behind the restoration or preservation of the regional political order through French interventions, is that without them, large swaths of Africa will tumble into chaos. One General of Operation Barkhane has explained that in the Sahel, “France is sitting on a pressure cooker”, and that if Barkhane withdraws, it will risk a “cascading destabilisation for all the countries in the subregion” (General Olivier Salaün in Powell, 2017, p. 63). Destabilisation needs to be avoided at all costs, which also for example explains the long-term, well-established relationship between France and Chad. Chad is not a stable country, but is kept stable through severe repression and human rights abuses by the regime of Déby. While France is not blind to this, it sees Chad as a key actor to support in keeping the region stable, additionally considering the strength and professionalism of the Chadian army (Powell, 2017).

Other than the preservation of regional stability, Powell refers to a couple of reasons that do not necessarily apply to Barkhane specifically, but rather to French post-independence military interventions in *Françafrique* in general. Firstly, related to the preservation of the status quo is the fact that France sees *Françafrique* as one of the last areas in which France can exert power, corresponding to the general French perception of itself as more than a simple ‘middle power’. Secondly, Powell (2017) importantly points at the interdependent nature of the Franco-African relationship, as African elites have also been able to exert power over French policy making. For example, during the Cold War, African leaders have threatened to ask support of the Soviets if France would not provide aid.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed what other scholars have said about the French counterinsurgency efforts in the Sahel, in particular Operation Barkhane. Scholars have predominantly been critical regarding the militarised nature of France’s strategy in the Sahel reflected in Operation Barkhane. This militarised approach leads to a focus on symptoms of insecurity (i.e. terrorism) rather than an attempt to address its root causes. Moreover, collaborating with Sahelian governments legitimises these governments and thus implies that they are “the good guys”. Meanwhile, French intervention feeds into the recruitment narrative of jihadist groups. France’s presence and action in the Sahel thus may perpetuate the very problem it aims to fight.

With regards to the reasons for French intervention, scholars mostly point out French economic interests, notably uranium extraction in western Niger. Yet, Powell (2017) in particular refutes this predominance and points at France’s long-established relationship with

Françafrique. This has resulted in Franco-African power relations that lead France and African (Sahelian) governments to have a mutual interest in perpetuating the regional status quo.

4. Overview and analysis of Operation Barkhane's Strategy

The previous chapter has reviewed the literature on Operation Barkhane. It has shown that predominantly critical regarding Operation Barkhane as it reveals France's militarised counterinsurgency approach. Part A of the current chapter will investigate Barkhane's strategy; including its aims, justification for intervention, and inherent logic. Part B of this chapter will then build on the first part, by demonstrating that Barkhane's strategy can be classified as an enemy-centric counterinsurgency strategy.

A. Operation Barkhane: aims, justification and inherent logic

While Operation Serval was a short-term military intervention limited to Mali, Operation Barkhane significantly increased the scope of French intervention in the Sahel, as it constitutes a regional counterterrorism operation which operates militarily within Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad (Charbonneau, 2017; ECFR, 2019). Barkhane's approach incorporates three main *aims*: "support[ing] partner nations' armed forces in the SSS; strengthen[ing] coordination between international military forces; [and] prevent[ing] the re-establishment of safe havens for terrorists in the region" (Operation Barkhane Press Pack, February 2020, p. 3). Additionally, the Press Pack emphasises the fundamental principle of *partnership*. It states that its "primary objective is to support the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) partner countries in taking over the fight against armed terrorist groups across the Sahel-Saharan strip (SSS)" (p. 4). It then elaborates on its strategy by explaining that

France's Sahelian strategy aims at allowing the partner nations to build up the capacity of ensuring their own security. It relies on a global approach (political, security and development), of which the military dimension is carried out by operation Barkhane, conducted by the French armed forces. In the current context, Barkhane efforts consist in a direct fight against the terrorist threat, in providing support to partner forces, in assisting international forces and in the actions in favour of the population so as to allow a gradual return to normality in the zones where State authority was being questioned.

However, it remains rather unclear how these different efforts will work together in order to achieve Barkhane's set goals. Moreover, considering the three aforementioned aims, it remains vague what the broader aims or end goals are that Barkhane ought to achieve. This is confirmed by Richards (2019) who argues that the wide-ranging aims of Barkhane are ambiguous and ill-defined, which in turn makes it difficult to define clear indicators for success or attainment of

objectives, and ultimately an endpoint. However, it is possible to come to an understanding of France's 'theory of change'²⁹ based on Barkhane's Press Pack, transcripts of summits and speeches by France, and research conducted by others. In the following two sections, the thesis will analyse and explain France's identification of the security threat and justification of its response, as well as the logic and strategy inherent to Operation Barkhane.

Identification of the Security Threat and Justification of the Response

The 'Operation Barkhane Press Pack' (February 2020, p. 3) explains the necessity of Barkhane's regional counterterrorism approach, as it states that "the cross-border dimension of the terrorist threat, especially related to the desert nature of the Sahel, requests to act in a region as wide as Europe through a regional approach in order to treat the terrorist organisation ramifications and counter cross-border movements in the Sahel-Saharan strip [SSS]". In other words, borders in the Sahel are porous, especially in regions such as the Liptako-Gourma region, and in order for Barkhane to effectively fight these "armed terrorist groups"³⁰, it is necessary to be able to operate across borders as these groups use the porosity of borders to retreat to another country.

France has explained the necessity of its ongoing intervention by arguing that this terrorist threat posed a security threat on multiple levels. Firstly, to Mali and the wider Sahel region. The Barkhane press pack document identifies the cross-border terrorist threat after which it announces France's strategy in the Sahel, which is to "assist partner nations in building up their capacity to ensure their *own security*" (2020, p. 2). Additionally, it mentions the "risks armed terrorist groups represent for *regional stability*" (p. 4). Wing (2016, p. 73) notes that "President Hollande is very careful to emphasise first and foremost the African role (MINUSMA) and the Malian invitation, rather than threats to France and Europe". This attitude is clearly reflected in the Barkhane Press Pack (February 2020), repeatedly emphasised through words such as *partnership*, *assist* and *support*. It also stresses the "Africanisation" of the efforts in the section on Barkhane's partnership with the G5 Sahel and partner forces (p. 4):

Within this framework, G5 Sahel Chiefs of Defence Staff regularly meet to share their assessments on the security situation in SSS, strengthen cooperation in countering cross-border terrorist threats,

²⁹ "A theory of change is a purposeful model of how an initiative—such as a policy, a strategy, a program, or a project—contributes through a chain of early and intermediate outcomes to the intended result" (Serrat, 2017, p. 237).

³⁰ The "Operation Barkhane Press Pack" refers to the actors that they are fighting as "(armed) terrorist groups", or "terrorists". Other ways in which the fight is described are "fighting/countering terrorism" or "fighting/countering the terrorist threat".

and reduce the Risks armed terrorist groups represent for regional stability. Considered as a strategic partner, who has consistently supported several nations in countering terrorism, France, through the intermediary of Chief of Defence Staff General François Lecointre, has been invited regularly to take part in these meetings.

This section suggests that the G5 Sahel Chiefs of Defence Staff are taking the lead in countering this security threat that terrorism poses, and that France has been invited by these G5 Sahel Chiefs to take part in these meetings in the role of ‘assisting’ strategic partner.

Yet, to France and the international community (notably Europe), France appears to underscore that the terrorist threat jeopardises *their* security. This can be seen in two speeches in Niamey and Gao by President Macron to the Barkhane forces:

As you know, the Sahel is a priority; this is where *our security* is at stake, this is where part of the future of the African continent is at stake, but also undoubtedly part of *our future* (Macron in Niamey, Niger, December 2017).

In talking with your comrades, I could see with what intelligence and determination you fulfil this mission necessary for the stability of Mali, more broadly of the Sahel and therefore *our security* (Macron in Gao, Mali, May 2017).

[this is what] earns you the recognition of *French* men and women because they know that you are accomplishing your mission for *their security*, for their protection by bearing high the values of the Republic (Macron in Gao, Mali, May 2017).

Although France’s security is already partly related to Europe’s security due to its geography, an interview with French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly clearly confirms this as she stated that the Sahel operation was “crucial to EU security, by eliminating a haven for terrorist organisations” (Mallet & Keohane, 2019, para. 3).

All in all, this shows that France’s military operation Barkhane is justified by identifying the multi-level nature of the terrorist threat present in the Sahel, and by France’s emphasis on the ‘Africanness’ of its Sahelian strategy. It is additionally justified by the presence of MINUSMA, but this division of labour will be discussed in the next section.

The Logic Inherent to Barkhane’s Strategy

Although Barkhane is a counterterrorism operation focused on the fight against terrorism, France’s strategy in the Sahel is not solely military. A press release (France Diplomacy, February 2020) by the French Ministry for the Armed Forces states that “the solution to the current crisis is not solely military but comprehensive, political, security-related and

economic”. This idea is reflected in the different partnerships that Barkhane maintains³¹ and is also echoed in the four pillars of a new framework called ‘Coalition for the Sahel’, which was announced during the Pau Summit in January 2020. These four pillars consist of: 1. The fight against terrorism; 2. Strengthening the military capabilities of the states in the region; 3. Support for the return of the state and administration on the territory; and 4. Development assistance. Barkhane “will play its full part”, yet since Barkhane’s “priority is the fight against terrorism”, it will especially play its part within the first axis (Barkhane Press Pack 2020; France Diplomacy, 2020).

Although France recognises the fact that a proper response requires multiple dimensions, Barkhane’s strategy follows a certain order. It believes that military efforts are *first* necessary in order to *then* either allow for reconciliation (MINUSMA) or for development³² (by Barkhane or by one of its partners, such as initiatives led by the G5 Sahel). For example, in a speech on the Barkhane base in Gao, Macron (May 2017) states that:

What I have seen today confirms my conviction that it is urgent that the Malian political actors all be there and implement this spirit of reconciliation. The *road to lasting peace* is long. You have to go through it with determination, with constancy. It *first* assumes *security*. It assumes the *presence of the armed forces, you*. It *then* presupposes a clearly defined *political and diplomatic roadmap*, implemented with determination, these are the Algiers Agreements for which the action to be taken must be accelerated and all the responsibilities must be taken. It *also* supposes that we support the *development* of Africa by associating public and private actors.

Firstly, there is the logic of first military efforts, then reconciliation. This logic is already clearly demonstrated at the end of Operation Serval. Serval was declared a success as it had succeeded in the (military) aims of regaining the Malian territory by “stop[ping] the jihadist offensive that threatened Bamako” and “put[ting] an end to the industrial organisation of terrorism that had increased in North Mali desert” (Operation Barkhane Press Pack, February 2020, p. 3). It then “transfer[red] the mission of stabilisation to the Malian partners as well as to UN forces (MINUSMA)” (p. 3). This then results in a *de facto* division of labour [...] with Barkhane focusing on kinetic, counter-terrorist operations, while MINUSMA supports political processes and reconciliation” (Chafer et al., 2020, p. 497).

Secondly, there is the logic of first military efforts, then development. This is confirmed by Guichaoua (2020) who has conducted interviews with key figures in the Sahelian crisis since 2012. He explains that the French stabilisation project can be understood as bricks that

³¹ With the G5 Sahel, UN (MINUSMA), and the EU (EUTM).

³² This is confirmed by Hanne (2016, p. 6) and Guichaoua (2020, p. 907).

build on each other. They are categorised by sectors of intervention (the 3Ds: defence, diplomacy and development) and time horizons. “‘Bricks’ follow each other, all aligned to serve a stabilization project implemented by using military means, *to be followed chronologically* by development efforts.” (p. 907). In other words: military actions first, then development efforts. This refers to the development efforts carried out by the French military, during French civil-military (CIMIC) operations.

Furthermore, Guichaoua (2020) provides another insight into the logic underlying the French intervention efforts. He explains that the French military’s course of action is formally planned backwards, after establishing a so-called ‘desired end state’. The objective indicators for this end state have not been made public but involve “weakening GATs³³ sufficiently that local armies are able to fight them ‘on their own’” (p. 907). This corresponds to the military first, then development logic, as it would be reasoned that through the weakening of Islamist militant groups, the local armies become capable to regaining territory and sovereignty, which then allows for the other pillars mentioned above, i.e. the return of the state and administration, and development assistance.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of France’s threat identification, justification and its military strategy operationalised through Barkhane, this chapter concludes that France’s ‘theory of change’ is as follows; France identifies a cross-border terrorist threat in the Sahel which threatens not only the security of the Sahelian countries, but also that of France and Europe. The “armed terrorist groups” want to create chaos and destabilise the region (Macron, May 2017; Macron, December 2017). Therefore, this security threat (i.e. the cross-border terrorist threat) requires an adequate response (Operation Barkhane Press Pack, February 2020, p. 3). This response consists of a comprehensive stabilisation project, in which military action, carried out by Barkhane’s armed forces is *first* necessary in order to *then* implement reconciliation processes and development initiatives.

³³ French abbreviation for terrorist armed groups: Groupes Armés Terroristes.

B. An enemy-centric counterinsurgency

In this section, the thesis argues that Operation Barkhane can be classified as a predominantly enemy-centric counterinsurgency. This can be seen in the fact that the centre of gravity is focused on the enemy (terrorists / armed terrorist groups) and in the predominance of the military actions that are to be carried out first.

Firstly, as explained in the theoretical chapter on counterinsurgency, the centre of gravity can either lie within the enemy (enemy-centric COIN) or within the population (population-centric COIN). Operation Barkhane clearly focuses on the enemy. One needs to keep in mind the point that Paul et al. (2016) make: although the literature juxtaposes enemy-centric against population-centric, in reality there is no 100% population-centric COIN and hardly ever a 100% enemy-centric COIN. This does not mean that we should abandon these analytical categories; on the contrary, they are very useful in the case of Operation Barkhane, as it points to a predominantly enemy-centric approach.

The focus on the enemy already lies in the nature and aim of Barkhane itself: to fight terrorism / to fight armed terrorist groups. The Barkhane Press Pack (February 2020, p. 4) states that “[Barkhane’s] primary objective is to support the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) partner countries in taking over the fight against *armed terrorist groups* across the Sahel-Saharan strip (SSS)”. As mentioned above, Barkhane will play its role in the new ‘Coalition for the Sahel’, with its four pillars. Barkhane will “play its full part, especially concerning the first axis, the *fight against armed terrorist groups* [...] 220 military personnel will be deployed as reinforcements. This will reinforce the fight against armed terrorist groups that afflict the region, in particular the ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), within the framework of a real combat partnership between local forces”. Barkhane understands “maintaining pressure on armed terrorist groups” to be an essential part of the stabilisation of the areas, by “preventing them from re-establishing safe havens, stemming their logistics flows [...] restricting terrorists’ freedom of movement and deprive them of their combat capabilities, for example by dismantling their stores of weapons, ammunition, explosives and communication equipment” (Press Pack, 2020, p. 8).

This does not mean that the importance of obtaining the consent of the population is never mentioned. France regularly mentions the importance of working for the benefit of local populations. Barkhane (Press Pack, 2020, p. 12) states that it “takes action for the benefit of local populations”. It does so through the implementation of several civil-military projects throughout the region. Yet the focus on the population is part of / phrased within the larger

framework of the fight against terrorist armed groups. This can be seen in the following excerpts:

We are fighting armed terrorist groups in the Sahel at the request of nations in the region, and specifically Mali. This request, and the “shared determination to fight together against terrorist groups,” were renewed at the Pau Summit on January 13. This collective action in the Sahel is also multidimensional, focusing beyond security on stabilization, development and reconciliation, and *taking into account the needs of communities, in order to dry up the sources of recruitment for armed terrorist groups.* (Macron, February 2020).

The two Presidents have expressed their common wish to act in an increased and rapid manner *for the benefit of the populations* of the northern and eastern regions of Burkina Faso, *where terrorist groups are trying to thrive by exploiting the vulnerabilities of these peripheral regions.* To this end, in line with the “Emergency plan for the Sahel” implemented by the government of Burkina Faso, AFD will invest nearly € 50 million in additional funding in these regions in 2019, in the areas of integration professional, rural electrification and water and sanitation. (Macron & Kaboré, December 2018).

This view of the population and development through a security lens is confirmed by Guichaoua (2020). He concludes that the Barkhane’s strategy indeed does involve development, yet development is seen as a means to pursue the end goal of security, rather than being an end in itself. Moreover, it is important to recall the logic of military actions first being necessary in order to then bring development and reconciliation. This corresponds to the enemy-centric logic of “first defeat the enemy, and all else will follow”, as opposed to the population-centric logic of “first control the population, and all else will follow”. This focus on military actions may also explain the perception of development as serving to achieve the wider end goal of security. The strategy of Barkhane explained in part A., combined with the predominant focus on counterterrorism/fighting the terrorist armed groups, clearly indicates an enemy-centric COIN logic.

5. What are the Main Drivers of Conflict in (northern) Burkina Faso?

So far, this thesis has discussed the analytical framework of counterinsurgency, has elaborated on scholars' thoughts on Barkhane and the French Sahelian strategy, and has analysed Barkhane's counterinsurgency strategy which led to the conclusion that Barkhane indicates an enemy-centric counterinsurgency logic. The current and following chapter will bring in the case study of Burkina Faso. The current chapter explains the drivers of conflict in (northern) Burkina Faso, which then allows the following chapter to use the Burkinabé case study to critically assess Operation Barkhane's enemy-centric counterinsurgency strategy.

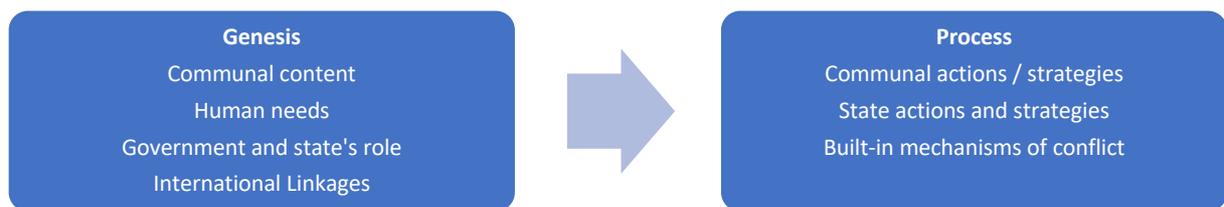
Until recently (\pm 5 years ago), Burkina Faso was known as an example of peaceful coexistence, and ethnic and religious tolerance³⁴ (International Crisis Group, 2016). However, with events such as the end of a long-term dictatorship with the deposal of Blaise Compaoré in 2014, the spill-over of conflict dynamics from Mali (and Niger), which itself was facilitated significantly by the collapse of Libya in 2011, and the marginalisation of certain ethnic communities in the rural areas of mainly northern and eastern Burkina Faso, the apparent stability of Burkina Faso radically changed (Preuss, 2020; Idrissa, 2019). In 2019, the UN stated that "Burkina Faso has become one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in Africa" (Mednick, 2019). This chapter serves the purpose of providing insight into the main conflict dynamics that contribute to the deteriorating security crisis dynamics in Burkina Faso. Edward Azar's (1990) theory of Protracted Social Conflict will be used to guide and structure this outline of the main drivers of conflict. Edward Azar (1990, p. 12) defines 'protracted social conflict' as

[conflicts in which] communities are deprived of satisfaction of their basic needs on the basis of the communal identity. However, the deprivation is the result of a complex causal chain involving the role of the state and the pattern of international linkages. Furthermore, initial conditions (colonial legacy, domestic historical setting, and the multi-communal nature of the society) play important roles in shaping the genesis of protracted social conflict.

This chapter uses Azar's key phases in explaining protracted social conflict, namely the *Genesis* (i.e. the preconditions for conflict) and the *Process Dynamics*. The chapter is structured in accordance with the subcategories that Azar employs within each phase. The *Genesis* phase of the conflict consists of *communal content, human needs, government and the state's role, and international linkages*. The *Process Dynamics* phase distinguishes between *communal actions and strategies, state actions and strategies, and built-in mechanisms of*

³⁴ Even if the same International Crisis Group report indicates risk factors for instability.

conflict. The thesis recognises the existing criticism on Azar’s model, for example that it builds on Human Needs Theory and is therefore very much focused on grievances, while not sufficiently taking into account the economic interests inherent to conflict and wars. However, the thesis uses Azar’s framework as grievances play an important role in the mobilisation and recruitment of individuals in Burkina Faso. For instance, an important factor failure of the state to provide for basic needs in peripheral areas, results in long-standing grievances which are skilfully capitalised on by Islamist militant groups (Demuyne & Coleman, 2020).



The three phases of Protracted Social Conflict. This chapter focuses on ‘Genesis’ and ‘Process’.

GENESIS

1.1. Communal Content

Firstly, Azar emphasises that a society characterised by a multicommunal composition is an important determinant in protracted social conflict. This multi-communal character may be a consequence of colonial divide-and-rule policies, or of historical patterns of rivalry resulting in the dominance of one group over the other. The state then is dominated by a single communal group or a coalition of a few communal groups that do not address the needs of other societal groups (Azar, 1990).

Interestingly, Burkina Faso has not been a clear example of a multi-communal society. Until 2016, Burkina Faso was viewed as a model of peaceful coexistence. This does not mean there were no fettering issues under the surface. But the Burkinabé society was for example characterised by religious pluralism, with religious communities not only living side by side, but living together. Similarly, along ethnic lines, different ethnic groups had personal relationships with each other and lived together. An International Crisis Group (2016) report explains that although the post-independence nation state has still been under construction, a sense of national identity has facilitated social cohesion amid ethnic, regional and religious differences. One of the historical factors contributing to this sense of national identity is the

legacy of President Thomas Sankara³⁵, who managed to significantly unify the nation and include the different groups, but who got killed by his friend and subsequent successor Blaise Compaoré³⁶. The legacy of the Sankarism strengthened patriotic sentiments and political consciousness (International Crisis Group, 2016).

This does not mean that socioeconomic and political grievances and inequalities, especially in rural areas, did not exist (Idrissa, 2019). The section *communal actions and strategies* will explain how Islamist militant groups exploited these to divide society and fuel inter-communal conflict.

1.2. Human Needs

Edward Azar, drawing on human needs theory, identifies deprivation of human needs as a second important precondition for conflict. He distinguishes between *security needs* (basic physical needs), *acceptance needs* (a socially accepted and acknowledged communal identity), and *access needs* (effective participation in political, market and decision-making institutions) (Azar, 1990; Demmers, 2017). Especially in the rural areas of Burkina Faso, the population lacks significantly in all these needs. Fulani herders, who constitute a significant part of the population in rural areas, such as northern Burkina Faso, and who have been predominant among the recruits of jihadist groups, have been underrepresented in state institutions, including public education. Fulani are pastoralists, yet pastoralists' political representation is weak or non-existent (International Crisis Group, 2020; UNOWAS, 2018). In addition, their levels of education are low and illiteracy is not uncommon (Clingendael interviews, 2020; UNOWAS, 2018). In addition, throughout Burkina Faso, access to natural resources is the main challenge (UNOWAS, 2018). Climate change and desertification severely affect people in rural areas, including the northern region of Burkina Faso (Hagberg et al., 2019, p. 79; UNOWAS, 2018, p. 26). This puts even more pressure on access to natural resources. Privatisation policies by the state, which are further elaborated on in the 'international linkages' section, have neither been conducive to development of rural areas (Idrissa, 2019).

³⁵ Thomas Sankara was installed as president in 1983 after a military coup. He was in office as president until his assassination in 1987 (Ray, 2019).

³⁶ Blaise Compaoré was in office as president of Burkina Faso between 1987 and 2014 (McKenna, 2014).

1.3. Government and the State's Role

Following the lack of fulfilment of basic human needs, rural communities often have a negative perception of the state, whom they feel has abandoned them (Clingendael interviews, 2020). State building and development have historically focused on the west and centre of Burkina Faso, while the east and north were seen as of peripheral importance (Idrissa, 2019). An interview in northern Burkina Faso, with, among others, the emir of Liptako³⁷, of which Northern Burkina is a part, illustrates this dire situation:

This zone has been forgotten for 50 years. In terms of development, lacking infrastructure like water, electricity and schools. There is the proliferation of Coranic schools with children studying for years, but having no professional opportunities. So it's obvious that when these groups [i.e. jihadist groups] come, people are vulnerable (Walsh & Sy, 2020).

In addition, another important factor adding to the state's role in conflict dynamics in Burkina Faso is the weakness of the state. Under the dictatorship of ex-President Blaise Compaoré, a special secret service military branch existed, called the RSP (Regiment of Presidential Security). The task of this controversial autonomous military unit was to protect the president, its institutions, and any person designated by President Compaoré (Rakotomalala & Karoui, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the RSP was well-trained and well-equipped, as opposed to the rest of the army, which was largely underfunded and neglected (Idrissa, 2019). Following the deposal of ex-President Blaise Compaoré in 2014, the RSP also dissolved. Consequently, the current government led by president Roch Kaboré, oversees a very weak and poorly trained army, which is also known for frequent human rights abuses against the population. This lack of protection has also resulted in the emergence of various self-defence groups, such as the Koglweogo, which themselves are also accused of committing human rights abuses (International Crisis Group, 2020).

1.4. International Linkages

Azar's 'international linkages' point at the fact that the state's ability to generate or prevent conflict is not only determined by internal factors, but also by external patterns of linkage (Demmers, 2017). Azar (1990) identifies economic dependency and client relationships (i.e. political and military relationships). These affect state autonomy and independence, and

³⁷ The Emir of Liptako is the supreme customary authority in Seno province in the north of Burkina Faso.

sometimes induces the client state to “pursue both domestic and foreign policies disjointed from, or contradictory to, the needs of its own public” (Azar, 1990, p. 11).

Firstly, there is the colonialist history of France in Burkina Faso. Although Upper Volta³⁸ gained independence from France in 1960, the country continued to significantly rely in France economically by receiving loans to fund economic and urban development. This dynamic continued until 1983, when Thomas Sankara came to power (Williamson, 2013). As Sankara aimed at Burkina Faso’s self-reliance, France and the World Bank halted budgetary support after 1983 and 1984 respectively (Nhemachena & Warikandwa, 2019, p. 152). Sankara thus put a lot of work into the national development of Burkina Faso, without economic or political interference by foreign powers. The country, including the rural areas due to his prioritisation of the rural economy, flourished under his reign (Idrissa, 2019). Sankara had only been in office for four years when he was brutally murdered by accomplices of his friend, and subsequent successor, Blaise Compaoré. Compaoré decided to strengthen the relationship with former coloniser France, as well as reversing Sankara’s policies by opening up the economy to private interests, implementing neoliberal policies, contacting the World Bank to start a Bretton-Woods structural adjustment program. Compaoré’s policies also reversed Sankara’s investment in the rural economy, which resulted in rural underdevelopment and crises (Idrissa, 2019). Thus, by opening up Burkina Faso to foreign intermeddling of amongst others France, Burkina Faso pursued policies that did not contribute to the genuine development of all of the country.

Another important factor is Compaoré’s relationship with Arab kingpins that organised drug trafficking throughout the Sahel and his relationship with the jihadist groups. Firstly, Compaoré forced the gendarmerie to protect drug trafficking that originated in the Gulf of Guinea, crossed through the Sahel-Sahara, and reached its destination in Europe. Consequently, Compaoré compromised this key security agency of the state out of self-interest. At the same time, insecurity issues plaguing the population, especially armed banditry in eastern and northern Burkina, were left to fester (Idrissa, 2019). Secondly, while Islamic terrorism had plagued Mali and Niger, for many years, Burkina Faso was spared. This can be explained through the fact that Compaoré reportedly maintained negotiations with the jihadists. Laurent Kibora explains that “former President Compaoré had a stick-and-carrot strategy, whereby he built up an efficient anti-terrorism unit, but, at the same time, he negotiated with

³⁸ Burkina Faso was known as ‘Upper Volta’ until after independence, the name being a remnant from the French colonial era. In 1983, Thomas Sankara came to power, who changed the name to ‘Burkina Faso’ (Williamson, 2013).

these jihadist groups. Many even believe that he had a non-aggression pact with them" (Krippahl, 2019, para. 3). Thus, despite the absence of jihadist attacks, jihadist activity certainly already existed within Burkina's borders. A part of its territory served as a recruitment point and logistics center for jihadists in the Sahel region (Navarro, 2019). A source of the Burkinabé security forces states that "Burkina was their sanctuary" (France24, 2019). In this light, it is interesting to note the first jihadist act³⁹ occurred six months after the fall of Compaoré, and only two weeks after the dissolution of the RSP (Navarro, 2019).

1. PROCESS

2.1. Communal Actions and Strategies

Partly due to their marginalisation, jihadist groups such as Ansaroul Islam, ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), and JNIM (Al-Qaeda branch), have been able to specifically recruit the Fulani (Cissé, 2020). However, grievances caused by deprivation of human needs were not the only factor in sparking recruitment. Ansaroul Islam, deemed Burkina's first homegrown militant Islamist group, significantly contributed to the destabilisation of northern Burkina Faso. The rise of this homegrown group can be explained partly through its leader, Ibrahim Malam Dicko, and by grievances caused by security force abuses, in addition to the longstanding marginalisation on different levels as explained in the section above (Le Roux, 2019). As early as 2009, Dicko, a Fulani preacher, was allowed to broadcast his message through local radio stations. He was a skilled speaker who drew large audiences with an anti-establishment discourse, and a call to social equality based on Islamic principles throughout the province. However, Dicko lost most of his sympathisers among the local population when he began to call for an armed struggle. Thus, although Dicko's ideas were well received, the majority of the population did not believe the solution to be violence (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 6). Dicko went to Mali, where he met Amadou Koufa, leader of the Macina Liberation Front⁴⁰, who became his mentor. When Dicko returned to northern Burkina in 2016, he started mobilising support for the creation of Ansaroul Islam. This time, he managed to gain support for his militant cause. An important factor in this change were the security forces' abuses that had happened in the meantime, such as the killing or humiliation of Fulani

³⁹ In April 2015, jihadists kidnapped a Romanian security guard at the Tambao manganese mine (located in the North of Burkina Faso, in the area bordering Mali and Niger (Navarro, 2019).

⁴⁰ The MLF ('Macina Liberation Front', also called 'Katibat Macina') is one of the most active violent extremist groups in Mali today. It is one of the four groups that together make up JNIM, the umbrella coalition of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the Sahel. JNIM stands for 'Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen', and means 'Group to Support Islam and Muslims' (ECFR, 2019).

community elders (Le Roux, 2019; Estelle, 2019). After Dicko died in 2017 following a French-led militant raid of the militant's camp, Ansaroul Islam declined. Yet, several of its members reportedly decided to join other militant Islamist groups such as ISGS. Furthermore, his ideas survived and militant groups have continued to skilfully play into the many grievances that Fulani (youth) experience (Demuyneck & Coleman, 2020; Huon, 2020).

2.2 State Actions and Strategies

Due to their subsequent association with these militant Islamist groups, the Fulani currently face stigmatisation by large parts of the Burkinabé society, including the state's Defence and Security Forces (FDS⁴¹) (Idrissa, 2019; Clingendael interviews; 2020⁴²). This has not infrequently led to atrocities by these forces, one recent example being the killing of 31 unarmed Fulani detainees by state security forces (HRW, April 2020). Consequently, due to long-standing political, economic, and social neglect and the human rights abuses, the relationship of Burkinabé living in the north with the state is a negative one, fuelled by fear, mistrust and frustration (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 7; Raineri et al., 2019, p. 31). Azar (1990) notes that in the majority of cases, states (especially ones with weak governance structures) employ a militant or harsh response in their strategy to cope with communal dissent. Similarly, the weak Burkinabé government has employed a very militarised counterinsurgency. This military response often involves abuses by security forces and self-defence groups which in turn fuel local, community-based violence that in turn provides a fertile recruiting ground for armed groups (International Crisis Group, 2020). Yet, the government chooses to encourage these self-defence groups and have additionally started to allow civilians to fight alongside the state security forces after a training of only two weeks (!) (International Crisis Group, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020). Besides demonstrating the relative weakness of the state, these dynamics significantly risk worsening the inter-communal violence even further.

This weakness, combined with the spiralling security crisis and jihadist attacks since 2016, has led the overwhelmed government of President Roché Kaboré to see no other option than to allow Operation Barkhane to intervene in Burkina Faso since 2018 (Idrissa, 2019).

⁴¹ FDS stands for Forces de Défense et de Sécurité.

⁴² For example: "Beaucoup parce que les FDS nous traitent de djihadistes et les djihadistes nous tuent aussi. Quand on est peulhs seulement on est exposé. Le plus grand défi pour nous c'est effectivement la stigmatisation dont nous sommes victimes. C'est devenu un crime que d'être Peul. Nous ne savons pas pourquoi on nous stigmatise comme si nous sommes des sous hommes. A vrai dire, nous souffrons de cette situation. Mais même sur place, on a les mêmes problèmes. Dès qu'il y a une attaque, les FDS arrivent et tuent tous les Peuls sans discernement aucun et surtout sans preuve. C'est inacceptable et c'est ce qui aggrave le terrorisme" (Clingendael interview, Est, éleveurs-pasteurs, Gayeri, December 2019).

However, France does operate to a lesser extent in Burkina Faso as compared to for example Mali. This may be partially explained by the fact that Kaboré is hesitant to involve France, being the former coloniser and ally of ousted ex-President Blaise Compaoré. This has resulted in a diffuse anti-French sentiment in Burkina Faso and more generally the Sahel, including perceptions of France being imperialist, trampling on national sovereignty. Suspicions are also raised as to whether France has a hidden agenda in the Sahel (Asche, 2020, p. 10; Roger, 2019).

2.3 Built-in Mechanisms of Conflict

This mechanism identified by Azar (1990) relates to the effects of long-term conflicts on mutual perceptions, and how this, in turn, can affect the behaviour of belligerent groups. When looking at the conflict dynamics of Burkina Faso, one can see that both actions by jihadist groups and the government or state security forces have contributed to intercommunal violence. Reification of ethnicity and increased stigmatisation lead to a negative downward spiral of further intercommunal violence and stigmatisation.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed the pre-existing and processual factors causing and reinforcing conflict dynamics in (northern) Burkina Faso. Although Azar's framework is very useful to provide a structured overview and analysis of the different dynamics, Idrissa's (2019) observation should be considered. Idrissa (2019), having conducted elaborate research on conflict dynamics in Burkina Faso, posits that, while Burkina Faso had all the 'ingredients' for conflict to take root, the key trigger for this spiralling security crisis is found in dynamics external to Burkina Faso. By this, he means the spill-over mechanisms of the destabilisation and weapon influx from Libya and the rebellion and spiralling conflict in Mali (and Niger).

6. Critical assessment of Barkhane's enemy-centric COIN strategy in the Burkinabé context

Now that Operation Barkhane's counterinsurgency strategy have been analysed, and the Burkinabé conflict dynamics have been examined, this chapter will constitute a critical assessment of Barkhane's enemy-centric COIN strategy in the Burkinabé context.

A. The enemy as the centre of gravity: decontextualisation and local roots obscured

Firstly, the emphasis on the enemy (the terrorists/terrorist armed groups) risks decontextualisation and insufficient attention to local dynamics, as well as the externalisation and homogenisation of the enemy. Macron, in his speeches, does at times mention famine, poverty, lack of education as factors that enable recruitment by Islamist militant groups⁴³. Yet at the same time, he also repeatedly takes the terrorist threat out of context by seemingly equalling the terrorist threat in the Levant, the Sahel, and in France⁴⁴. This results in him presenting the terrorist threat as a decontextualised threat that feeds upon local grievances, instead of emphasising the local grievances and factors that enable Islamist militant groups to recruit. One can argue that Barkhane's regional approach to the Sahel, instead of a country-specific approach, exemplifies this decontextualised approach. While Barkhane mostly intervenes in Mali, it also identifies the Liptako-Gourma region as its priority area in fighting the terrorists, due to the porous borders and the resulting identified cross-border 'terrorist threat'. This region does not only span Mali, but also the north of Burkina Faso and the west of Niger. Since the bilateral defence agreement concluded in December 2018 between France and Burkina Faso, Barkhane has conducted several military operations in the north of Burkina Faso (See appendix). The justification to intervene in the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region based on the cross-border terrorist threat appears to point at an understanding of northern Burkina Faso as an extension of the Malian conflict. While the Burkinabé region belonging to the Liptako-Gourma region does indeed share important characteristics across its borders, and

⁴³ For example: "It is by driving out of the continent famine, lack of education, great poverty that we will most surely eliminate what is germinating on this soil: radical Islam, drug and human trafficking, terrorism. Your enemies, our enemies, feed on this misery. Our action must therefore also be a development action, an action which will consist in helping, beyond Mali, all the Sahel States to live better here to dry up everything that gives reasons for Islamist terrorism to continue to pursue his actions" (Macron in Gao, Mali, May 2017).

⁴⁴ For example: "A world war – no country is immune – in a new form. A war that opposes us to a new totalitarianism, that of radical Islamism, which as raised its armies, extended its grip, deployed its ideological apparatus, notably using the Internet, which spreads death and mass terror. Its goal, as we know, is to enslave bodies and minds, to try to divide, to break up, to crush our democracies [...] It is primarily military, to fight terrorist groups in their strongholds, in the Sahel, Iraq, and Syria. Thanks to our armies, thanks to the military strikes of the coalition, Daesh, the Islamic State, is weakened – but the fight will be long! This war is also being waged at our gates, on the other side of the Mediterranean, in Libya. And we continue, of course, to fight against jihadist groups in the Sahel!" (Valls (French Prime Minister), September 2016).

while borders are indeed porous, northern Burkina Faso is still a part of a different country, with different conflict dynamics based on the population, ethnicity, history, strength of the army, government, etc. To see the north of Burkina Faso as an extension of the Malian conflict, then, risks decontextualisation of the country-specific conflict dynamics. In reality, by intervening in Burkina Faso, Barkhane inevitably becomes part of the conflict dynamics at play in Burkina Faso. Yet, it is highly questionable whether (predominantly) militarily intervening in a highly unstable country with no UN peacekeeping force present (like MINUSMA in Mali), will contribute in any way to long-term stability and peace.

Secondly, placing the enemy at the centre of gravity also risks decontextualizing ‘enemy’, i.e. Islamist militant groups, by ignoring or downplaying their differences and their local dimension. The French discourse and actions imply the idea of an ‘organised enemy’; preying upon the local population in “failed states” (Powell, 2017). Although it is true that there are long-established networks of all sorts of trafficking, in which jihadist groups are also engaged, and established contacts between jihadist groups, it is crucial to realise the fact that this is not an organised ‘homogeneous’ enemy or evil that pops up in different places. Here, it is important to realise the interests local Islamist militant groups have in aligning themselves with umbrella organisations like the Islamic State or Al Qaeda. In turn, these umbrella organisations often share this interest, as it reinforces the idea of their power and success in withstanding the “imperialist Western evil France”.

Thirdly, the (one-sided) focus on the “armed terrorist groups” who “want chaos”, “want to destabilise the Sahel”, and who “are trying to thrive by exploiting the vulnerabilities of these peripheral regions”⁴⁵ obscures the more complex reality. It does not acknowledge the fact that besides using force against the population (“if you don’t leave in 72h we will kill you”⁴⁶), the Islamist militant groups are also skilled at winning the population’s support (win: providing protection, money, ideology, marrying into communities⁴⁷), and that this in itself is a result of the decades-long neglect by the Sahelian governments of these peripheral areas such as the north of Burkina Faso.

Furthermore, by solely focusing on the atrocities committed by Islamist militant groups, the significant amount of abuses by state security forces, especially against the stigmatised Fulani, play into the success and survival of Islamist militant groups. State security forces’ abuses are an important factor in Burkina Faso in the grievances and recruitment of especially

⁴⁵ See defence policy speech macron and the press release bilateral agreement 2018 Burkina – France (add ref).

⁴⁶ Reportage Walsh & Sy, 2020.

⁴⁷ See Demuynek & Coleman, 2020. Interviews Clingendael (2020).

the Fulani (Dufka, 2020; Estelle, 2019). State security abuses facilitated recruitment of Fulani by Ibrahim Dicko, founder of Burkina Faso's first homegrown militant Islamist group Ansarul Islam. Clingendael interviews (2019, 2020) with herders (Fulani) in the north and east of Burkina Faso indicate the slow and lacking response of the state to the stigmatisation of these Fulani. One interview indicates that, if the state will not soon play an active role in fighting Fulani stigmatisation, they will all flee the country⁴⁸. Another Fulani Focus Group indicates that they are "more scared of the state security forces than of the terrorists"⁴⁹. France's exclusive focus on the atrocities committed by Islamist militant groups therefore represents a worryingly simplistic and one-sided understanding of the situation on the ground. The fact that heads of state (French and G5 Sahel) during the Pau summit (January 2020) "paid tribute to the civilian victims of the atrocities committed by those terrorist groups and to the African, French and international soldiers killed while accomplishing this mission" (France Diplomacy, January 2020), while not saying a word about the atrocities committed by state security forces, confirms this one-sidedness.

Moreover, the one-sided focus on the atrocities committed by militant Islamist groups enables the cooperation of the French forces with the local Burkinabé forces, that are known for these human rights abuses. The literature review chapter has already shown the problematic implications of this cooperation. There has been a push by external actors for national armies to root out the jihadists from the territories they have occupied (Tinti, 2020). In this light, the Pau summit rather encouraged French and local armies' efforts. This is reflected in the four pillars, including the focus on French and joint efforts in the fight of terrorism, strengthening the military capabilities of the Sahelian states, and support for the return of the state and administrations (French Diplomacy, January 2020). This clearly implies the idea that the state is good and the terrorist groups are bad. It also assumes that the state cares for its entire population, while the situation in (among others) the north of Burkina Faso shows the severe

⁴⁸ L'État réagit très lentement, pourtant il faut faire vite si non tous les éleveurs vont partir au sud. Nous ne voyons vraiment pas de réaction forte de l'état par rapport à la stigmatisation des éleveurs Peuls dans le cadre de cette lutte. C'est très mauvais, et comme l'autre vient de le dire, nous risquons de vider la zone pour nous réfugier dans des pays où au moins on ne va pas nous tuer" (Clingendael interview, Est, éleveurs-pasteurs, Gayeri, December 2019).

⁴⁹ Mais, il y a aussi le contexte sécuritaire, lié aux groupes terroristes où nous sommes confrontés non seulement aux attaques des groupes, terroristes, mais aussi dans les pays étrangers, on nous accuse souvent, on nous assimile aux terroristes et nous sommes arbitrairement arrêtés et emprisonnés. Cette situation est la plus grave, nous avons plus peur des Forces de police ou gendarmerie dans ces pays que l'action des groupes terroristes. Souvent, avec les groupes terroristes, quand ils vous rencontrent et qu'ils sentent que vous être musulmans, ils vous laissent tranquille, mais certains aussi ne considèrent pas votre religion, ils vous tuent sans chercher à comprendre (Clingendael interview, Est, éleveurs-pasteurs, Bogande, December 2019).

decades-long neglect by the state and the lack of protection against both state security forces and the Islamist militant groups.

In this light, it is very interesting to note the development on the ground after the Pau summit, held on 13 January 2020). From January 2020, the amount of human rights abuses by state security forces in the Sahel exploded. Nsaibia (2020, p. 3) asserts that

In the wake of the Pau meeting, state violence targeting civilians increased in all three countries as local and foreign forces stepped up their operations. If the Pau Summit did not encourage civilian targeting, it evidently appears to be a direct consequence.

Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, a senior analyst for the Sahel at the International Crisis Group, provides a more detailed understanding of how the emphasis on stepping up operations is related to an increase in human rights abuses:

“[t]here has been a push for national armies, at the behest of increasingly frustrated domestic populations and external actors like former colonial power France, to root out the jihadists from territories that they have occupied. But these military campaigns are ripe for human rights abuses, since jihadist groups can always revert to asymmetrical warfare and blend in with the local population when necessary” (Ibrahim in Tinti, 2020).

This explosion in state security abuses gained international attention through denouncements and reports by Human Rights Watch (2020) and Amnesty International (2020). As a result, France denounced these human rights abuses by state security forces through stating that this impunity should be addressed, that these abuses “could threaten international support” (RFI, June 2020), and through Macron stating during the June 2020 Nouakchott summit that “the Peul (i.e. Fulani) populations, in particular, are not the enemy of anyone [...] we have only one enemy: Islamist terrorism throughout the region” (Macron, June 2020). Yet, until then, France had been extremely timid on these human rights abuses driven by stigmatisation (Bensimon, 2020). Bensimon further argues that France indirectly has a share in these abuses, as it contributes to training and equipping the local militaries and as Barkhane’s French armed forces conduct joint operations with the local armies.

In conclusion, this section has argued that the ‘enemy’ being the centre of gravity has risked and resulted in decontextualisation and externalisation of the terrorist threat, obscured the importance of the root causes which are found in local dynamics, and has contributed to a simplification of a much more complex reality. This risks and results in abuses against the local population, especially stigmatised Fulani, as a focus on results and simplification of reality easily leads to the enemy-centric approach of “draining the sea”, with the population in it.

B. The risks of “military first, all else will follow”

Chapter 4.A. has shown that the underlying Barkhane COIN strategy assumes that military efforts are first and foremost needed before aspects of reconciliation, development and stabilisation can be implemented. Guichaoua (2020, p. 907), based on interviews with French military officials, concluded that the French military’s course of action is formally planned backwards, after establishing a so-called ‘desired end state’. The objective indicators for this end state have not been made public but involve “weakening GATs sufficiently that local armies are able to fight them ‘on their own’”.

Yet, this “military first and all else will follow” approach is problematic for several reasons. Despite France’s efforts at framing its Sahel policy as ‘Africanised’ (i.e. France supports the G5 Sahel states rather than leading them), the fact that the military efforts need to come first, combined with the fact that the local armies are too weak to conduct the counterinsurgency on their own, results in Barkhane leading the counterinsurgency. This is shown in the fact that France contributes to training and equipping local armies, and in the fact that Barkhane’s aim is for the Sahelian countries to “take over the fight against terrorism” (Barkhane Press Pack, 2020, p. 4).

Another important risk inherent to a militarised approach is the risk of being at the expense of political sensitivity. Indeed, Guichaoua (2020) explains France’s approach to the Sahel as technical and depoliticised. However, in reality, all of Barkhane’s actions are fundamentally political. Firstly, the fact that Barkhane leads the counterinsurgency efforts, reinforces and displays the reality that the Sahelian states are not capable of managing their own sovereignty and territory. While being reluctant towards French cooperation due to its political sensitivity in Burkina Faso, the overwhelmed Burkinabé government saw no other option than to formalise a defence agreement with Barkhane in 2018. Secondly, considering the significant (neo)colonial role of France in the Sahel, external military assistance is a politically sensitive issue (Guichaoua, 2020). This has sparked protest throughout the Sahel, notably in Mali and Burkina Faso, against French military intervention, and has fuelled suspicions of a French ‘hidden agenda’ in the Sahel⁵⁰ (Asche, 2020, p. 10; Roger, 2019). In Burkina Faso the anti-French sentiment is fuelled by the legacy of Sankarism, which aimed to develop the nation without external assistance (Roger, 2019). Nevertheless, France, faced with these protests, has criticised the Sahelian leaders for not dismissing this anti-French sentiment.

⁵⁰ This is not to suggest that the entire Sahelian populations is against French intervention. In Burkina Faso, opinions are divided, as some emphasise the neo-colonialist aspect and the risks of a militarised approach, while others assert that Barkhane is needed in order to curb the “terrorist threat”.

Although the spread of fake news regarding France has partially informed France's response, it nevertheless seems to reveal a lack of awareness of the political sensitivity of French involvement. France's depoliticised approach is further exemplified through seeing mentoring as a primarily technical issue to enhance Barkhane's efficacy. This is in stark contrast with the Sahelian perception of mentoring, i.e. "a politically sensitive move intensifying external military tutorship" (Guichaoua, 2020, p. 908). Thirdly, the depoliticised approach is evident in France's choices of forming alliances with non-state armed groups on the ground. France saw these alliances as instrumental to the fight against terror, however they were deeply resented by the general Sahelian public (Guichaoua, 2020). This shows how an enemy-centric approach which prioritises the military to come first, risks deterring the population, rather than 'winning their hearts and minds'.

Guichaoua (2020) shows how this "military first and the rest will follow" approach is (partly) a consequence of the way in which the French counterinsurgency approach is built. He explains that the French administrative jargon uses the terminology of engineering, resulting in Programmes and teams forming 'bricks', designed to complement other bricks. These bricks are categorised either by sectors of intervention (the 3Ds (defence, diplomacy, development)) and time horizons. However, this 'brick' approach leads to several problematic results. Firstly, although it appears to have improved compared to the past, the cooperation between the 'bricks' remains not smooth. This means for example that the 'defence' brick works rather independently from the 'development' brick (Guichaoua, 2020). Secondly, within a "stabilisation project" such as Barkhane, all bricks are supposed to build on each other. Yet it starts with the military brick, which is then chronologically followed by the development brick. The development brick then is also supposed to answer the challenges posed by the 'military' brick, such as the aforementioned resentment by the population when Barkhane worked together with non-state militias. This, Guichaoua explains, inevitably leads not to withdrawal in case of failure, but the continuation of building with other bricks. In the same way, the reform of Sahelian armies is compared to "fixing a car while driving it" (Guichaoua, 2020, p. 908).

The way in which the French policy thus creates significant problematic aspects and raises the question of how the French expect to come to a comprehensive approach that does not continue to build on previous failures. This policy is reflected in Macron's visit to Burkina Faso in November 2017. His visit was met with protests in the capital Ouagadougou, and with violence against French troops. According to Benedikter and Ouedraogo (2018),

[t]hese protests confirmed widespread unhappiness of the population with what is viewed as the inability of French partners to combat Burkinabe government corruption and malpractice. Macron, paradoxically, indirectly confirmed such perceptions by stating that France aims to leave its colonial past behind and will no longer tell Africa what to do. He promised an increase in development aid and offered partnerships in education, renewable energies, startup companies, transportation, and health. Yet many local observers interpreted his words as a retreat from France's responsibilities towards improving the rule of law and governance in Burkina Faso. During his subsequent visit to French troops in the Sahel region, Macron promised fast and decisive military victories over Islamic extremists, yet the underlying development problems at the roots of fundamentalism remained insufficiently addressed in his outlook.

This excerpt clearly reveals all of the severe aforementioned limitations of the enemy-centric COIN approach of the French. It shows the complications of the uncritical assumption of the legitimacy of the government and the illegitimacy of the Islamist militant groups. It shows the negative consequence of working with the government to first militarily intervene, in order to then implement development initiatives, because the initial assumptions and positions underlying the French intervention do not allow for a critical review and reform of the roots of the problems: bad governance. It is highly questionable how development projects will be sustainable if the problems of corruption, government malpractice, state security abuses, and stigmatisation are not sufficiently addressed in France's COIN strategy. Although France may seem to address the root causes by creating projects to battle inequality, poverty, etc., it only addresses the symptoms, as the real root causes lie within the governance of the country.

7. Conclusion

France's fight against terrorism/terrorists in the Sahel through Operation Barkhane has been an ambitious and expensive counterinsurgency campaign. Yet, withdrawal of French troops seems nowhere near; on the contrary, involvement seems to only increase (Venturi & Toure, 2020). As France is accused of having spread and exacerbated the insecurity across the Sahel, and as anti-French sentiment has spread among parts of the Sahelian populations, it is important to critically analyse its intervention through Operation Barkhane. This thesis has conducted such an analysis by investigating what kind of counterinsurgency strategy Barkhane employs, and has critically assessed the assumptions inherent to this strategy, specifically by considering the implications on the ground in (northern) Burkina Faso. This has led this thesis to investigate the following research question: *Which assumptions underlie Barkhane's counterinsurgency strategy, and how does this strategy play out in the context of Burkina Faso in the period 2017-2020?*

To answer this question, the thesis has explained how France's Barkhane counterinsurgency is enemy-centric in nature, reflected in its compartmentalised "brick" approach that prioritises the military component, and in Barkhane's preoccupation with the destruction of a decontextualised terrorist enemy. This prioritisation of military actions reflects the enemy-centric approach of "first physically and militarily defeat the enemy, and all else will follow". Yet, this 'brick' approach is problematic as, as the "military brick first" has resulted in cooperation with the Sahelian governments and state security forces, despite significant frustration and fear towards these state actors among the (Burkinabé) population, in particular the Fulani (Clingendael interviews, 2020). Guichaoua (2020) explains this as "fixing the car while driving". France's cooperation with the state actors legitimises them, while in reality they are part of the many problems that have contributed to insecurity and recruitment by Islamist militant groups. In addition, this is detrimental to a holistic counterinsurgency approach, as uncritically cooperating with the government and its military forces excludes the option of addressing the root causes of insecurity, i.e. bad governance.

Moreover, one may wonder whether Barkhane's enemy-centric militarised approach does not in fact exacerbate the insecurity rather than alleviate it. Barkhane's approach involves weakening violent extremist groups to such an extent that the local armies will be able to take over from Barkhane (Guichaoua, 2020). Yet, in Burkina Faso, the army, significantly affected by Compaoré's policies and the dissolution of the RSP, remains extremely weak. This is demonstrated in the Burkinabé government encouraging self-defence groups (e.g. Koglweogo) and civilian forces. The former have been accused of human rights abuses. The latter only

receive a training of two weeks, which raises questions regarding their competencies and concern of further ethnicisation of the conflict dynamics. Moreover, the compartmentalised brick approach that asserts military action first to then implement reconciliation and development programmes, is highly questionable in the case of Burkina Faso. One may ask how France expects to bring lasting peace and stability (Macron, May 2017), to a country with a significantly weak government, that is subject to ever-deteriorating insecurity, and where no UN peacekeeping force is present.

The enemy-centric counterinsurgency is not only reflected in the “military first and all else will follow”. It is also demonstrated in France’s ‘centre of gravity’: the fight against terrorists is Barkhane’s top priority. This is then further framed in an enemy-centric way as France, in its discourse and actions, creates an image of an organised, decontextualised (evil) (terrorist) enemy. This problematically simplifies a complex reality, obscures root causes, and shifts the focus towards addressing the symptoms (i.e. terrorism) of insecurity (Charbonneau, 2019; Wing, 2016). As Idahosa et al. (2018) argue: it does not address the sources of recruitment. On the one hand, these jihadist groups win over the population by capitalising on these grievances, including the human rights abuses by the state security forces. On the other hand, these groups, such as Al-Qaeda⁵¹, have been sowing fear among the population in the Liptako-Gourma area through for example creating assassin units that kill anyone known to have collaborated with the Burkinabé state forces or the French Barkhane troops. In addition, jihadist groups have been blending in with the population. It has been argued that the push for military results in the fight against terrorism by several actors among whom France (for example during the 2020 Pau Summit), is connected to the staggering increase in human rights abuses, including significantly in Burkina Faso in recent months (Nsaibia, 2020).

By analysing and assessing Barkhane’s counterinsurgency strategy and the assumptions inherent to it, this thesis represents an illustration of the complications that an enemy-centric counterinsurgency approach risks bringing about. Yet, the complications that Barkhane faces are not solely restricted to an enemy-centric COIN. Indeed, it also brings to light difficulties inherent to counterinsurgency in itself. Counterinsurgents representing an external force, such as French-led Barkhane in the Sahelian countries, are employed with the consent of the host government, while they do not need the consent of the insurgents (Howard, 2019). Counterinsurgents thus automatically side with the government, thereby inevitably legitimising the government (Charbonneau & Sears, 2014). In the case of Barkhane, France repeatedly

⁵¹ Local affiliate: JNIM.

justifies its intervention by underscoring the its invitation by and partnership with the Sahelian governments. Yet, in places where counterinsurgencies are undertaken, bad governance is frequently at the root of the problems that have brought about the insurgency. Consent of the government can therefore not uncritically be equated with consent of the population.

Another problem inherent to today's counterinsurgencies in particular, including the Sahel, is the global trend towards stabilisation and counterterrorism. Unsurprisingly, today's interventions are more often denoted as military interventions or counterterrorism operations that counterinsurgencies. The international efforts in the Sahel represent a good case to illustrate this shift (Charbonneau, 2019). The enemy-centric focused concepts of counterterrorism and the War on Terror lead to a focus on symptoms rather than on root causes of the Sahelian crisis, as well as decontextualising the Islamist militant 'enemy' or 'terrorist'.

The enemy-centric approach of Operation Barkhane thus reflects the complications inherent to enemy-centric counterinsurgencies. Yet, France continues to employ and even intensify its military efforts in the Sahel. Considering these risks and dangers, France needs to fundamentally rethink *what* it is doing in the Sahel, i.e. what its ultimate goals are. If this is indeed long-term peace and stability (Macron, May 2017), France needs to seriously reconsider its compartmentalised (and militarised) "brick strategy" and its enemy-centrism. Only a serious reconsideration of this counterinsurgency strategy will create space for the conditions necessary to bring long-term peace and stability to the Sahel, including Burkina Faso. Even if its counterinsurgency would truly aim to address the real root causes of insecurity, i.e. bad governance, France will still need to deal with the dilemma of how to bring about fundamental reform of the state apparatus, while working together alongside and with the consent of the Sahelian governments.

[Limitations and suggestions for follow-up research](#)

This thesis has several limitations that are related to its scope and to the availability of information. Although the Barkhane Press Pack outlines the aims and activities of Barkhane and its partners, it does not explicitly provide insights into its ultimate end goal and the steps it takes in order to reach that goal. This, as explained, is related to the "brick strategy" of Barkhane itself and to the fact that the objective indicators to the end state are not publicly disclosed. This is problematic because it hampers one's (including this thesis') ability to accurately analyse and assess Barkhane's methods. Guichoua's (2020) research has been key in this thesis' ability to gain insight into Barkhane's method, yet the general scarcity of

information limits the thesis' assessment. More research into Barkhane's exact 'theory of change' would therefore be crucial.

Furthermore, this thesis' use of Burkina Faso as a case study in the critical assessment of Barkhane's assumptions constitutes both a strength and a weakness. Burkina's case has particularly pinpointed the shortcomings of Barkhane's militarised strategy in the country by highlighting its predominantly military intervention in a country where there is no peacekeeping force like MINUSMA and whose government forces are too weak to fight the "jihadists" on their own. The strength of this thesis then is that it pioneers as an examination of the implications of Barkhane's military actions in the north of Burkina Faso. In this sense, it contributes to filling a gap in academic literature, which mainly focuses on Mali. However, the limited research on Barkhane in Burkina Faso also limits this thesis, as it cannot compare its findings to other research. The research that comes closest is Idrissa's (2019) well-informed examination of the conflict dynamics in Burkina Faso. Idrissa mentions the role of France in Burkina's conflict dynamics, yet his focus is on explaining the conflict dynamics itself, and not on Operation Barkhane in relation to Burkina Faso. Related to this scarcity is the difficulty of finding precise information on the extent to which there is coordination and cooperation between France and Burkina Faso in Operation Barkhane's actions in the country.

Finally, it is important to explain why, although part of France's Sahelian strategy, this thesis has not elaborated on Barkhane's partnerships in great detail. Firstly, although France indeed provides political and economic support to actors like the G5 Sahel and MINUSMA, they are essentially different actors, and should therefore not be confused with the counterinsurgency that France is conducting through Operation Barkhane. The fact that France attempts to legitimise itself through MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel actually reconfirms its very compartmentalised engineering logic. Particularly Barkhane's attempts to legitimise itself through MINUSMA is extremely problematic, as this idea of the division of labour conflates peacekeeping and counterterrorism, thereby infringing upon the impartiality of a UN peacekeeping operation that is present based on the consent of the warring parties, and whose aim is to aid reconciliation and ultimately sustainable peace. Secondly, the G5 Sahel joint force operations achievements are very few, and the development projects initiated by for example the G5 Sahel are often delayed or underfunded, which corresponds to the logic of development being a means in the pursuit of security, rather than an end in itself (Guichaoua, 2020). And thirdly, and importantly, UN peacekeeping force MINUSMA does not operate in Burkina Faso.

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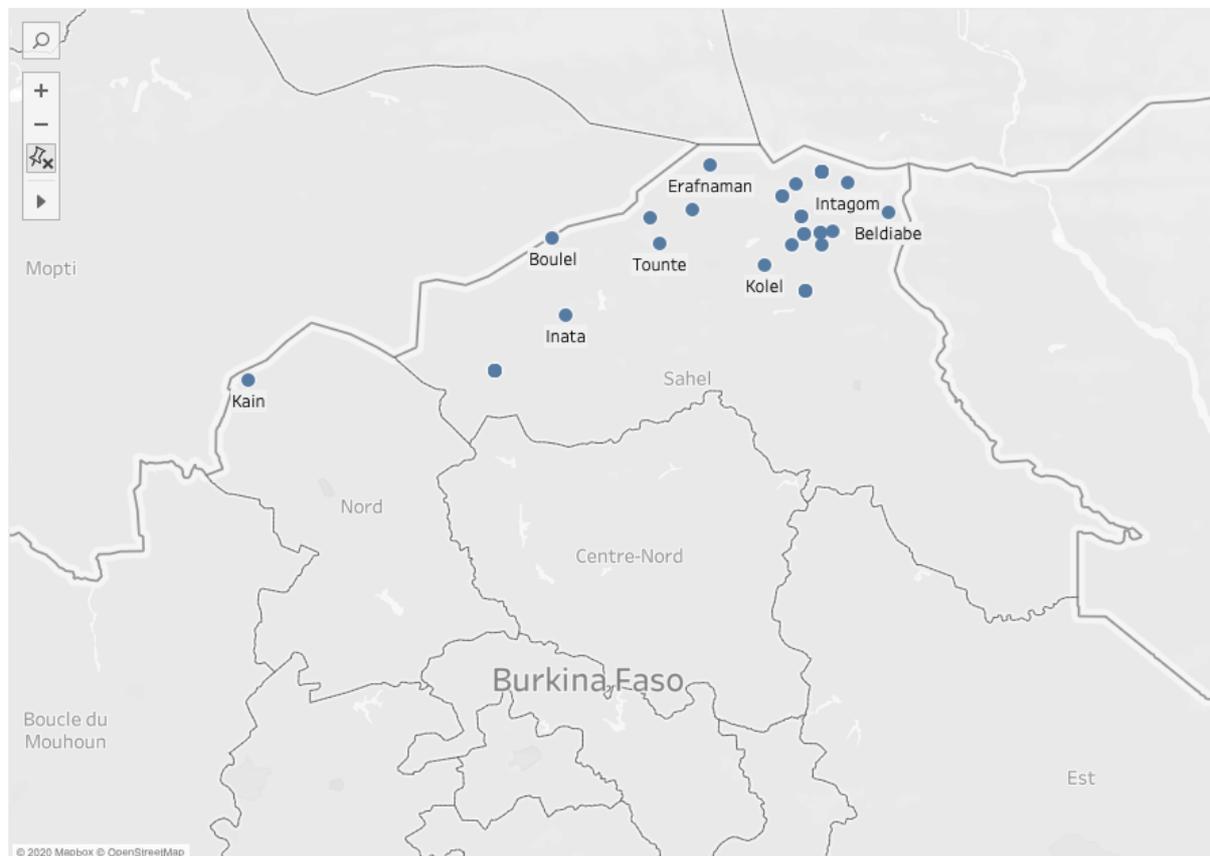
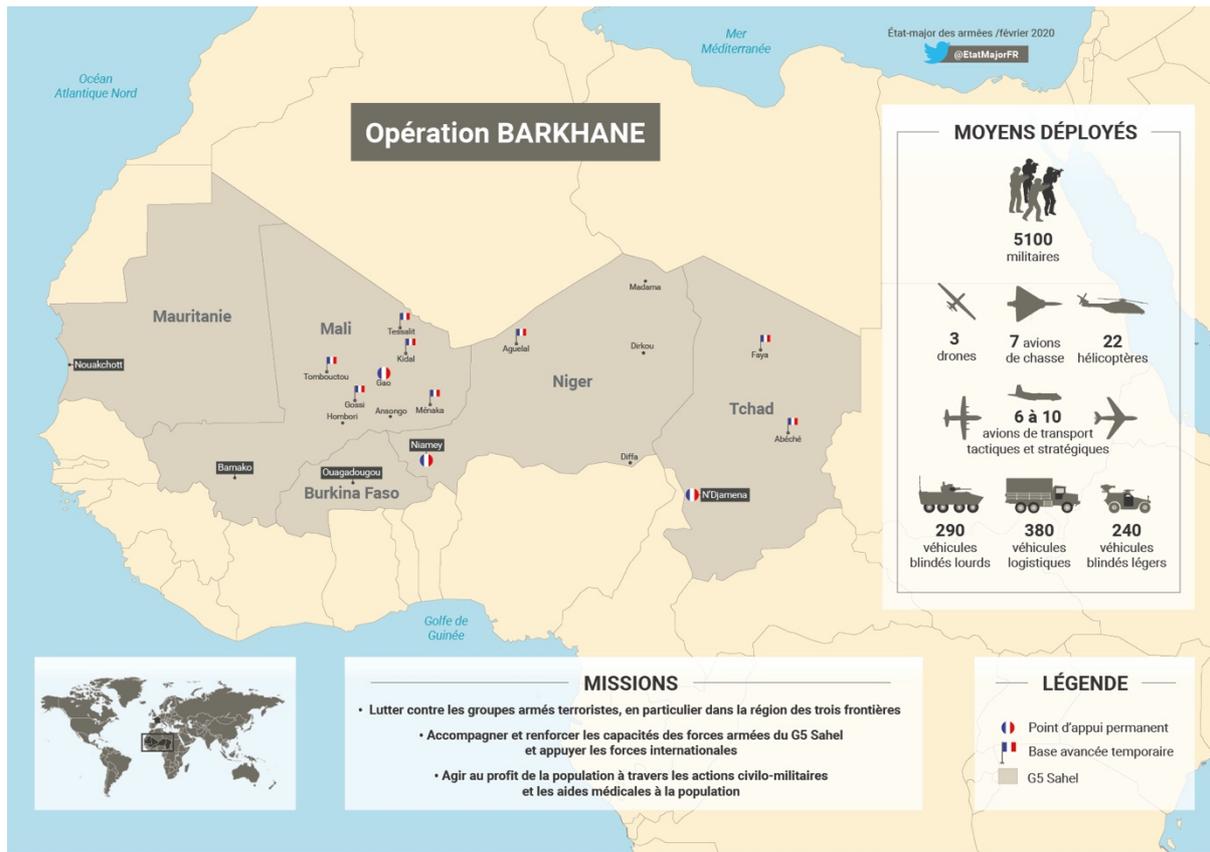
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Appendix



event_date	event_type	sub_event_type	actor1	assoc_actor_1	actor2	assoc_actor_2
20 July 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)			
20 July 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)			
20 July 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)			
16 July 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
18 June 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
24 May 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
09 May 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
07 May 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
07 May 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
07 May 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
07 May 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
07 May 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
07 May 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
07 May 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
04 May 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
01 May 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
01 May 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
01 May 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
27 April 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
23 April 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
11 April 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
07 April 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
04 April 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
09 March 2020	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
05 March 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-); Military Forces of Mali (2013-)	Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
02 March 2020	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)		Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
09 December 2019	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-)	Anassoul Islam	
09 November 2019	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-)	JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
09 November 2019	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-)	JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
13 September 2019	Strategic developments	Change to group/activity	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-)	JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
29 May 2019	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-)	JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
29 May 2019	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-)	JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	Katiba Macina
29 May 2019	Explosions/Remote violence	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-)	JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
09 May 2019	Battles	Armed clash	Military Forces of France (2017-)	Military Forces of the United States (2017-); Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-)	JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)	
03 October 2018	Explosions/Remote violence	Air/drone strike	Anassoul Islam		Military Forces of France (2017-)	