



SAHEL/BARKHANE UPDATE

More Questions than Answers in the New Security Dispensation

Last week's announcement that both the Barkhane mission and the Takuba task force were to be withdrawn from Mali was largely a formality; deliberate provocations¹ by the Junta in Bamako in recent months had made **the status quo completely untenable**. However, there are more **questions than answers in the new dispensation for the region's security**.

① Naturally, the joint declaration issued at the conclusion of the February 17th conference in Paris² sought to emphasize the enduring nature of the military campaign against the Islamist threat in the Sahel³. Accordingly, **the forced departure was presented as a strategic re-boot**⁴ under which the base of operations would be transferred to neighbouring Niger⁵, in a time-frame of four to six months.

However, one can already identify a number of **problems with this latest iteration of the Barkhane/Takuba deployment**.

② In the first place, the ink was barely dry on the Paris communiqué when the **Malian authorities dismissed the schedule** Mr. Macron had announced, insisting instead that the relevant troops be withdrawn "without further delay, under the supervision [of the host government]"⁶.

The logistical challenge of relocating 4,000 troops and their matériel would seem to rule out accelerating the planned schedule in any significant way. This creates the **potential for unintended 'encounters'** as FAMA⁷ troops begin to deploy in operational zones before the international forces have fully vacated them.

③ It was actually **back in July 2021**⁸ that Mr. Macron first announced that the newly constituted **Takuba special-forces mission would be based in Niamey**. The fact that this deployment failed to materialize suggests **an acute case of second thoughts** on the part of the Niger authorities. There are **ample grounds for such concern**.

¹ The catalogue of harassment has included: declaring a routine Barkhane cargo flight a violation of Mali's airspace; demanding the repatriation of a Danish contingent arriving to join the Takuba task-force; and, declaring persona non grata the French ambassador in Bamako. These were accompanied by a barrage of rhetorical assaults, such as the Prime minister all but equating Barkhane's French troops with mercenaries, by describing them as "legionnaires".

² I.e. Conférence sur la lutte contre la menace terroriste et le soutien à la paix et à la sécurité au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest

³ E.g.: « À la demande de leurs partenaires africains, ... [le Canada et les Etats Européens opérant aux côtés de l'opération Barkhane et au sein de la Task Force Takuba] sont néanmoins convenus de poursuivre leur action conjointe contre le terrorisme dans la région du Sahel. »

See the Déclaration conjointe signed by the representatives of: Germany; Belgium; Bénin; Canada; Chad; Côte d'Ivoire; Czech Republic; Denmark; Estonia; France; Ghana (ECOWAS chair); Hungary; Italy; Lithuania; Mauritania; Netherlands; Niger; Norway; Portugal; Romania; Sénégal (AU chair); Slovakia; Slovenia; Sweden; and Togo – plus the European Council, the European Commission, the Coalition for the Sahel and the AU Commission.

⁴ Employed at the Sahel G5 Summit in June 2021 and again in Jan 2022, the recycled euphemism was never really going to hold water.

⁵ The only 'front-line' State with a democratically elected government, Niger already hosts Barkhane's fleet of Reaper drones that operate from a base outside Niamey.

⁶ Issuing this demand in a televised statement, Choguel Maïga (the combative Prime minister) made a point of repeating the latter phrase twice for added emphasis.

⁷ I.e. Forces armées du Mali.

⁸ I.e. During a joint press conference at the Elysée Palace with President Mohamed Bazoum.

In November 2021 a **Barkhane convoy**⁹, escorted by the national gendarmerie, was blocked by **approximately one thousand demonstrators** protesting against France's military presence. Two civilians were shot dead and 18 wounded in the confrontation¹⁰.

④ The **arrival of the Barkhane and Takuba missions is likely to deepen local antipathy** towards the French-led presence and this could ultimately call the deployment's viability into question¹¹.

Another potential vulnerability for the planned deployment is the **reign of terror which villagers in Niger's Tillabéri region**¹² have endured over the last 18 months – primarily at the hands of the local IS affiliate, the État islamique du Grand Sahara (EIGS). If this spate of massacres were to continue, it **could exacerbate local resentment** over the presence of foreign troops – as happened in Mali.

⑤ The **stated focus** of the reconfigured mission entrusted to the Barkhane and Takuba forces is countering the jihadi threat in **the zone des trois frontières** where, as we have seen, the principal adversary is the EIGS. However, this narrow targeting essentially **leaves to their own devices the AQIM affiliates Ansar Eddine, Katiba Macina and Katiba Sermà**¹³ that have been active in Mali's Sikasso (south-east) and Koulikoro (north-central) regions, respectively.

Although Wagner's mercenary troops are reported to have been deployed in various locations across the centre of the country, it is unclear how effective they will prove in the unfamiliar Malian theatre¹⁴.

⑥ It seems inevitable that the departure of the Barkhane and Takuba forces will significantly compromise **Mali's de facto role as a security-buffer for its coastal neighbours**¹⁵. Indeed, over the last year the northern regions of **Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Benin have each seen multiple attacks** by Islamic extremists¹⁶.

This threat was **clearly on the minds of participants at the recent Paris conference** on security in the Sahel, as the final communiqué records specifically, « **Les partenaires internationaux indiquent leur volonté d'envisager activement d'étendre leur soutien aux pays voisins du Golfe de Guinée et d'Afrique de l'Ouest** »¹⁷.

⁹ A few days earlier the same convoy, which was en route from Abidjan to Gao (Mali), had encountered similar hostility while crossing Burkina Faso.

¹⁰ After initially accusing the demonstrators of provoking the tragedy, President Bazoum soon found it necessary to change his tune ... and demand an investigation into the killings.

¹¹ The most recent massacre occurred earlier this week when turbaned gunmen on motor-cycles opened fire on a bus, killing at least 18 passengers.

¹² Bordered by Burkina Faso's eastern frontier, Tillabéri is the western-most of Niger's eight administrative divisions. With Mali's Gao region to its immediate north, it epitomizes the *zone des trois frontières*, which has emerged as the epicentre of jihadi activity in the Sahel.

¹³ Operating under the umbrella of the Groupe de soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulmans, these two units have, respectively, attacked targets just across Côte d'Ivoire's northern border, and extended their reach progressively westwards towards the Kayes region that borders Senegal.

¹⁴ Especially given the catastrophic failure of their deployment against the Islamist insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province.

¹⁵ As will be recalled, Western intelligence sources have cited a GSIM conclave in 2020 at which, « **Les chefs d'Al-Qaïda au Sahel ont conçu leur projet d'expansion vers les pays du Golfe de Guinée** ». Report quoted in "Al-Qaïda veut progresser vers le Golfe de Guinée", by Le Figaro, Feb. 1, 2021.

¹⁶ The most recent attack took place in Benin on Feb. 9, 2022 when five park rangers and 10 others were killed in the W Regional game reserve (that actually straddles the country's borders with Burkina Faso and Niger).

¹⁷ During the subsequent press conference, Mr. Macron made a point of highlighting the commitment to bolster the security of Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Benin. With specific regard to meeting Côte d'Ivoire's requirements, it seems reasonable to assume that the resources – i.e. infrastructure, personnel, equipment - of the Abidjan-based *Académie internationale de lutte contre le terrorisme* will play a key role.

⑦ While this is all reasonably encouraging, it is noteworthy that there seems to have been **no real mention of Senegal in the relevant discussion**¹⁸. This strikes one as **a grave omission**, in view of:

- the fact that over the last two years the **Senegalese authorities have made a number of arrests** in the vicinity of the Malian border and subsequently charged the individuals concerned with being **recruiters for AQIM**;
- the **determination by the UN Security Council** in March 2021 that “[GSIM] elements, backed by radical Islamist influencers, have encroached into Senegal along the road from Kayes to Kaffrine, in Bakel, in the Ferlo reserve and in the gold extraction area of Saraya” ;
- the AQIM affiliate **Katiba Macina’s relentless advance towards the Senegalese border**.

The scale of the potential threat and the scope of European – and especially French - economic interests in the country encourage the belief that **discreet arrangements might already be in place provide security assistance to the local authorities**, as needed¹⁹.

However, pending evidence of any such a commitment, **a supplement to the Republic’s risk premium**²⁰ would seem warranted.

¹⁸ Although President Macky Sall was in attendance, he was there in his capacity as current chairman of the AU’s conference of heads of state.

¹⁹ One possible motive for such discretion could be to avoid the controversy that a more high-profile arrangement might trigger.

²⁰ I.e. 60 b.p. wide of Côte d’Ivoire, based on the yield spread of each sovereign’s eurobond maturing in 2033.

This Report has been prepared purely for the purposes of information and neither constitutes, nor is intended to constitute an offer to sell or the solicitation of an offer to purchase securities. Although the statements of fact in this Report have been obtained from, and are based upon sources that Rhombus Advisors LLC believes to be reliable, the Firm does not guarantee their accuracy, and any such information may be incomplete or condensed. All opinions and forecasts included in this Report represent the Firm’s judgement as of the date of the Report and are subject to change without notice.