



TSC INSIGHTS

FRANCE'S MISSED MOMENTS IN MALI

Wassim Nasr & Raphael Parens

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Executive Summary

Why did France fail in Mali? French President Emmanuel Macron's decision to withdraw his country's remaining troops from Mali in August 2022 followed a nearly decade-long military mission to combat jihadist insurgents, particularly in the country's north. France's failure reflected an inability to define clear and achievable counterterrorism objectives during *Operation Barkhane*, misaligned public opinion and relations within France and Mali, and indecision among senior policymakers regarding the political status of Sahelian governments. France missed a clear window to withdraw from Mali in early 2021 amidst a possible negotiated settlement between Mali's then-democratic government and Jamaa't Nusra't al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), an affiliate of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali and the Sahel region. Had France seized this opportunity, Paris could have overcome the "mission creep" of Barkhane, an operation lacking clear strategic outcomes or conditions of victory, and concluded the operation successfully, giving the government a badly needed "win" in Africa.

The window for a "clean" withdrawal closed with the arrival of Wagner Group mercenaries in Mali in December 2021. Russian mercenaries advanced with few means and without a fight, and France was left with a choice between taking a military stand against Wagner and the consecutive junta governments or accepting a withdrawal and a harsh foreign policy defeat. In the end, France chose to abandon its costly, decade-long engagement in Mali (the operation cost France almost €1 billion in 2020, or 76 percent of military expenditures for operations at home and abroad).¹ Many will perceive this about-face as a failure to contain jihadi groups, which have continued spreading in the Sahel region, as a failure to protect Sahelian

¹ "Operation Barkhane and the Future of Intervention in the Sahel," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), accessed June 27, 2023, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/operation-barkhane-and-the-future-of-intervention-in-the-sahel>.

civilians from terrorism, and as ceding influence to Russia, which is using Wagner's political success in Mali as a driver of influence elsewhere in west Africa.^{2,3}

Serval Success, Barkhane Bane

Operation Serval – a limited French counterterrorism operation borne out of a request for aid from the previous Malian government in 2013 – proved successful due to its clearly articulated set of military objectives.^{4,5} The operation aimed to drive jihadist groups, including AQIM, Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), out of central Mali and their strongholds in the north and northeast of the country. To explain Serval's success, experts pointed to high-level political will, surgical use of special forces and air strikes, and strong use of local forces and knowledge of the jihadist groups' weak points. The operation capitalized on the enemy groups' tendency to be flushed out of hiding by patrols, where they were exposed to air and artillery attacks.⁶ Indeed, this operation was successful because "France avoided a quagmire and a unilateral commitment by formulating an exit strategy that included a progressive withdrawal that would occur simultaneously with the transfer of responsibility for security and stabilization to a UN-sponsored peacekeeping force."⁷

France's victory was a much needed public relations win for Paris, particularly after the fallout from its failure to broker peace or establish a stable government following the death of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.⁸ This victory also was useful for France at a time when it was being accused of neocolonialism while fighting an

² "Violent Extremism in the Sahel | Global Conflict Tracker," accessed June 27, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel>.

³ Paul Stronski, "Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa's Sahel Region - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace," February 28, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/28/russia-s-growing-footprint-in-africa-s-sahel-region-pub-89135>.

⁴ Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, "Operation Serval: The French Intervention in Mali - Leiden Security and Global Affairs Blog," July 28, 2015, <https://www.leidensecurityandglobalaffairs.nl/articles/operation-serval-the-french-intervention-in-mali>.

⁵ Hassan Ould Moctar, "It Is Time for Europe to Learn from Its Mistakes in the Sahel," Conflict | Al Jazeera, February 15, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/2/15/it-is-time-for-europe-to-learn-from-its-mistakes-in-the-sahel>.

⁶ Stephanie Spet, "Operation Serval: Analyzing the French Strategy against Jihadists in Mali," *ASPJ Africa & Francophonie* 3rd Quarter 2015 (n.d.).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Paul Taylor, "France's Double Game in Libya – POLITICO," April 17, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/frances-double-game-in-libya-nato-un-khalifa-haftar/>.

insurgency.⁹ Serval successfully achieved another objective, as well, defending central Mali from being overrun by Al-Qaida. France appeared successful because it defended Bamako and central Mali, although jihadist objectives did not in fact extend as far as Bamako. As such, Serval was politically successful — it protected the Malian government and capital from being overrun by jihadist groups, while also pushing back jihadi strongholds in northern Mali all the way to the Algerian border.

Barkhane stood in stark contrast to Serval in terms of clear objectives.¹⁰ France aimed to create a global approach to security in the Sahel that would eventually allow Sahelian states to maintain their security autonomously.¹¹ Barkhane's "global" nature rested primarily on European partners — such as Sweden, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom — and expanded Serval's operational scope to the Sahel region, integrating concerned African countries. Like the U.S. counterterror campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, this operation included many partners, but lacked an achievable game plan and an efficient cooperation mechanism.¹² The establishment of Barkhane also provided critical support to the United Nations mission, MINUSMA, by focusing on counterterrorism, which was not one of the latter's mandated roles.¹³ One of the primary challenges for Barkhane was target selection. Instead of attempting to conquer territory or defeat an ideology, counterterror campaigns in the style of the War on Terror aim to fight a tactic, a *modus operandi*, or an act of terrorism. This strips away the political aims from a group, leaving potential outcomes unresolved. Meanwhile, Barkhane's jihadist opponents had both a clear objective (building an Islamic Emirate) and a means (fighting to the death).^{14,15} Further, both Al-Qaida and

⁹ Stephanie Spet, "Operation Serval: Analyzing the French Strategy against Jihadists in Mali," *ASPJ Africa & Francophonie* 3rd Quarter 2015 (n.d.).

¹⁰ Michael Shurkin, "France's War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine," *Texas National Security Review*, November 2, 2020, <https://tnsr.org/2020/11/frances-war-in-the-sahel-and-the-evolution-of-counter-insurgency-doctrine/>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Hassan Ould Moctar, "It Is Time for Europe to Learn from Its Mistakes in the Sahel," *Conflict | Al Jazeera*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/2/15/it-is-time-for-for-europe-to-learn-from-its-mistakes-in-the-sahel>.

¹³ Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Arthur Boutellis, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Counterterrorism and Peacekeeping in the Sahel | IPI Global Observatory," July 20, 2021, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2021/07/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-counterterrorism-and-peacekeeping-in-the-sahel/>.

¹⁴ "The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel: How Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Are Battling for Legitimacy in the Sahelian Context," *Middle East Institute*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/schism-jihadism-sahel-how-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-are-battling-legitimacy-sahelian>.

¹⁵ Puja Pandit, "Terrorism in the Sahel | Global Terrorism Index 2022," *Vision of Humanity*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/sahel-emerges-as-the-new-epicentre-of-terrorism/>.

Islamic State (IS) are engaged in a global power struggle.¹⁶ Indeed, AQIM's fear of losing territory to IS in the Sahel (and elsewhere) has encouraged them to keep fighting.¹⁷ All of these factors meant that France and its allies were politically unprepared for a war of attrition with jihadist groups in the Sahel, while their opponents were prepared to commit to this type of long-term operation.¹⁸

A wide variety of challenges inhibit democratic states like France, the United Kingdom, and the United States when intervening and identifying appropriate long-term goals in challenging counterinsurgency environments like the Sahel. Should they pursue national or regional stability, prioritize the prevention of attacks on home soil, promote democracy, strengthen local governance, advocate for gender equality, or work toward other similar goals? These wide-ranging objectives contribute to discontinuity and are confused by an inability, or a struggle at the very least, to establish long-term foreign policy strategy due to the perception of political impatience, changes in public opinion, and leadership turnover in many Western democracies.^{19,20} On the other hand, authoritarian governments like Russia can maintain continuous foreign policy strategies and approaches without worrying about liberal democratic norms, human rights violations, or issues related to partnering with governments that came to power through coups. China, which has favored partnerships in Africa based on economic aid and infrastructure development rather than Russia's more militarized strategy throughout the continent, also benefits from unilateral foreign policy approaches. Western goals in Africa are almost unlimited in scope, while Russia and China pursue lower-cost and shorter-term goals.²¹

In Mali, Operation Barkhane ran into a host of issues on the ground. Although French forces took limited casualties, Malian and French authorities failed to capitalize on forward advances by instituting civilian integration into civil society and government. Civil administration and services were not efficiently restarted in

¹⁶ Jacob Zenn and Colin P. Clarke, "Al Qaeda and ISIS Had a Truce in Africa—Until They Didn't," *Foreign Policy* (blog), May 26, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/26/al-qaeda-isis-west-africa-sahel-stability-jihadi-groups/>.

¹⁷ Wassim Nasr, "ISIS in Africa: The End of the 'Sahel Exception' - New Lines Institute," New Lines Institute - New Lines Institute is the first independent, non-partisan American think tank, June 2, 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/>.

¹⁸ Danielle Paquette and Rick Noack, "West African Militants Hope for a Taliban-Style Takeover - The Washington Post," August 27, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/27/west-africa-militants-afghanistan/>.

¹⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. Volume 1, 1835, Page 231.

²⁰ Douglas C. Foyle, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Elite Beliefs as a Mediating Variable on JSTOR," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1997): 141–69.

²¹ Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, and Marcel Plichta, "Commentary: 'Who Thinks Wins': How Smarter U.S. Counterterrorism in the Sahel Can Pay Dividends for Great Power Competition," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 16, no. 4 (April 28, 2023), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/commentary-who-thinks-wins-how-smarter-u-s-counterterrorism-in-the-sahel-can-pay-dividends-for-great-power-competition/>.

recaptured towns, demonstrating a limited capacity to accomplish long-term counterinsurgency objectives like building local governance and capacity to resist insurgent recruitment and occupation. Instead, AQIM and IS retook villages and killed supposed “collaborators” with relative ease, creating a cycle of fear toward government occupation. Meanwhile, Barkhane’s paramilitary partners were not fully reliable. In particular, historically-marginalized ethnic Tuareg groups often had their own scores to settle, complicating the peacemaking and normalization process and further hardening already stark ethnic divisions.^{22,23} Accordingly, Barkhane sacrificed more elusive strategic success for minor tactical victories that proved fleeting.

All these common failures wrought by Barkhane and Bamako allowed consecutive Malian governments to capitalize on a growing anti-French sentiment and pin their own failures on Paris. The Kremlin leveraged this disconnect, albeit with Malian junta support. Kremlin-backed social media accounts pushed anti-French, pro-Russian, and pro-junta narratives across Facebook, while Malian civil society groups such as “Yerewolo Debout sur les Remparts” promoted similar narratives with Russian backing.²⁴ Meanwhile, a Russian media organization currently under U.S. sanctions and owned by Wagner-affiliate Maxim Shugaley published a poll purporting to show that 87% of Malians favor their government’s relationship with the Wagner Group.²⁵ These operations led to massive street demonstrations in Bamako against France and its “neocolonialism.” Despite Yevgeny Prigozhin’s venture towards Moscow and alleged exile to Belarus, Wagner’s business model will survive through future iterations of the company or other Russian private military companies, which will follow Wagner’s attractive overseas blueprint.

Although these Russian disinformation campaigns were successful in their own right, they and the subsequent Russian-backed Wagner Group intervention reflected long-standing grievances against the former colonial power.²⁶ In particular, Malians found it difficult to believe that “mighty” countries like France

²² Nathaniel Powell, “Why France Failed in Mali - War on the Rocks,” February 21, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/>.

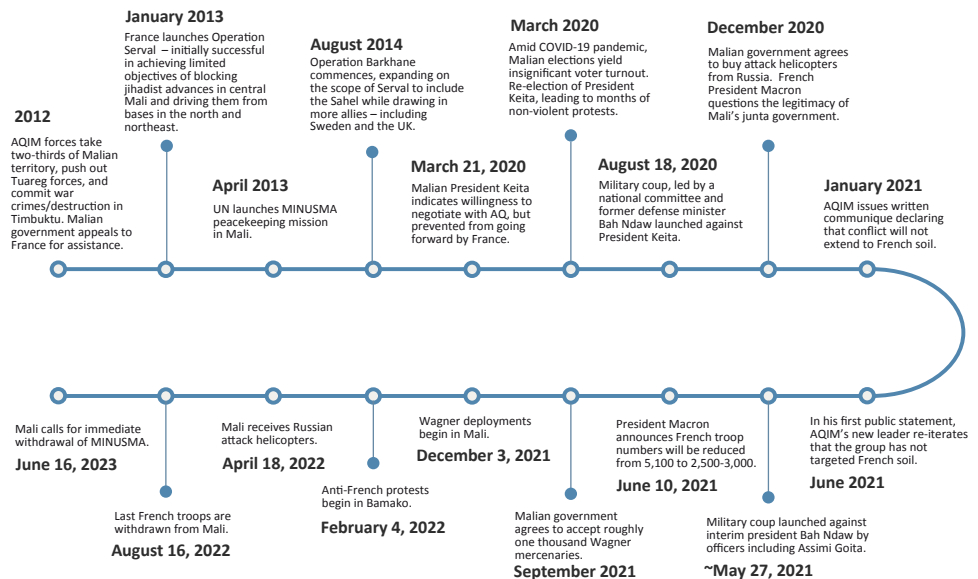
²³ Catrina Doxsee, Jared Thompson, and Marielle Harris, “The End of Operation Barkhane and the Future of Counterterrorism in Mali,” March 2, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/end-operation-barkhane-and-future-counterterrorism-mali>.

²⁴ Shola Lawal, “Russian Trolls and Mercenaries Win Allies and Good Will in Africa - Coda Story,” August 25, 2022, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/russian-mercenaries-mali-africa/>.

²⁵ Jared Thompson, “The Wagner Group Has Its Eyes on Mali: A New Front in Russia’s Irregular Strategy,” Modern War Institute, October 14, 2021, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/the-wagner-group-has-its-eyes-on-mali-a-new-front-in-russias-irregular-strategy/>.

²⁶ Jean Le Roux, “Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group, Anti-Democracy Protests,” Medium | dfrlab, February 17, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-russian-facebook-assets-in-mali-coordinated-support-for-wagner-group-anti-democracy-protests-2abaac4d87c4>.

and the United States could fail to root out terror over a ten-year campaign. Further, they often did not appreciate that the benefits of cutting-edge military technology like drones were limited in such a multi-dimensional campaign. While drones can hit specific targets over vast distances, they cannot secure thousands of square kilometers of land twenty-four hours a day. Meanwhile, the French government misjudged the correct time to withdraw from Mali. Paris failed to understand the war of optics accompanying its counterinsurgency campaign; defeating, or at least subduing, insurgencies and maintaining Malian popular support should have been dual priorities. A withdrawal before Wagner's arrival would have met both priorities, when France could have more successfully exploited political opportunities and framed the narrative of the withdrawal as a choice, and a success, rather than leave it to appear as a failure highlighted by Wagner's aggressive short-term tactics.



The Missed Moment

Despite the numerous issues of Operation Barkhane, France still had a brief window of opportunity to withdraw from Mali on its own terms, while also being able to claim some measured success: a strategic victory that forced jihadist groups to come to the negotiating table with the central government. Two dates stand out as possible exit points that would have served France better: March 2020 and January 2021. On February 10, 2020, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita admitted

that he had initiated talks with AQIM senior leaders.^{27,28} France could have chosen to accept negotiations as a chance to move toward a withdrawal. However, in a flagrant violation of Mali's sovereignty and the political conclusions of the "Inclusive National Dialogue," France overruled Keita and blocked this action on the basis that he should not negotiate with terrorists.^{29,30,31}

In January 2021, JNIM issued a communique stating that its ongoing war with France would not occur on French soil.^{32,33} Six months later, the new head of AQIM, Abu Ubaidā Youssef al-Aanabi, stressed in his first audio message that French soil was never targeted from Mali.³⁴ In response to a direct question about attacks on French soil, Aanabi noted that "Western leaders are arrogant and they do not want to admit that our goals are regional."³⁵ This comes in contradiction to his own words in 2019, when he stated that "it is [Al-Qaida's] legitimate right to target France whenever and wherever they like."³⁶ This reversal reflected the new strategic landscape in Mali and the Sahel, but also demonstrated that French military

²⁷ Marc Perelman and Christophe Boisbouvier, "Le Président Malien IBK Annonce Un Dialogue Avec Des Chefs Jihadistes," RFI, February 10, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200210-ibrahim-boubacar-keita-rfi-ibk-jihadistes>.

²⁸ "Mali's President Admits to Holding Talks with Senior Jihadist Leaders," France 24, February 10, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200210-exclusive-mali-s-president-acknowledges-dialogue-with-jihadist-leaders>.

²⁹ "Mali: le dialogue national inclusif s'achève sur quatre résolutions," RFI, December 22, 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20191222-mali-dialogue-national-inclusif-acheve-quatre-resolutions>.

³⁰ Cyril Bensimon, "Paris s'oppose Au Dialogue Avec Les Chefs Djihadistes Au Sahel," Le Monde, December 17, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/12/17/paris-s-oppose-au-dialogue-avec-les-chefs-djihadistes-au-sahel_6063707_3212.html.

³¹ Fatoumata Diallo and Manon Laplace, "Mahmoud Dicko : « Au Mali, Ce n'est Pas à La France d'imposer Ses Solutions » – Jeune Afrique," JeuneAfrique.com, June 11, 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1187147/politique/mahmoud-dicko-au-mali-ce-nest-pas-a-la-france-dimposer-ses-solutions/>.

³² Wassim Nasr [@SimNasr], "(5)ce com revêt une teinte politique comme les précédents. Mais au delà des accusations et de la propagande, il trace clairement les limites de la confrontation avec la #France au #Mali/#Sahel en fixant comme but le retrait de #Barkhane. Vu l'importance, voici la version anglaise <https://t.co/XUPCRpCHSK>," Tweet, *Twitter*, January 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/SimNasr/status/1349801237764571140>.

³³ "IntelBrief: Negotiating out of Counterterrorism in the Sahel - The Soufan Center," August 6, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-august-6/>.

³⁴ Wassim Nasr [@SimNasr], "#AQMI(7) « vos gouv vous trompent en affirmant que l'occupation du #Mali est pour empêcher la projection/préparation d'attentats ... ceci est un mensonge, tout le monde sait que jamais votre pays n'a été attaqué depuis le Mali... vous devrez faire pression pour un retrait... »," Tweet, *Twitter*, June 20, 2021, <https://twitter.com/SimNasr/status/1406665033757646852>.

³⁵ "In Context: FRANCE 24 Analyses Comments by al Qaeda's North Africa Leader," France 24, March 6, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230306-al-qaeda-leader-in-north-africa-grants-exclusive-interview-to-france-24>.

³⁶ "Exclusive: FRANCE 24 Questions AQIM Jihadist Leader," May 3, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190530-aqmi-jihadist-leader-maghreb-france-terrorism-al-qaeda-islamic-youssef-al-Aanabi?ref=tw>.

pressure could have potentially brought JNIM to the negotiating table. Instead, France refused to capitalize on its diplomatic and military opportunity to show the meaningful role played by French forces, secure in the knowledge that the homeland was free from the threat of attacks. This was a clear “sliding-doors” moment of missed opportunities; if France had defined its strategic goals in Mali as preventing jihadist attacks on French soil, its mission would have been accomplished.

At these critical junctures, Macron and the French government could have pulled an unlikely political victory from a potentially unwinnable conflict. Had France spun either event as a result of the pressure its counterinsurgency campaigns had put on AQIM, France could have withdrawn on its own terms while enjoying a public affairs victory. Research and practice have shown that poor local governance, combined with economic and ethnic grievances, frequently fuels insurgencies, as continues to be the case in Mali.³⁷ However, through its intransigence, its seeming disregard for Malian sovereignty, and its late August 2022 exit, France demonstrated that it did not put democracy, civil society promotion, or even strategic military achievements first. Instead, Paris waited more than two years and endured two coups in Mali before reaching this decision, by all appearances under Wagner Group duress.³⁸

This failure speaks to a misalignment of strategic goals and democratic norms. French politicians appeared to be of two minds – fighting for Malian democracy and maintaining French influence. In Mali’s case, France’s indecision on such goals damaged Paris’ foreign policy reputation and image, as occurred the U.S. government over its Afghanistan operation. A similar situation occurred in Burkina Faso, where another junta government, dissatisfied with Operation Barkhane, pushed the French mission out of the country.³⁹ Other African countries may face a similar fate in the future.

Considering that President Macron announced the end of Operation Barkhane in June 2021, why did France slow-roll its withdrawal from Mali?⁴⁰ The campaign was unpopular in French society, with 51 percent of French citizens opposing Barkhane

³⁷ Ladd Serwat et al., “Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali,” *ACLEDA* (blog), August 30, 2022, <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/>.

³⁸ “IntelBrief: As France Draws Down in the Sahel, How Will It Impact Regional Stability?,” The Soufan Center, June 24, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-june-24/>.

³⁹ “French Army Officially Ends Operations in Burkina Faso,” February 20, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230220-french-army-officially-ends-operations-in-burkina-faso>.

⁴⁰ Viviane Forson, “Sahel : Emmanuel Macron acte la fin prochaine de l’opération Barkhane,” *Le Point*, June 11, 2021, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/sahel-emmanuel-macron-acte-la-fin-prochaine-de-l-operation-barkhane-11-06-2021-2430495_3826.php.

in January 2021.⁴¹ Still, the French government cited domestic public opinion, particularly the perception of Islamist threats to French territory and citizens, to justify delaying the withdrawal its forces. This reflected justified fears of Islamic State threats in this region of the Sahel and an inability to consider JNIM's limited goals and interest in negotiation, which should have been a workable basis for the government. Instead, by waiting until late 2022 to remove the last French units from Operation Barkhane, President Macron allowed the Russian state-supported Wagner Group to claim a public relations victory over France.⁴²

Lessons Learned

What lessons can France and the West learn from the breakdown in relations with Mali? Most painfully, the West still has a way to go in understanding the drivers of terrorism, which has been a means rather than an end for local or global jihad. Terrorist groups pursue long-term socio-political change through the means available to them, not only including terrorism and violence, but also negotiation and changes to governance. Many in the West do not understand the grievances and security needs that drive populations toward supporting or joining jihadist movements, despite nearly 20 years of investment by many Western states in the "Global War on Terror."^{43,44} Paris must draw a line between tackling domestic terrorist threats and its decade-old interventions in the Sahel.

In the same vein, Western leaders must critically re-evaluate their expectations and definitions of success in counterterrorism or counterinsurgency campaigns. France's failure in Mali stemmed from Barkhane's lack of clear objectives, which starkly contrasted the successful and limited scope of Serval. "Defeating terrorism" is an unreasonable and undefinable objective, as combatting a tactic is akin to wringing water from a stone. For proof, one need look no further than Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, clear and obvious measures of success – such as limiting civilian casualties, bringing jihadist groups to the negotiating table, and fostering local support for security forces – are essential in such campaigns.⁴⁵ Western political leaders also cannot forget about the non-military elements of these campaigns, as strengthening local civil society and governance, administration, and

⁴¹ Felix Nkambeh Tih, "51% of French Oppose Military Presence in Mali," January 12, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/51-of-french-oppose-military-presence-in-mali/2107534>.

⁴² Raphael Parens, "The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali - Foreign Policy Research Institute," March 18, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali/>.

⁴³ Ladd Serwat et al., "Wagner Group Operations in Africa."

⁴⁴ Nathaniel Powell, "Why France Failed in Mali - War on the Rocks."

⁴⁵ J. Boone Bartholomees, "Theory of Victory," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 38, no. 2 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2419>.

public works are the bulwarks necessary to block the waves of grievances propelling communities toward extremist groups.^{46,47}

For the Sahel region, the ongoing war between IS and JNIM is a game changer. Local populations are being forced to choose between those two players, meaning that demobilization and disengagement in the near future is unlikely. Historical ethnic fractures are becoming more and more ideological, as seen in recent intra-jihadi battles in Ansongo among primarily Fulani forces. This political landscape is ever moving and evolving, meaning that advocated “solutions” can quickly be rendered obsolete.

If Western democratic countries were still operating within twentieth century models of influence – “*Francafrique*” for France and Cold War “anti-communism” for the United States – and demonstrating little regard for human rights or democracy, most of the juntas and autocratic regimes in Africa would side with the West. This approach would admit the limits of democratic political change and state building. Yet such an approach is extremely unlikely given Western commitments to democratic principles and values enshrined in several international treaties, including the UN Charter.

Last, France, the United States, and other partners ought to learn from the failure to negotiate with AQIM in 2020 and reflect on the benefits generated by negotiations with these groups in 2023. Once Jeffery Woodke and Olivier Dubois, kidnapped U.S. and French citizens respectively, were released by AQIM in late March 2023, it became clear that at least Paris (and perhaps Washington) was willing to negotiate (even indirectly) with Al-Qaida affiliates in Africa.⁴⁸ This dovetails with similar negotiations in Afghanistan between the Taliban and the United States during the later stages of that campaign.⁴⁹ This is an important step forward in acknowledging the role of insurgents as combatants with political objectives rather than simply faceless agents of terrorism. The death of Ayman al-Zawahiri and the “third path” represented by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib

⁴⁶ Joseph Sany, “In Africa, Here’s How to Respond to Russia’s Brutal Wagner Group | United States Institute of Peace,” United States Institute of Peace, April 6, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/africa-heres-how-respond-russias-brutal-wagner-group>.

⁴⁷ Eric Rosand and Daniel Hooton, “Issue Brief: Promoting Democracy And Security In Africa: Don’t Forget Cities” (The Soufan Center, February 2022).

⁴⁸ “IntelBrief: Release of Hostages in West Africa Highlights Important Role of Partnerships,” The Soufan Center, March 23, 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-march-23/>.

⁴⁹ Lindsay Maizland, “U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 2, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>.

Syria should be considered opportunities to build on.^{50,51} More than two decades of strategic failures in fighting terrorism should make a good argument in favor of negotiation as a key tool, among others, in any conflict. Taking it off the table is akin to fighting with one hand tied behind the back.

About the Authors

Wassim Nasr is a Senior Research Fellow at The Soufan Center, focusing on jihadist dynamics in the Middle East and Africa and European responses. He is a French journalist who has been monitoring jihadist groups for more than a decade for the French news outlet France24 in French, English, and Arabic. He is the author of *État islamique, le fait accompli* (2016).

Raphael Parens is a Eurasia Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He studies African conflict, Russian military policy, and paramilitary groups. He has published papers on the Wagner Group and conflict in Africa through the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the Counterterrorism Center at West Point, War on the Rocks, and Foreign Affairs.

⁵⁰ Paul Cruickshank, "Journey to Idlib: An Interview with Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 19, 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/journey-to-idlib-an-interview-with-wassim-nasr-journalist-france24/>.

⁵¹ Wassim Nasr, "Reporter's Notebook: Idlib, the Last Islamist Rebel Bastion in Syria," France 24, November 5, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230511-reporters-notebook-idlib-the-last-islamist-rebel-bastion-in-syria>.



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