From New Frontier to New Normal: Counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel-Sahara
Richard Reeve and Zoë Pelter
August 2014

Executive Summary

Context

● The Sahel-Sahara is increasingly seen as the “new frontier” in global counter-terrorism operations. Recurrent security crises since the 2011 Arab uprisings and the NATO-assisted overthrow of Libya’s Gaddafi regime have radically changed international perceptions of northwest Africa as a focus of activities by jihadist groups. It is now the priority area for French external counter-terrorism operations and is rising rapidly in importance to the US. Both countries are implementing a “pivot to Africa”. This report documents the evolving importance of the Sahel-Sahara in French and US counter-terrorism strategy and the means with which they and their allies are waging overt and covert war against jihadist groups in the region.

● 2014 is a year of major transition for French and US counter-terrorism and crisis response forces in the Sahel-Sahara. On 1 August, France formally initiated its redeployment of military forces under Opération Barkhane. This sees French land, air and special forces move from a high-intensity, short-duration mission in northern Mali to a permanent posture at over a dozen locations across five or more Sahel states. The US is increasing its presence more steadily in line with the maturation of its newest combatant command, Africa Command (AFRICOM), and the rolling out of a crisis response concept known as the “New Normal”. Since at least 2013, French, UK, Canadian and Dutch special forces also operate in Mali, Niger and Nigeria. Air-mobile US Marines task forces are increasingly deploying to Africa from bases in Spain and Italy and are known to be seeking at least one “Intermediate Staging Base” in coastal West Africa.

● The Sahel-Sahara is a vast territory the size of the USA or China, its 12 countries home to over 200 million people and three primary jihadist groups – Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Shari’a and Boko Haram. France has been the dominant external security actor there for over a century and sees a direct threat to its citizens and territory from regional terrorist groups. European states, and increasingly some Asian states, have strong interests in Saharan energy exports (oil, gas, uranium) and trade, including arms sales. The US had few regional interests before 2002; the September 2012 deadly attack on its diplomats in Benghazi radically changed its perception of the threat to its interests from the Sahel-Sahara.

Operations

● The military operation launched in January 2013 against AQIM and its allies in northern Mali was one of at least seven such French-led interventions in the region since 1968. However, it was the first major overt operation by an external power to target jihadist groups and it was the most multinational. At least 22 other countries provided direct support for Opération Serval and the associated African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Opération Barkhane and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) entrench the presence of over 9,000 external security forces in the Sahel-Sahara with mission and mandate to combat terrorist groups.

● The true nature and extent of counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel-Sahara can only be guessed at. Covert operations using Special Operations Forces have become an increasing feature of US operations. Several hundred are believed to be present in the region on undisclosed “contingency operations”. Since at least 2013, French, UK, Canadian and Dutch special forces also operate in Mali, Niger and Nigeria. Air-mobile US Marines task forces are increasingly deploying to Africa from bases in Spain and Italy and are known to be seeking at least one “Intermediate Staging Base” in coastal West Africa.

● France and the US are increasing their intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities in the Sahel-Sahara. Niamey airport in Niger is their main ISR base in the Sahel, where each operates two unarmed versions of the MQ-9 Reaper “hunter-killer” unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The French base at N’Djamena in Chad has also been used for UAV operations, notably during the current US response to the Chibok abductions in northeast Nigeria. However, the most potent US UAVs operating over Africa are probably based at Sigonella in Sicily. So far, the only recorded regional usage of armed UAVs has been by the US during the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011. Algeria, the most capable regional
actor, has immediate plans to acquire long endurance combat UAVs for use in the Sahara. Given gaps in its UAV coverage from Niamey, Sigonella and Djibouti, the US is likely to seek further long-term UAV basing facilities, possibly in Senegal and Chad. Meanwhile, France, the US and (sporadically) the UK and Spain operate a significant number of manned ISR aircraft across the Sahel-Sahara.

- Private military and security contractors (PMSCs) are a small part of French operations in the Sahel-Sahara but have run key parts of AFRICOM’s covert counter-terrorism operations in the region. These include running a post-2007 ISR operation using light aircraft (Operation Creek Sand), transporting special operations forces, providing medical evacuation and search and rescue capacities, and to stockpile aviation fuel at regional airports. MINUSMA will contract PMSCs to operate its unarmed UAVs from Mali.

- Counter-terrorism training to regional security forces has become ubiquitous under AFRICOM’s multifaceted Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and is likely to be expanded significantly under the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund announced in mid-2014. In addition to France, a range of second-tier external actors also play a role in regional counter-terrorism training, including the European Union, Canada, Israel, Colombia and Japan.

- The use of abduction and illegal rendition of terrorism suspects appears to have been a minor aspect of recent counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel-Sahara. However, there were numerous such cases documented between 2001 and 2004 implicating Algeria, The Gambia, Libya, Mauritania and Morocco. Morocco, the US’ primary regional ally, was accused of hosting secret detention and torture facilities. Since October 2013 US special forces have twice abducted terrorist suspects from Libya and taken them for trial in the US without the consent of the Libyan government.

Outcomes

- Over its eighteen months, Opération Serval (January 2013 to July 2014) achieved tactical successes within major strategic limitations. The (overstated) advance south of jihadist groups was repelled and control of much of the north was returned to the Malian government. However, French, African and UN intervention has not addressed the political and social nature of the northern rebellion and has limited ability to protect civilians against a terrorist rather than insurgent threat. Moreover, intervention in Mali appears to have displaced AQIM and its allies into Libya, Niger and possibly Nigeria. UN mandates for ongoing French operations in parallel to MINUSMA effectively authorise an indefinite right of deadly pursuit of groups that France may define as terrorists. This is a dangerous precedent that goes beyond the normal understanding of peace support operations and UN accountability.

- The US has set much more strategic objectives for its TSCTP but so far has seen marginal success. While AFRICOM and Washington have established a regular military presence in all regional countries and thus a close knowledge of its local partners’ capabilities, there is little recognition of the often toxic nature of these partnerships. Successes in building capacities of Mauritanian and Chadian elite units is balanced by dismal failures in Mali and Libya and the disruption caused by repeated political interventions, mutinies and coups by elements of allied regional militaries.

- Governance and human rights are considerably undermined by the current securitisation of policy in the Sahel-Sahara. France, and to a lesser extent the US, relies hugely on the support of Chad’s authoritarian government for basing and combat support. Undemocratic governments in Algeria and Mauritania have also been able to normalise their international relations, including arms imports, as crucial partners in Saharan counter-terrorism operations. Perceived international protection may discourage some regional governments from seeking internal political settlements. The elected Malian government seems to have interpreted the post-2013 French military spearhead and UN shield as a reason not to pursue a peace process with northern separatists.

- Rather than discrediting terrorist ideology as planned, the heightened visibility of US and French forces in the Sahel-Sahara and the strengthening of Islamist militia during the Libyan civil war appears to have significantly increased the profile and activity of jihadist groups. The threat they pose to the US, France and Europe from Sahel-Saharan jihadist groups is still largely assumed; neither AQIM, Boko Haram nor Ansar al-Shari’a has yet launched an attack outside its home region. While some disruption of such groups has been effected since 2013, at least the motivation for retaliatory attacks is likely to increase as the militarisation of the Sahel-Sahara continues.