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WEST AFRICA SAHEL REGION: LESSONS FOR
GHANA ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES
IN NORTHERN GHANA**

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Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**NAVAL
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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN THE WEST
AFRICA SAHEL REGION: LESSONS FOR
GHANA ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS
FORCES IN NORTHERN GHANA**

by

Appah Yaw Owusu

December 2022

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**COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN THE WEST AFRICA SAHEL
REGION: LESSONS FOR GHANA ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN
NORTHERN GHANA**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS
(IRREGULAR WARFARE)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
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ABSTRACT

The thesis assesses the capabilities of the Ghana Army special operations forces (SOF) and how they can be employed to support counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Ghanaian regions that are threatened by the spread of insurgency in Africa's Sahel region. The porosity of borders between northern Ghana and Burkina Faso in the Sahel, the similarity of situations between the Sahel and northern Ghana, and the quick spread of the Sahel insurgency to other parts of West Africa have made northern Ghana highly susceptible to the jihadist insurgency. The study analyzes secondary materials and data and finds that, in addition to the latent issues in the Sahel countries, the over-securitization of COIN operations in the Sahel, notably by France, has yielded unimpressive results. From the analysis, the thesis draws useful lessons for Ghana. While best COIN practices require an effective combination of kinetic and non-kinetic strategies, COIN operations in the Sahel have generally been kinetic. This has led to some pundits describing COIN operations in the Sahel as a "security traffic jam." Based on lessons from the Sahel crisis, assessed capabilities of the Ghana Army SOF, and within a framework of comprehensive COIN operations, the thesis recommends specific tasks for the Ghana Army SOF to support COIN operations in northern Ghana.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
ASOB	Army Special Operations Brigade
AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
COIN	counterinsurgency
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
FLM	Macina Liberation Front
GATIA	Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (<i>Groupe Armé Touareg Imghad et Alliés</i>)
GIA	Armed Islamic Militant Group (<i>Groupe Islamique Armé</i>)
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
GWOT	global war on terrorism
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWAP	Islamic State of West Africa Province
JNIM	<i>Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin</i> (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims)
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
SOF	special operations forces
U.S.	United States
UN	United Nations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis assesses the capabilities of the Ghana Army special operations forces (SOF) and how they can be employed to support counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Ghana's regions that are threatened by the spread of insurgency in the Sahel region of Africa. While the whole of Ghana is not insulated from the insurgency, the porosity of borders between northern Ghana and Burkina Faso in the Sahel, the similarity in the situation between the Sahel and northern Ghana, and the speed of the spread of the Sahel insurgency to other parts of West Africa have made northern Ghana particularly susceptible to the insurgency. The Sahel insurgency provides the following lessons:

- Conventional operations alone cannot resolve insurgency.
- Indirect strategy is key to COIN operations.
- The population is central to COIN operations.
- Any state security brutality brings negative consequences.
- Latent local issues are exploited by insurgents.
- Illicit trade facilitates insurgency.
- Motorbikes provide transportation flexibility for the Sahelian terrain.
- Ungoverned spaces offer refuge to insurgents.
- International collaboration is key to COIN operations.
- Regional cooperation is necessary for COIN operations.
- Strong indigenous forces are imperatives for COIN operations.
- Drone technology is necessary for COIN operations.
- Security operations alone cannot resolve insurgency.

While best COIN practices demand an effective combination of kinetic and non-kinetic measures, COIN operations in the Sahel, with France as the dominant actor, have generally been kinetic, in what has popularly become known as a “security traffic jam.” The results of COIN operations in the Sahel have generally been unimpressive as insurgency remains on the rise. The thesis presents the following findings:

- Interventions in the Sahel crisis have failed to yield the needed results.
- The Sahel has become the new turf for global terrorism.
- Prevailing conditions in the Sahel have facilitated the insurgency.
- The Sahel risks becoming the new turf for global power competition.
- COIN operations in the Sahel have been over securitized.
- Prevailing conditions in northern Ghana make it predisposed to the insurgency in the Sahel.

While acknowledging that COIN operations are a whole-of-government approach, the military, and for our purpose, the Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade (ASOB), remains one of the government agencies for COIN operations. With lessons from the Sahel and based on the assessed capabilities of the Ghana Army SOF, some recommendations are made:

- The Ghana Army SOF should be kept as small as necessary.
- The Ghana Army SOF should be suitably employed.
- Training should focus on current operations such as the developments in the Sahel.
- Equipping and retooling should consider the peculiarities in northern Ghana.
- Ghana Army SOF training should consider incorporating lessons from the Sahel crisis.

- The Ghana ASOB should support the training of conventional forces.

Some recommended roles for the Ghana Army SOF include:

- Direct action.
- Special reconnaissance and information operations.
- Quick reaction operations.
- Expeditionary operations.
- Key leadership engagement.
- Covert observation posts.
- Training assistance and capability building.
- Tactical advice and support.

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We did this together.

Glory to God Almighty.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND

The need to focus Ghana's evolving special operations forces (SOF) on the looming insurgency threats from the Sahel arises from the porosity of borders, the commonalities of the situation between northern Ghana and the Sahel, and the unimpeded spread of insurgency in the West Africa sub-region. The Sahelian crisis provides invaluable lessons for countries within the West African sub-region, including Ghana. The northern parts of Ghana share borders with Burkina Faso in the Sahel. The study supposes that insurgency threats to northern Ghana could be an extension of the Sahel insurgency, or, as with the Ansaroul Islam terrorist group in Burkina Faso, threats could take the form of localized insurgency with close links to insurgent groups in the Sahel. Northern Ghana shares similarities with the Sahel with respect to ecology, topography, poverty, and latent security issues, among others. These similarities, coupled with the porosity of borders, make the spread of Sahelian terrorist activities imminent. Ghana consequently has the opportunity to draw lessons from the Sahelian crisis and align its capabilities in readiness for the imminent threat.

The erstwhile global war on terrorism (GWOT), in which the Western powers took the fight against terrorism to the doorsteps of the terrorists, succeeded in shaking the roots of the terrorists. The consequence of GWOT was that it caused a dispersion of the terrorists who found new areas of operations, including the Africa Sahel region.¹ Already, the Sahel region was battling with the consequences of the fall of the Gadhafi regime in Libya. The insurgency that started in Mali in 2012 has since spread throughout the Sahel region to the borders between northern Ghana and Burkina Faso.

Locally, the governments in the Sahel region lack the capability for power projection—both state authority and military capacity—and are unable to govern the vast

¹ Lina Raafat, *The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel: How the al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Are Battling for Legitimacy in the Sahelian Context* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2021), 22, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/schism-jihadism-sahel-how-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-are-battling-legitimacy-sahelian>.

expanses of their territories. This inability leaves their outlying areas particularly vulnerable to criminals and terrorists. Isaac Kfir, a Research Fellow of the Institute for Economics & Peace in Australia, narrates how these terrorists have exploited these vulnerabilities to enhance their activities.² The caravan trade route that facilitated trade between the Mediterranean and Africa has now received a boost through technology (mainly vehicular transportation) and communication (global positioning systems and mobile phones) while national forces lack the capacity to patrol the large stretch of land.³ Equally, the consequent designation of the Sahel as a hub of terrorism has discouraged tourism, caused economic hardships, and inadvertently made the situation conducive to increased terrorism.⁴ Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari, research professors at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, observe how the hitherto Sahel region, which had not been part of discussions on global security, has, in the past three decades, shot to the spotlight as it confronts policymakers and the international community with a hybrid of challenges of climate, poverty, food scarcity, fragile institutions, population issues, transnational crime, and jihadist insurgencies.⁵

The International Crisis Group’s Africa report N°299 avers that military operations should be complemented with governance solutions, bearing in mind that it is dangerous to assume that the latter is superior to the former and also naïve to assume that democracy can survive against internal and external threats without any means of defense.⁶ Professors of security studies at the Naval Postgraduate School in California, United States (U.S.), Sean F. Everton and Nancy Roberts, similarly, distinguish between kinetic and non-kinetic

² Isaac Kfir, “Organized Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel: How Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Approaches Ignore the Roots of the Problem,” *International Studies Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (November 2018): 344–59, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky003>.

³ Kfir.

⁴ Pádraig Carmody, “Transforming Globalization and Security: Africa and America Post-9/11,” *Africa Today* 52, no. 1 (Autumn 2005): 97–120, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4187846>.

⁵ Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari, “Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel: A Hybrid Political Order in the Making,” *International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1835324>.

⁶ International Crisis Group, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, Africa Report N°306 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2021), https://sahelresearch.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/170/ICG_Eng_sahel-stabilisation-strategy.pdf.

counterinsurgency (COIN) operations and establish the need for practitioners to ascertain whether the approaches to COIN are increasing or decreasing the level of violence.⁷

Meanwhile, while best practices in COIN require a blend of security and non-security measures, COIN operations in the Sahel tend to be biased towards security measures. Jennifer G. Cooke, Boris Toucas, and Kartrin Heger of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) have subsequently described COIN operations in the Sahel as a “security traffic jam.”⁸

France, through an initial intervention of Operation SERVAL (a fully conventional force), to Operation BARKHANE (a COIN force), to the introduction of Task Force TAKUBA (an all-European SOF), continues to battle the Sahelian insurgency with no end in sight. This thesis attempts an analysis of the Sahel crisis, investigates the extent to which COIN operations have combined security and non-security measures, and outlines lessons it holds for Ghana Army SOF in securing northern Ghana against insurgency.

B. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How have COIN operations in the Sahel balanced kinetic/security operations and non-kinetic/civic action?
2. What lessons can Ghana learn in securing its northern borders with the Sahel?
3. How can the Ghana Army SOF be employed to support COIN operations in its regions bordering the Sahel?

⁷ Nancy Roberts and Sean F. Everton, “Strategies for Combating Dark Networks,” *Journal of Social Structure* 12, no. 1 (2020): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.21307/joss-2019-030>.

⁸ Jennifer G. Cooke, “Understanding the G5 Sahel Joint Force: Fighting Terror, Building Regional Security?,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, November 15, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-g5-sahel-joint-force-fighting-terror-building-regional-security>.

C. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Given the complexities of the crisis and the wide land area that is supposed to be covered, the requirement for efficient use of the limited resources cannot be ignored. The Ghana Army SOF, through specialist training and exercises both locally and with partner nations, comes with efficiency, an economy of force, target discrimination capacity associated with political sensitivity, and operational flexibility, among others. These qualities of Ghana Army SOF can come in handy when employed in COIN operations in northern Ghana. The importance of this study is to draw lessons from the Sahel crisis as they relate to northern Ghana and derive appropriate roles and strategies for the Ghana Army SOF.

D. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Introduction

Literary writings on the Sahel crisis are diverse as the increased terrorist activities remain of global concern. This section reviews existing literature on the Sahel crisis and the various initiatives undertaken in the respective countries, either independently or in collaboration with other countries. The literature review is in two categories: the Sahel crisis and COIN operations in the Sahel.

2. The Sahel Situation

The G5 Sahel comprises Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.⁹ The location, terrain, and vast unoccupied territory of the Sahel have enabled crime such as smuggling, human trafficking, kidnapping, and narcotics trade, dating decades back. The situation of the neglected communities with the resultant thriving of illicit trade in the form of munition trade, drug smuggling, and other contrabands is what Guisepppe Dentice, an

⁹ Moda Dieng, “The Multi-National Joint Task Force and the G5 Sahel Joint Force: The Limits of Military Capacity-Building Efforts,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 40, no. 4 (2019): 481–501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2019.1602692>.

international relations expert in the Middle East, describes as an “illegal economy.”¹⁰ The subsequent tagging of the Sahel as a hub of terrorism has affected tourism, caused economic hardships, and inadvertently exacerbated the situation.¹¹

Marinko Bobic, a lecturer in international relations and diplomacy at Leiden University, explains the crisis in the Sahel in terms of the Transnational Organized Crime (TOC)-terrorism nexus. He observes that post 9/11, global counterterrorism made it more difficult for terrorists to enjoy the support of rogue states but afforded them an opportunity to thrive in weak states and the global virtual world, and with transnational organized crime as a sustainable means of survival.¹² Isaac Kfir, for instance, notes how “money gained from criminal activities has allowed Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to insert itself into local communities [in the Sahel] ... and how the other groups are following or adapting to this model.”¹³ Terrence McNamee, a specialist in development, governance, and security issues at the Wilson Center, notes that attacks in the Sahel region peaked in 2019 as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) claimed responsibility for most of the attacks.¹⁴

Thus, insurgency in the Sahel is multifaceted. It is about security and governance. It is about jihadism, terrorism, and insurgency. It is about governance and transnational organized crime, and it is about trafficking. It is a tribal conflict. It is about the effects of climate change as well as the fight over scarce resources.

¹⁰ Giuseppe Dentice, *Terrorism in the Sahel Region: An Evolving Threat on Europe’s Doorstep* (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2018), <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/terrorism-in-the-sahel-region-an-evolving-threat-on-europes-doorstep/>.

¹¹ Carmody, “Transforming Globalization and Security: Africa and America Post-9/11.”

¹² Marinko Bobic, “Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism: Nexus Needing a Human Security Framework,” *Global Crime* 15, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2014): 241–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2014.927327>.

¹³ Kfir, “Organized Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel,” 349.

¹⁴ Terence McNamee, *The State of Peacebuilding in Africa: Lessons Learned for Policymakers and Practitioners* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

3. Counterinsurgency in the Sahel Region

Scholarly writings on COIN in the Sahel could be divided into those that tilt in favor of security operations on one hand and civic action operations on the other hand. Everton and Roberts distinguish between kinetic (security) and non-kinetic (civic action) COIN operations.¹⁵ Writing in favor of the civic action approach to the insurgency in the Sahel, Kfir analyzes how policies intended to address the Sahel crisis tend to ignore open discussion and scrutiny of the effectiveness of measures to address the threat posed by jihadists and criminal organizations. He notes that:

These measures arguably do not address the root problems of the region, which are mainly about human insecurity as seen by the fact that over 40 million Sahelians are food insecure. Therefore, there is a need for Western states—mainly the United States and France—to review whether the militarization of the fragile Sahel region is what is required.¹⁶

Kfir again, asserts that the military and security approach to the insurgency in the Sahel has had a negative effect in disincentivizing the security forces in countering terrorists as the militarization of the region presents a propaganda tool for the insurgents, who then portray themselves as liberators from foreign occupation.¹⁷ He notes how the incompetence of the indigenous forces has enabled terrorist groups to thrive, necessitating U.S.-France interventions in the form of counterterrorism (aimed at direct actions against terrorists) and COIN (aimed at building the capacities of the Sahelian security forces).¹⁸ Meanwhile, France's Operation SERVAL, a fully conventional force of approximately brigade strength of French troops, was replaced with Operation BARKHANE, which expanded operations to cover almost the entire Sahel when the jihadists resorted to asymmetric warfare.¹⁹ The subsequent introduction of Task Force TAKUBA was yet aimed to increase the security capabilities of Sahel COIN operations.

¹⁵ Roberts and Everton, "Strategies for Combating Dark Networks."

¹⁶ Kfir, "Organized Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel," 345.

¹⁷ Kfir, "Organized Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel."

¹⁸ Kfir.

¹⁹ Michael Shurkin, "French Liberal Governance and the Emancipation of Algeria's Jews," *French Historical Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010): 259–80, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-2009-027>.

In his essay *Counterterrorism Strategy in the Sahel*, an intelligence specialist at the Center for Civil-Military Relations in New York, U.S., Lawrence Cline, advocates combining politics and security, citing how the Algerian government’s political and security approach was effective against the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the then principal terrorist group in the Sahel region.²⁰

Similarly, Roger Trinquier, a French WWII veteran and COIN theorist, while acknowledging the importance of armed forces, advocates for the coordination of military and civilian efforts.²¹ Meanwhile, Michael Shurkin, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, establishes how the French COIN strategy in the Sahel has moved from the front seat in colonial times to the back seat in recent times. In his study *French Liberal Governance and the Emancipation of Algeria’s Jews*, he laments that while classic French COIN strategy is global in outlook (security, development, and governance), the French Operation BARKHANE “is limiting itself to focusing on security in the anticipation that others [other agencies and governments] will do the political work. This is complicated by the fact that the French presence constitutes a political intervention, even as the French strive to avoid political interference.”²² Shurkin explains that the change in the French approach to COIN in the Sahel is aimed at curing the perceptions of French neocolonialism in the Sahel.²³

Pauline Le Roux, a visiting Assistant Research Fellow at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies from 2018 to 2019, expresses how the G5 Sahel Joint Force is a unique platform to coordinate and reinforce collaboration in regional security.²⁴ Boas, in his book, *Rival Priorities in the Sahel: Finding the Balance between Security and Development*, notes how the G5 initiation risks becoming yet another front on the GWOT and proposes

²⁰ Lawrence Cline, “Counterterrorism Strategy in the Sahel,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 10 (2007): 889–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100701559032>.

²¹ Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006).

²² Shurkin, “French Liberal Governance,” 36.

²³ Shurkin, “French Liberal Governance.”

²⁴ Pauline Le Roux, *Responding to the Rise in Violent Extremism in the Sahel* (Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019), 7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19332>.

that the G5 should work in the interest of development.²⁵ Bruno Charbonneau, a Professor of International Studies at the Royal Military College in Saint-Jean, corroborates that while there exist controversies as to the centrality of the military in COIN operations, there are standard core claims. He outlines that “the ‘population’ is at the heart of the fight between insurgents and counter-insurgents; the primacy of politics is paramount; development or social engineering work is necessary to sustain the effects of military victories; and close civil–military relations are essential to success.”²⁶

In another vein, the global contest between al Qaeda and the Islamic State has reared its head in the Sahel.²⁷ In what has been termed the “Sahelian Exception,”²⁸ ISGS and the Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims – JNIM) collaborated and coexisted until 2020 when a disagreement over territory and mass defections led to a confrontation between the Macina Liberation Front (a group within JNIM) and ISGS.²⁹ But Wassim Nasr, a journalist with France24 and a jihadism expert, explains that the absence of confrontation between ISGS and JNIM did not necessarily mean cooperation, analogizing that:

The evolution of ISIS in al Qaeda territory in the Sahel has many similarities with its evolutions in other parts of the world where an absence of clashes did not indicate cooperation. Similar tribal, local, or interpersonal dynamics prevailed in Yemen or Syria in the early stages of building ISIS’s influence before full-blown clashes played out.³⁰

Heni Nsaibia, a Senior Researcher at the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), establishes how COIN efforts in the Sahel has come to be focused on

²⁵ Morten Boas and Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, *Rival Priorities in the Sahel Finding the Balance between Security and Development* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2018).

²⁶ Bruno Charbonneau, “Counter-Insurgency Governance in the Sahel,” *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (November 2021): 1808, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab182>.

²⁷ Raafat, *The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel*.

²⁸ Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, “The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali,” *International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 69–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833566>.

²⁹ Baldaro and Diall.

³⁰ Wassim Nasr, “ISIS in Africa: The End of the ‘Sahel Exception,’” New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, June 2, 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/>.

the two main terrorist groups, the Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM and ISGS, after almost a decade.³¹

4. Conclusion

The Sahel crisis has emerged as one of the ripple effects of the GWOT. The contest between the Islamic State and al Qaeda is replicated in the Sahel by ISGS and JNIM. COIN operations, of which France is the leader, have since targeted these two groups. Meanwhile the insurgency in the Sahel is about poverty, crime, transnational crime, trafficking, jihadism, and governance, among others. Scholarly writings have consequently tilted either to security operations or civic action. COIN operations in the Sahel have been critiqued for their security bias, giving rise to the “security traffic jam tag.” Scholarly writings have exposed the deficiencies in the over-reliance on security measures in COIN operations in the Sahel.

E. RESEARCH APPROACH

This study examines the multiplicity of factors causing the Sahel crisis, the threat that the Sahel crisis poses to northern Ghana, and the capabilities and strategies that the Ghana Army SOF can bring to support COIN operations in northern Ghana. It examines the complexities of the Sahel insurgency and the influence of global jihadism on the region. In studying COIN operations in the Sahel, the thesis centers on French COIN operations with the acknowledgement that France remains the main actor in the interventions in the Sahel crisis. It assesses France’s COIN strategy in the Sahel vis-à-vis its global COIN strategy, and how efficiently it has managed the Sahel situation. The study outlines how France has transitioned from conventional intervention, through COIN, and the introduction of an all-European SOF. It continues to draw lessons from the Sahel situation as they impact northern Ghana. It then analyzes the capabilities of the Ghana Army SOF, strategies open, and the roles that the Ghana Army SOF can play in securing northern.

³¹ Héni Nsaibia, “State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results Is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), May 20, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-results-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians/>.

The study uses qualitative analysis and relies on secondary sources in the form of articles, previous research, reports, and publications. Due to the very infant nature of the Ghana Army SOF, it is deemed that the vision of the Special Operations Brigade commander is invaluable. The expert knowledge of the Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade (ASOB) commander is sought, through interviews, to obtain information that is specific to Ghana Army SOF. Through an analysis of the capabilities of the Ghana Army SOF and from the perspective of the Brigade Commander, and combined with COIN models, the thesis proposes strategies and outlines roles for the Ghana Army SOF in northern Ghana.

F. THESIS OUTLINE

Chapter I sets the background to the study by establishing the question and its importance. Chapter II describes the nature, nuances, and major actors in the Sahel crisis. Chapter III analyzes the interventions represented in France's Operation SERVAL, Operation BARKHANE, and Task Force TAKUBA. Chapter IV draws lessons that Ghana can learn from the Sahel. Chapter V suggests roles that the Ghana Army SOF can play in operations along Ghana's northern border with the Sahel. Chapter VI summarizes the findings and makes some recommendations.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE SAHEL CRISIS

A. INTRODUCTION

The crisis in the Sahel region is a complex one spanning jihadist insurgency, crime, terrorism, human trafficking, economic issues, and governance. The major terrorist groups have taken on global identities. It has become difficult, and almost impossible, to ascribe a single cause to the crisis. Causes tend to become effects. Effects lead to other causes. The tendency exists for the “Afghanistization” of the Sahel situation, whereby economic, tribal, land, and other issues are all lumped together as terrorism.³² Jennifer G. Cooke, Director of the Africa Program at CSIS in Washington, observes that “in the Sahel more than anywhere else, there is a strong link among poverty, drug trafficking, terrorism, ethnicity, land conflicts, and access to resources.”³³ Land issues are underlined with tribal issues and intertwined with religious issues. Religious issues, which are mostly facilitated by terrorism, are exploited by jihadists. Effects of climate change have led to large, arid, and ungoverned territories, which facilitates illegal trade and transnational organized crime.

High-handed approaches to security are exploited by terrorists to sever the populace from the government. Meanwhile, governments have been blamed for their inability to deal decisively with insurgents/terrorists. Insecurity has led to low economic activity and high poverty rates. The low economic activity and high poverty rates are then exploited by terrorists who have become resourceful through illegal economic deals that are equally facilitated by insecurity. This vicious cycle characterizes the complexity of the Sahel crisis. In another vein, atrocities perpetrated by governments have played to the advantage of the insurgents who exploit such atrocities for their recruitment drive. This chapter discusses the complexities of the Sahel crisis, its security, political, ecological, religious, economic, and sociological dimensions, and the key terrorist organizations operating in the Sahel.

³² Cristina Barrios and Tobias Koepf, eds., *Re-Mapping the Sahel: Transnational Security Challenges and International Responses* (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2014), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/re-mapping-sahel-transnational-security-challenges-and-international-responses>.

³³ Cooke, “Understanding the G5 Sahel Joint Force.”

B. COMPLEXITIES OF THE SAHEL CRISIS

Africa's Sahel region lacks unanimity in definition but is mostly defined in climatic and territorial terms.³⁴ Ecologically, the G5 Sahel is part of the area that lies about 4,800 miles from Senegal, along the Atlantic Ocean and the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. The Sahel region comprises several million square miles of arid and semi-arid grasslands serving as a transition zone between the Sahara Desert in the north and the tropics in the south. While the Sahel region can be demarcated in spatial terms, Boas Strazzari, a research professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, suggests that “the Sahel as a region cannot be demarcated, as it is a social space: it expands and shrinks in line with political, social, and economic trajectories that are impacted by ecological changes.”³⁵ Despite the lack of uniformity in the definition of the Sahel, defining the Sahel within the confines of the G5 countries has spatial, political, social, and economic trajectories. The G5 group is the group of 5 Sahelian countries that formed the G5 Sahel initiative in 2014 to address their common issues on security and development. They are Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Figure 1 shows the map of the G5 Sahel:

³⁴ Stellah Kwasi et al., *Prospects for the G5 Sahel Countries to 2040* (Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies, 2019), <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/prospects-g5-sahel-countries-2040/>.

³⁵ Bøås and Strazzari, “Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel,” 2.

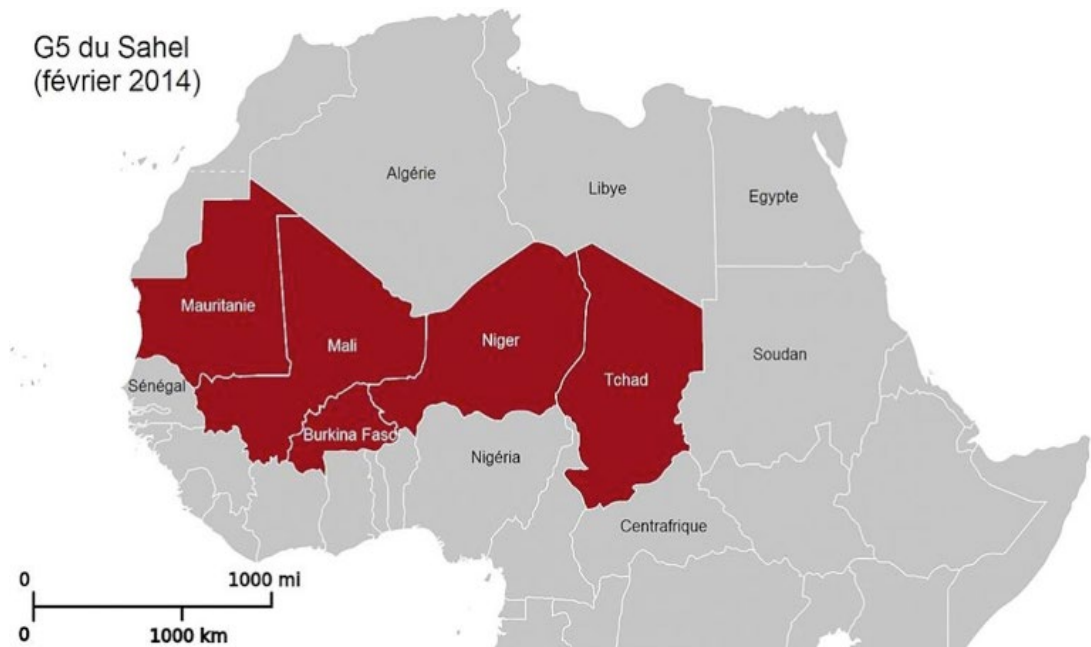


Figure 1. The G5 Sahel Map.³⁶

The 5 countries that have come together to form the G5 Sahel initiative are the focus of this study. The 5 countries acknowledge the commonalities in their challenges and the need to synergize to pursue their common good. The Sahel remains one of the world’s poorest regions, battered by a “... harsh climate, population growth, food insecurity, corruption, crime, and violent extremism.”³⁷ Political weakness, marginalization, and violence have combined with social and environmental conditions to become drivers of radical proselytizing and terrorist activities of prominent terrorist groups and affiliates.³⁸

Politically the G5 Sahel countries are all members of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States, established on February 4, 1998.³⁹ The expanse of the land makes it almost impossible for the resource-constrained governments to maintain their presence across their territories without collaboration with local and non-state actors such as traditional

³⁶ Source: “Headquarters of West African G5 Sahel Force Attacked -Sources,” Egypt Today, June 29, 2018, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/53060/Headquarters-of-West-African-G5-Sahel-force-attacked-sources>.

³⁷ Dentice, *Terrorism in the Sahel Region*, 3.

³⁸ Dentice, *Terrorism in the Sahel Region*.

³⁹ Kwasi et al., *Prospects for the G5 Sahel Countries to 2040*.

leaders, community-based groups, and non-governmental organizations.⁴⁰ Prior to the 2012 Malian crisis for instance, the state had been literally absent in the northern part of the country, as the few government security forces were seen as predators who acted with impunity, amid widespread corruption.⁴¹

The issue of weak governments remains a key cause and exacerbating factor in the Sahel. Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, the president of the Centre for Strategy for Security in Sahel Sahara, observes that: “for many years, the Sahel was marginalized, abandoned far from states capital cities.”⁴² Terrorism in the Sahel region presents a classic example of the observation made by the Former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs of the United States, Chester Crocker. He notes that a classic security dilemma between conflict and security arises when weak or destructive governments become the source of conflicts, and equally so when governments’ tough choices open themselves to corruption and criminality.⁴³

In security terms, the insurgency and terrorism in the Sahel region could be traced to the Algerian civil war in the 1990s when the first extremist network—the Armed Islamic Militant Group (GIA)—emerged. The GIA, later to become AQIM, targeted civilians and later security agencies and government agencies.⁴⁴ Contemporary terrorism in the Sahel, however, could be defined temporally in terms of the period after the fall of the Gadhafi regime in Libya and the emergence of several armed groups mostly in southern Algeria, eastern Mauritania, northern Mali, southwestern Niger, and, in recent years, in the northern regions of Burkina Faso.⁴⁵ Jean-Pierre Filiu, Professor of Middle East Studies at Sciences

⁴⁰ Le Roux, *Responding to the Rise in Violent Extremism in the Sahel*.

⁴¹ Rasmus Alenius Boserup and Luis Martinez, *Europe and the Sahel-Maghreb Crisis* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), 2018), <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-european-powers-and-the-sahel-maghreb-crisis>.

⁴² Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, “Sahel Sahara: Crises in the Crisis,” *Centre 4s* (blog), November 12, 2021, <https://www.newcentre4s.org/EN/2021/11/12/sahel-sahara-crises-in-the-crisis/>.

⁴³ Chester A. Crocker, “Africa Governance Challenges and Their Implications,” *International Journal of Comparative Studies in International Relations and Development* 6, no. 1 (December 2020): 45–56, <https://doi.org/10.48028/iiprds/ijcsird.v6.i1.05>.

⁴⁴ Dentice, *Terrorism in the Sahel Region*.

⁴⁵ Dentice.

in the Paris School of International Affairs, establishes that “the fact that Gaddafi’s loyalists had planted arms caches all over the desert, now accessible to any roaming gang, only contributed to the volatility of the situation and to the unprecedented dissemination of war weaponry.”⁴⁶ In Mali, the return of Tuareg fighters from Libya with a wide array of munitions gave impetus to the post-independence secession struggle by the Tuareg in northern Mali. The insecurity and governance situation has seen an increased rate of illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, with its attendant problems.⁴⁷

Economics drive the insurgency in the Sahel region. Closely linked to terrorism in the Sahel is transnational organized crime. Terrorist groups like AQIM are noted for their resort to such crime as ransom taking, transnational crimes, and drug trafficking as means of survival.⁴⁸ Still on economics, the “ancient trans-Saharan trade routes facilitated cross border trade and a transhumance lifestyle for hundreds of years, predating the French colonial period.”⁴⁹ The ancient trade routes that traversed from Mali to Europe have turned into the routes for the smuggling of drugs, diamonds and gold, with the numerous terrorist groups as major beneficiaries.⁵⁰ Figure 2 is the map of the ancient trans-Saharan trade routes:

⁴⁶ Jean-Pierre Filiu, “Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Dilemmas of Jihadi Loyalty,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26295965>.

⁴⁷ Boserup and Martinez, *Europe and the Sahel-Maghreb Crisis*.

⁴⁸ Dentice, *Terrorism in the Sahel Region*.

⁴⁹ Kwasi et al., *Prospects for the G5 Sahel Countries to 2040*, 4.

⁵⁰ Gary K. Busch, “The Logistics of the War in the Sahel,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 2 (2013): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.bh>.



Figure 2. Ancient Trans-Saharan Trade Routes.⁵¹

Dr. Gary K. Busch, an international trades unionist, academic, businessman, and political intelligence consultant, provides another economic perspective to the Sahel crisis:

The collapse of Libya under Kaddafi left these smugglers without a protector so the radical extremists who supplanted Kaddafi offered the smugglers of the Sahel the same protection as before but required their ideological support in the cause of radical Islam as an additional price. Their successes were aided by the breakdown of competence and cohesion of the states of the Sahel as they reverted to incompetent competing military cliques. The smugglers were left with few natural enemies and they spread their wings.⁵²

Any doubt about the close link between terrorism and transnational crime in the Sahel was erased after the incident of a plane that crashed after it had transported cocaine from

⁵¹ Source: "West Africa Trade Routes," Adobe Express, accessed September 16, 2022, <https://express.adobe.com/page/vm4jLgAxKAOzA/>.

⁵² Busch, "The Logistics of the War in the Sahel," 4.

South America to northern Mali. The plane had offloaded about 11 tons of cocaine in Mali but crashed during takeoff.⁵³ Terrorist groups like AQIM are noted for their resort to such crime as ransom taking, transnational crimes, and drug trafficking as means of survival.⁵⁴

In another perspective, Francesco Strazzari and Morten Bøås, research professors at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, aver that the situation in the Sahel is not necessarily about insurgents seeking to overthrow a central political power:

The historical example of the Sahel Big Man Ibrahim ag Bahanga illustrates this point. Ag Bahanga embarked on his Big Man career during the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s as a lesser rebel leader and gained control of a commune (division of local government) after the rebellion ended. He was involved in trade and smuggling; he led other rebellions, and at the same time, until his death in August 2011, maintained relationships with neighboring governments, Algeria and Libya, as well as certain segments of the Malian government and administration.⁵⁵

They postulate that it involves influential persons profiting from the crisis through cooperation and collaboration with both governments and insurgents.

From the global perspective, the Sahel has become the new turf for global power competition (GPC). Russia, through the Wagner forces, maintains an increased influence in Chad. In Mali, French and European Union forces have been repatriated while Russian Wagner forces have deployed. Lina Raafat, a non-resident scholar for the Countering Terrorism and Extremism Program at the Middle East Institute, observes that when in 2019 the U.S.-led coalition defeated the Islamic State caliphate in Syria, the Islamic State extended its geographic reach, rebranding itself as a jihadist movement.⁵⁶ Hitherto, terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel came in the form of armed groups, separatists, militias, terrorists, jihadi groups, and common criminals. Ould Abdallah, President of the Center of Strategies for the Security in the Sahel Sahara, decries how at the international

⁵³ Erik Alda and Joseph Sala, “Links between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 3, no. 1 (2014): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.ea>.

⁵⁴ Dentice, *Terrorism in the Sahel Region*.

⁵⁵ Bøås and Strazzari, “Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel,” 11.

⁵⁶ Raafat, *The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel*.

level, a Cold War-like tendency has emerged in the Sahel region, with countries like Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and other Western countries seeking more political, economic, and other spaces.⁵⁷

Another complex dimension to the Sahelian crisis is the atrocities perpetrated by the national armies themselves. Indications are that government forces in their eagerness to achieve results perpetrate atrocities against civilians. As security force atrocities against civilians increase, the population is severed from the government, allowing the insurgents to return to the communities with a tighter grip.⁵⁸ In the aftermath of the 2020 Pau Summit, when Malian and Burkinabe troops were reengineered to carry out offensives against ISGS, the period saw an increase in government atrocities against civilians. Figure 3 shows a graph depicting the trend in atrocities against civilians within the period.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Abdallah, “Sahel Sahara.”

⁵⁸ Nsaibia, “State Atrocities in the Sahel.”

⁵⁹ Nsaibia.

Violence Against Civilians by State Forces in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (Jan 2019 - April 2020)

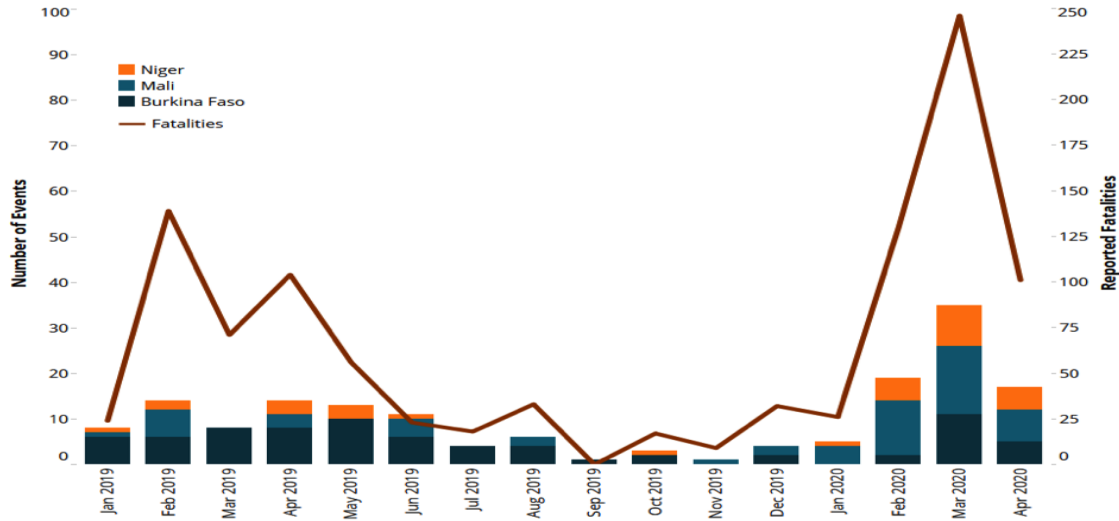


Figure 3. Violence Against Civilians by State Forces in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (January 2019 – April 2020).⁶⁰

The heavy-handed tactics of government forces and their arming of community vigilante groups have caused further deterioration of the situation and facilitated militant recruitment while increasing intercommunity violence.⁶¹ For example, in Mali, security forces’ mass executions and biased atrocities against pastoralists motivated surviving victims to join jihadist groups.⁶²

Luca Raineri, a research fellow at the Dirpolis Institute, Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa, Italy argues that while other factors drive insurgency in the Sahel, it is state atrocities that drive mass mobilization for the jihadist insurgents. He explains that economics, tribal, ideology, and other factors seek to motivate the elite jihadists but when states engage in or sponsor atrocities, it facilitates mass mobilization for the insurgents. He elaborates that state atrocities come either directly through state security or indirectly when

⁶⁰ Adapted from Nsaibia.

⁶¹ Clionadh Raleigh, Héni Nsaibia, and Caitriona Dowd, “The Sahel Crisis since 2012,” *African Affairs* 120, no. 478 (January 2021): 123–43, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adaa022>.

⁶² Raleigh, Nsaibia, and Dowd.

states support non-state actors to perpetrate atrocities.⁶³ For instance, in Mali, the weakness of the government caused it to team up with the Groupe Armé Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA) and the Mouvement du Salut de l’Azawad (MSA), in operations in northern Mali. As a result, when President Macron was elected in 2017, the leaders of GATIA and MSA traveled to France to deliberate on the security of the Sahel. Al-Saharawi (leader of ISGS) exploited this invitation and used it “his own propaganda, as evidence that France had allied with some communities to the detriment of others, and that the GATIA, the MSA and the local governments were only puppets and apostates in the pay of foreign crusaders. Contradicting his usual discretion, al-Saharawi issued a public letter on behalf of the ISGS, calling the leaders of the MSA and of the GATIA the pharaohs of the unbelievers.”⁶⁴ The propaganda effect was key to the success of ISGS’ mass mobilization from other tribes that were not related to GATIA or MSA.

C. THE MAJOR TERRORIST GROUPS IN THE SAHEL

1. Global Trends, Cooperation, and Conflict

Heni Nsaibia, a Senior Researcher at ACLED, observes that “after eight years of conflict in the Sahel, the international community remains primarily focused on the two main jihadi militant groups driving the sub-regional insurgency in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger: the Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).”⁶⁵ The trend of the spread of insurgency in the Sahel region projects that the threat to Ghana’s northern region would likely be from the existing terrorist groups in the Sahel or a local group collaborating with them. Lessons from Burkina Faso, where the Ansaroul Islam, the

⁶³ Luca Raineri, “Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 8 (2022): 1632–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1828078>.

⁶⁴ Raineri, 9.

⁶⁵ Nsaibia, “State Atrocities in the Sahel.”

local terror organization, collaborates with JNIM and ISGS, are worth noting.⁶⁶ Although several other armed groups exist in the Sahel, JNIM and ISGS are the dominant groups.⁶⁷

The rather uncharacteristic cooperation that exists between affiliates of ISIS and Al Qaeda in the Sahel began to wane in 2019. It was a matter of time for ISGS and JNIM to take their cue from the global contest between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State on the jihadist supremacy front. Thus, in addressing the Sahel crisis in its current form, the existing rivalry between ISGS and JNIM must be considered to put the dynamics into perspective.

The cooperation between JNIM and ISGS was characterized by agreement, coexistence, and implicit territorial arrangements. ISGS and JNIM had cooperated until 2019 due, in part, to their common origin and the close relationship that had hitherto existed between them. Second, the two groups had cooperated due to a hitherto tacit geographic exclusiveness in their areas of operations.⁶⁸ Third, their initial collaboration is attributable to the limitations that time imposed on them—it took over one year for the Islamic State to accept the allegiance sworn by ISGS, and JNIM equally took time to form a proper united al-Qaeda alliance. The period of cooperation was therefore just an incubation period. Once the Islamic State acknowledged the allegiance of ISGS and JNIM wholly affiliated with al-Qaeda, it was just a matter of time for them to reignite the global jihadist contest between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

The first major source of conflict was that JNIM was unwilling to share territory in some of its traditional strongholds. Second, ISGS persistently poached the JNIM members. Third, JNIM had agreed to dialogue with the Malian government, a position with which ISGS disagreed. Also, when JNIM commenced the signing of agreements with militiamen, ISGS questioned the commitment and credibility of JNIM to the cause of jihadism. Finally, the integration of ISGS into the overall structure of the Islamic State of West Africa

⁶⁶ Héni Nsaibia, “Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), January 17, 2019, <https://acleddata.com/2019/01/17/insecurity-in-southwestern-burkina-faso-in-the-context-of-an-expanding-insurgency/>.

⁶⁷ Ricardo René Larémont, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel,” *African Security* 4, no. 4 (October 2011): 242–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2011.628630>.

⁶⁸ Baldaro and Diall, “The End of the Sahelian Exception.”

Province (ISWAP) was the final cause of the strained relationship between JNIM and ISGS.⁶⁹ The mounting global competition between IS and al Qaeda was to replicate itself in JNIM and ISGS sooner rather than later. From 2019 to the second quarter of 2021, JNIM and ISGS clashed approximately 140 times.⁷⁰ Figure 4 shows a graph of the trend of clashes between ISGS and JNIM from 2019 to the second quarter of 2021:



Figure 4. JNIM-ISGS Clashes by Quarter.⁷¹

Thus, the global dimension that the Sahel insurgency has taken has come to add to the complexities of the Sahel crisis. After about four years of cooperation, ISGS and JNIM are affiliates of the Islamic State and al Qaeda, respectively, with their concomitant

⁶⁹ Nsaibia, “State Atrocities in the Sahel.”

⁷⁰ Raafat, *The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel*.

⁷¹ Source: Raafat.

ideological jihadist differences. The resultant increase in armed activities has come to add to an already debilitating Sahel crisis.

2. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

The origin of ISGS is traced to Adnan Abu Walid Al Sahrawi's oath of allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2015. Al Sahrawi unilaterally pledged al-Mourabitoun's allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State but failed to get the support of other members of the leadership, particularly Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Al Sahrawi subsequently broke away and formed what is now known as ISGS.⁷² Al Sahrawi was a veteran Salafi-jihadist fighter in the Sahel.⁷³ He joined the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) as a spokesperson, then became the leader of the new group—al-Mourabitoun.⁷⁴ MUJAO had split from AQIM but MUJAO itself was split, with some members leaving to form ISGS under Adnan Abu Walid Al Sahrawi.⁷⁵ ISGS is therefore of Al Qaeda stock, having its initial core members from breakaway al-Mourabitoun—an affiliate local branch of Al-Qaeda. In May 2015, Adnan Abu Walid Al Sahrawi, the leader of the defectors, pledged his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State.⁷⁶

Ideologically, ISGS toes the Islamic State ideology based on a hardline Salafi-jihadist caliphate and the implementation of sharia law in a conservative style.⁷⁷ In its area of operations, ISGS believes in engaging in atrocities such as amputating the arms and feet

⁷² Pauline Le Roux, "Exploiting Borders in the Sahel: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara," *Spotlight* (blog), June 10, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/exploiting-borders-sahel-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-isgs/>.

⁷³ Thompson Jared, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State in the Greater Sahara," *Examining Extremism* (blog), July 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-greater-sahara>.

⁷⁴ Heni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 7 (July 2020): 1–14, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>.

⁷⁵ "The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat Al-Islam Wa Al-Muslimeen, JNIM)," Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel, accessed April 10, 2022, https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/jnim.

⁷⁶ Baldaro and Dially, "The End of the Sahelian Exception."

⁷⁷ Jared, "Examining Extremism: Islamic."

of thieves. Their other measures were the banning of music and censorship of certain celebrations and events such as weddings. In areas where governance services are lacking, ISGS performs judicial and executive functions such as dispute resolution, tenancy mediations, and cattle protection. They also provide social and welfare services and as well provide cash rewards for locals who carry out attacks on behalf of ISGS.⁷⁸ While a key strategy of ISGS and JNIM is to exploit local undercurrents to advance their cause, there are stark differences. ISGS adopts an Islamic hardline approach and presents itself as an obdurate alternative to JNIM.⁷⁹

ISGS is organized around the personality of Al Sahrawi. Initially organized around a few fighters who broke away from al-Mourabitoun, ISGS, upon acceptance by the global Islamic State, has grown to be a credible jihadist force in the Sahel. It draws its membership through the mobilization of the local population and poaching of members of the rival JNIM.⁸⁰ ISGS engages in the co-option of existing Salafist-jihadist cells and maintains close ties with Burkina Faso's Ansaroul Islam. The group concentrates most of its operation in the area of the tri-border or Liptako-Gourma region of the Sahel. Even though ISGS is a wing of ISWAP, it maintains its independence in operations and has direct communication with the Islamic State.⁸¹ ISGS has evolved from an unrecognized (and mostly disregarded) Islamic State affiliate to an increasingly prominent and distinct "wing" of ISWAP.⁸²

Operationally, the strategy of ISGS employs high mobility and operates across borders to avoid being easy targets for security forces.⁸³ ISGS came to the fore when, in 2016, it attacked civilian targets in the area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger; attacked a Burkina Faso military post close to the border with Mali; and attempted a prison break in Niger. Perhaps these incidents showcased the credibility of the group, convincing

⁷⁸ Jared.

⁷⁹ Raafat, *The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel*.

⁸⁰ Jared, "Examining Extremism: Islamic."

⁸¹ Jared.

⁸² Nsaibia and Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly."

⁸³ Le Roux, *Responding to the Rise in Violent Extremism in the Sahel*.

the Islamic State to acknowledge ISGS as an affiliate.⁸⁴ The most famous ISGS attack occurred on October 4, 2017, when five American special forces soldiers, alongside five of their Nigerien counterparts, were killed in an ISGS ambush. Up to 2022, ISGS remains one of the active jihadist insurgency groups in the Sahel region.

3. The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims

JNIM was formed in 2017 as a coalition of Salafi-jihadist insurgent groups operating in the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa.⁸⁵ March 2017 witnessed the merger of Ansar Dine, AQIM, al-Mourabitoun, and the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) to form JNIM.⁸⁶ The groups represented various interest groups in the Sahel. The “four al Qaeda-linked militant Islamist groups in the Sahel—Ansar Dine, FLM, al-Mourabitoun, and the Sahara Emirate of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM Sahara)—represented Tuareg, Fulani, Arab jihadists from the Sahel, and Arab jihadists from the Maghreb, respectively.”⁸⁷ Although the components within JNIM have acted relatively autonomously, they have consistently reaffirmed their membership in the umbrella group.⁸⁸ All of these groups share the common feature of having originated from either AQIM or from within the circles of Iyad Ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Dine.⁸⁹

AQIM remains a prominent terrorist and armed group in the Sahel region.⁹⁰ When Abdel Malik Drukdal became the leader of the GSPC, he increased collaboration with Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s group in Iraq, which was later accepted by Osama Bin Laden (the

⁸⁴ Stig Jarle Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift: Fault-Lines of the African Jihad* (London: Hurst & Company, 2019).

⁸⁵ Thompson Jared, “Examining Extremism: Jama’at Nasr al-Islam Wal Muslimin,” *Examining Extremism* (blog), July 15, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-jamaat-nasr-al-islam-wal-muslimin>.

⁸⁶ International Crisis Group, *Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM*, Africa Report N°306 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/306-mali-enabling-dialogue-jihadist-coalition-jnim>.

⁸⁷ Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, *The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel* (Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27050>.

⁸⁸ European Council on Foreign Relations, “The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims.”

⁸⁹ Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*.

⁹⁰ Dentice, *Terrorism in the Sahel Region*.

then global al Qaeda leader) as the local branch of Al-Qaida.⁹¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's emir, the then second in command, announced the union in September 2006 and rebranded the GSPC as AQIM the following January. AQIM aligned with al Qaeda to maintain its credibility and facilitate recruitment and fundraising, as a result of the reverses suffered by AQIM's precursor group, GSPC.⁹²

When MUJAO split from AQIM in 2015, part of the group's fighters formed ISGS under Adnan Abu Walid Al Sahrawi, and the remainder remained with al-Mourabitoun, which eventually joined JNIM.⁹³ Al-Mourabitoun is popularly noted for some major attacks since the summer of 2014, notably, the Bamako hostage-taking of November 2015. Following the attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako in November 2015 and the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou in early 2016, Al-Mourabitoun was absorbed into AQIM, burying their hitherto unresolvable disagreements in leadership and composition of the group.⁹⁴

The FLM was led by Amadou Koufa, a radical Fulani who preached radical Islam, based on Fulani liberation and dominance and inspired by "Macina," the nineteenth century Fulani-led Macina empire. Even though the FLM does not have majority Fulanis, the leadership exploits the "Fulani tag" to facilitate recruitment from the Fulani populace.⁹⁵ Prominently, the FLM is noted for being the main JNIM branch that broke the "Sahel exception" when it engaged in armed exchanges with ISGS in central Mali.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Filiu, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb."

⁹² Djallil Lounnas, "Confronting Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib in the Sahel: Algeria and the Malian Crisis," *Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 5 (2014): 810–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2014.974033>.

⁹³ European Council on Foreign Relations, "Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)/Al-Mourabitoun," Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel, accessed April 10, 2022, https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/mujao#menuarea.

⁹⁴ Celeste Hicks, "The Sahel's Ungoverned Spaces and the Ascent of AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun and MUJAO in Mali and Niger," in *Extremisms in Africa*, ed. Alain Tschudin et al. (Johannesburg, South Africa: Fanele, 2018), 107–39, <https://gga.org/CAM/Niger/AQIM,%20AL%20Mourabitoun%20and%20MUJAO%20in%20Mali%20and%20Niger%20-%20Celeste%20Hicks.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Eizenga and Williams, *The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel*.

⁹⁶ Baldaro and Dially, "The End of the Sahelian Exception."

The alliance of the four groups forming JNIM was a reaction to two major developments: as a strategic move to forge a stronger Islamic jihadist front against concerted operations of Operation BARKHANE and MINUSMA as well as the need to forge a stronger AQ front to counter the 2015 emergence of ISGS in the Sahel.⁹⁷ The tendency to consider JNIM as a single entity with a unified command and concept of operations tends to obscure the realities of insurgency in the Sahel as it helps the insurgents to obscure their motivations, operations, and vulnerabilities.⁹⁸ Eizenga and Williams of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies report that “while frequently seen as a singular operational entity, [JNIM] is, in fact, a coalition of distinct militant Islamist groups with different organizational structures, leaders, and objectives.”⁹⁹

In terms of ideology and tactics, JNIM aims to drive away the foreigners and impose its form of Islamic law. JNIM relies on four lines of operations: “first, to spread over the largest possible geographical area; secondly, to exhaust the army and security forces by attacking them continually; thirdly, to gain popular support; and finally, to adopt the principle of guerrilla warfare while also using regular military tactics when possible.”¹⁰⁰ The group uses media to propagate its ideology and it is known to cooperate with local leaders in areas they control.¹⁰¹ In its bid to spread jihadism across the other parts of the West African Sahel region, JNIM has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. It is known to use such tactics as attacks, assassinations, and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on United Nations (UN), Malian, and French forces.¹⁰² Generally, JNIM is known to be more cooperative with governments and other militants than the hardline ISGS.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Troels Burchall Henningsen, “The Crafting of Alliance Cohesion among Insurgents: The Case of Al-Qaeda Affiliated Groups in the Sahel Region,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 3 (2021): 371–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2021.1876455>.

⁹⁸ Eizenga and Williams, *The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel*, 1.

⁹⁹ Eizenga and Williams, 2.

¹⁰⁰ International Crisis Group, *Mali*, 6.

¹⁰¹ International Crisis Group, *Mali*.

¹⁰² European Council on Foreign Relations, “The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims.”

¹⁰³ Raafat, *The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel*.

D. CONCLUSION

The weak states in the Sahel region provide a conducive environment for terrorist and armed groups to thrive. Additionally, Islam, as the dominant religion, exposes the Sahel community to radicalization and proselytization. The trans-Saharan trade routes and the proximity of the Sahel to Europe make the terrorism situation a problem, not for the Sahel alone but also for Europe. Terrorists have preyed on circumstances to establish a foothold to perpetuate their agenda. Within the numerous terrorist and jihadist groups in the Sahel can be seen a clear distinction along the lines of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS).

The contest for superiority in the jihadist world equally extends to the Sahel. The coming together of the Al Qaeda-affiliated jihadists to ultimately form JNIM was in reaction to the emergence of ISGS (an IS-oriented jihadist group). The formation of JNIM was intended to form a solid al Qaeda front for the supremacy contest that had characterized other theatres where the two groups operate. Thus, since 2015, terrorist groups in the Sahel came to be divided between the global al Qaeda and its arch competitor—the Islamic State. ISGS and JNIM uncharacteristically cooperated and co-existed in what commentators describe as “the Sahel exception.” The alliance was, however, short-lived, as in 2019, ISGS and JNIM started fighting among themselves reminiscent of their contest in other theatres.

III. COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN THE SAHEL CRISIS

A. INTRODUCTION

This thesis acknowledges that other actors play an important but subservient or supportive role to France and supposes that an analysis of the French strategy will give a representational picture of COIN operations in the Sahel. Bruno Charbonneau, a professor at the Royal Military College of Canada, observes that there is no doubt about the centrality of the French military and diplomatic leadership and counter-insurgency in the Sahel.¹⁰⁴ He asserts that COIN in the Sahel is grounded in the French doctrine but acknowledges “the support of the American government (in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), the EU through its multiple missions and funding schemes, and the collaboration of African regimes.”¹⁰⁵ Dr. Gary K. Busch, an international trades unionist, an academic, a businessman, and a political intelligence consultant, for instance explains how France has used its position in the UN and influence in Europe to get the UN and the European Union to sponsor what is predominantly a pursuit of France’s national interests in Africa.¹⁰⁶ On the U.S. support to the Sahel, he questions why the U.S. taxpayer should be made to fund *Françafrique* – a France neo-colonial policy in Africa.¹⁰⁷

In 2012, Tuareg rebels and allied jihadist armed groups conquered northern Mali and subsequently, in 2017, invaded the Malian capital, Bamako, marking disturbing milestones in the insurgency and general crisis in the Sahel.¹⁰⁸ This jihadist onslaught threatened the West African sub-region and neighboring Europe. In addition to France, several countries and organizations, ranging from the UN, European Union, U.S., and G5

¹⁰⁴ Charbonneau, “Counter-Insurgency Governance in the Sahel,” 1813.

¹⁰⁵ Charbonneau, 1813.

¹⁰⁶ Gary K. Busch, “Why Should U.S. Taxpayers Fund French Neo-Colonialism,” accessed October 2, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/29322598/Why_Should_U_S_Taxpayers_Fund_French_Neo_Colonialism_docx.

¹⁰⁷ Busch.

¹⁰⁸ Charbonneau, “Counter-Insurgency Governance in the Sahel.”

Sahel countries have undertaken intervention operations, in what has generally been christened by some pundits as a “security traffic jam.”¹⁰⁹

The first part of this chapter discusses France’s COIN strategy in the Sahel as it compares with its global strategy, the rationale behind the variations in the strategy in the Sahel, and how effectively it has balanced security and non-security measures. The second part discusses France’s Operation SERVAL, Operation BARKHANE, and Task Force TAKUBA and how they play out in France’s overall COIN strategy in the Sahel.

B. FRANCE’S COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY IN THE SAHEL

In 2012, when Mali was faced with the threat of being overtaken by the insurgents, France deployed Operation SERVAL, which succeeded in halting the onslaught of the insurgents and dismantling most of the insurgents’ havens, forestalling Mali from falling into the hands of Islamic insurgents. Operations SERVAL was succeeded by Operation BARHKANE, which in turn has been reinforced with Task Force TAKUBA.

An examination of France’s COIN operations in the Sahel would reveal a deviation from France’s COIN doctrine, which is a “global approach.”¹¹⁰ The global approach combines politics, security, and development in COIN operations. Preceding circumstances to France’s interventions in the Sahel give us a perspective from which we can understand France’s strategies in the Sahel. Marina E. Henke, of the Department of Political Science at Northwestern University, draws several instances of France’s initial reluctance in intervening in Mali.¹¹¹ She outlines the following series of events: the director of the French Secret Service, Érarid Corbin de Mangoux, was skeptical about any full-scale French military intervention in Mali; in October 2012 President Hollande had publicly ruled out any direct French intervention in Mali; and President Hollande, in

¹⁰⁹ Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, “Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 856, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa093>.

¹¹⁰ Michael Shurkin, “France’s War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine,” *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 35–60, <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/11707>.

¹¹¹ Marina E. Henke, “Why Did France Intervene in Mali in 2013? Examining the Role of Intervention Entrepreneurs,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23, no. 3 (2017): 307–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2017.1352004>.

October 2012, had declared France would distance itself from interfering in the affairs of Africa.¹¹²

So, what necessitated France’s intervention in the Sahelian crisis in the face of the reluctance by French officials? Admittedly, France’s 2013 intervention was occasioned by the call for assistance from the Malian government. Mali was on the verge of collapse, a development that threatened the entire Sahel region.¹¹³ There were, however, other motivations for France’s intervention. France’s military intervention in the Sahel was for economic reasons as well. Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman of the Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism, Leiden University in the Netherlands, are of the view that France’s interest in the Sahel stems from its economic interests—in particular, its reliance on uranium from the Sahel, which Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman claim to be guarded by secretly deployed French commandos.¹¹⁴ These motivations are key to understanding France’s COIN strategy in the Sahel.

Commentators worry about why France has adopted a relatively security-based approach in its Sahelian COIN strategy. The French army’s COIN doctrine originates from its colonial experience. France’s global approach to COIN can be seen through thinkers like Trinquier, a French Army officer and a COIN theorist. He proposes the limited importance of armed forces and a requirement to combine military and civic action.¹¹⁵ Shurkin corroborates this assertion when he avers that “... common features of French approaches have been a de-emphasis on military operations and the need for a population-centric focus that emphasizes economic, psychological, and political actions intended to shore up the legitimacy of the colonial political order.”¹¹⁶ He notes that even though France has been variously criticized for the securitization of the Sahel COIN operations,

¹¹² Henke.

¹¹³ Henke.

¹¹⁴ Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, “Operation ‘Serval’: A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013–2014,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 6 (2015): 801–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494>.

¹¹⁵ Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*.

¹¹⁶ Shurkin, “France’s War in the Sahel,” 36.

he supports France's assertion that it has a global approach to COIN that de-emphasizes military operations.¹¹⁷ Thus, any critique of France's contemporary interventions in the Sahel must take cognizance of the wholistic strategy and the rationale behind the Sahel variation.

In April 2013, when France released a joint publication, *Contre-insurrection*, it spelled out most of the strategies that were later to guide its operations in Mali, and subsequently, the whole of the Sahel.¹¹⁸ *Contre-insurrection* seeks to give greater autonomy to the host nation, with the intervention forces taking the back seat, restore the situation to normalcy, and return it to local forces.¹¹⁹ Admittedly, therefore, France's interventions in the Sahel have purposely been security-based in outlook. In the midst of the criticism of France's Sahelian operation being security-focused, the chief of staff of the French armed forces, Army General François Lecointre, labeled France's COIN approach for the Sahel as "a crisis management strategy centered on the Sahel's own populations and their perceptions regarding the development of the crisis."¹²⁰ In corroboration, the "Sahel Alliance," in which France plays a leading role, has six priority fields: "education and youth employment; agriculture, rural development, food security; energy and climate; governance; decentralization and basic services; and internal security."¹²¹ The Sahel Alliance gives snippets of France's overall intent in the Sahel.

Contrary to all the counter arguments, however, France's Operation SERVAL, Operation BARKHANE, and Task Force TAKUBA typify France's direct COIN/CT operations in the Sahel, which have been largely security/kinetic operations. Rasmus Alenius Boserup and Luis Martinez from the Danish Institute for International Studies report succinctly the rationale behind France's security-inclined strategy in the Sahel:

¹¹⁷ Shurkin, "France's War in the Sahel."

¹¹⁸ Shurkin.

¹¹⁹ Shurkin.

¹²⁰ Charbonneau, "Counter-Insurgency Governance in the Sahel," 1812.

¹²¹ "The Sahel Alliance," Alliance Sahel, accessed July 6, 2022, <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/sahel-alliance/>.

France’s military involvement in the Sahel is based on the idea that jihadist terrorism is neither an expression of socio-economic problems nor a consequence of France’s military interventionism. Rather, it is seen as the culmination of an ideological struggle between anti-democratic jihadists and democratic France, as also manifested in the recent attacks by jihadists in France itself. As such, it is also perceived to be the prelude to a war fought by jihadist groups against French democratic values. France’s engagement is based on the idea that reducing poverty in the Sahel would eliminate neither the extremists nor the jihadists. In consequence, French military operations prioritize the destruction of the human and material infrastructure of the jihadists as a means to reduce their capacity and ultimately eliminate them altogether. Only then will France be able to support the Sahel states in restoring their authority and putting in place development policies targeting the most abandoned regions.¹²²

The above report could underscore the reason why France’s COIN operations in the Sahel have not achieved the desired results. Major Ryan Hess, a U.S. senior intelligence officer and an Air Force Foreign Area Officer for Africa Command, compares Operation BARKHANE with U.S. counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. He bemoans how military superiority has ensured tactical success, expressed in number of insurgents killed, but failed to lead to strategic progress.¹²³ Apart from this report going against France’s own acceptable global approach to COIN, it goes against the generally accepted population centeredness of COIN. As operations center on insurgents, the collateral effect on the population severs the population from security forces and state authorities. The development enables the insurgents to win the “hearts and minds” war. There is little wonder that despite the success of France’s operations in killing several key leaders of the insurgents, insurgency continues to rise in the Sahel.

C. FRANCE’S COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN THE SAHEL

1. Operation Serval

France’s military intervention in the Sahel commenced in 2012, when the Malian government called on France to help halt the advance of radical Islamists towards the

¹²² Boserup and Martinez, *Europe and the Sahel-Maghreb Crisis*, 41.

¹²³ Ryan Hess, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Operation Serval, and the Value of Irregular Warfare,” *Combating Terrorism Exchange (CTX)* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 22–33, <https://nps.edu/documents/110773463/137155527/CTX-VOL1202-AI+Qaida+in+the+Islamic+Maghrib+.pdf>.

capital, Bamako.¹²⁴ Since then, Operation SERVAL became the French intervention in the five Sahelian countries to fight terrorism.¹²⁵ In about a year of Operation SERVAL, the major towns in Mali were freed from insurgents, the terrorists suffered severe setbacks as most of their key leaders were killed and strongholds destroyed as Mali was able to conduct elections.¹²⁶ Notably, France’s efforts facilitated African and international troops’ efforts to help stabilize Mali, cleared sanctuaries of AQIM, and fended off attacks by other terrorist groups.¹²⁷ Operation SERVAL achieved what it was designed for—a conventional style operation—which yielded tactical, rather than strategic, success. Figure 5 is the logo of Operation SERVAL:



Figure 5. Operation SERVAL Logo.¹²⁸

The inefficiencies in conventional tactics of Operation SERVAL soon came to the fore as the terrorists took to insurgency tactics and spread from Mali to the other parts of

¹²⁴ Boeke and Schuurman, “Operation ‘Serval.’”

¹²⁵ Olivier Tramond and Philippe Seigneu, “Operation Serval: Another Beau Geste of France in Sub-Saharan Africa?,” *Military Review* 94, no. 6 (November 2014): 76–86, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20141231_art014.pdf.

¹²⁶ Tramond and Seigneu, 76.

¹²⁷ Tramond and Seigneu, “Operation Serval.”

¹²⁸ Source: “De Serval à Barkhane : Quelles Évolutions Du Dispositif Français Au Sahel?,” OverBlog, January 14, 2015, <http://rpdefense.over-blog.com/2015/01/de-serval-a-barkhane-queelles-evolutions-du-dispositif-francais-au-sahel.html>.

the Sahel region. The consequence was that insecurity soon rose to unprecedented levels in the Sahel region. In January 2020, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (and Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel), Mohamed Ibn Chambas, noted in his security brief to the UN Security Council a five-fold increase in casualties from terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, from 770 deaths in 2016 to 4,000 deaths reported in 2019.¹²⁹

But Sergei Boeke, a researcher at Leiden University, and Bart Schuurman, an Associate Professor at Leiden University's Institute of Security and Global Affairs in the Hague put up a defense when they note that France's strategy was born out of the of the desire of France to wean itself of the perceived "excessive interference by a former colonial power on the one hand and being seen as a passive accomplice to a new failing state on the other."¹³⁰ To Boeke and Schuurman, therefore, Operation SERVAL was politically successful in preventing the collapse of Mali, protecting France's strategic interests in the Sahel, contributing to the creation of an European Union training mission, and enabling United Nation support for an African-led Support Mission to Mali, as well as creating the international awareness of the Islamist insurgency in the Sahel.¹³¹ To the extent that Operation SERVAL was a quick reaction to halt the onslaught of the insurgents, it could be adjudged to have met its objectives to a very large extent. The follow-on interventions (Operation BARKHANE and Task Force TAKUBA) were to determine how enduring the gains made were to be.

2. Operation Barkhane

Operation BARKHANE replaced Operation SERVAL as a more enduring and geographically encompassing mission.¹³² Charbonneau notes that Operation SERVAL, as

¹²⁹ "Briefing of the Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel to the Security Council: 'Despite Positive Political Developments, the Region Continues to Witness a Devastating Surge in Terrorist Attacks,'" UNOWAS, January 9, 2020, <https://unowas.unmissions.org/briefing-special-representative-west-africa-and-sahel-security-council-%E2%80%9Cdespite-positive-political>.

¹³⁰ Boeke and Schuurman, "Operation 'Serval.'"

¹³¹ Boeke and Schuurman, 821.

¹³² Charbonneau, "Counter-Insurgency Governance in the Sahel."

a military intervention, was a tactical success, a success that was to be preserved in the face of looming strategic failure.¹³³ Operation BARKHANE was to form the backbone of France’s effort at regionalizing COIN efforts beyond Mali to the G5 Sahel countries. It had a double intent: “first, assist the G5 Sahel armed forces in fighting terrorist networks in the Sahel-Sahara region, and second to contribute to the prevention of terrorist safe-havens in the region.”¹³⁴ Figure 6 is the logo of Operation BARKHANE:



Figure 6. Operation BARKHANE Logo.¹³⁵

While Alassane Camara of the Central China Normal University asserts that Operation BARKHANE engages in combat operations together with Malian forces, training, and local development, French officers insist that the priority of operation BARKHANE is counterterrorism.¹³⁶ It is evident that the kinetic aspect of Operation BARKHANE outweighs

¹³³ Charbonneau.

¹³⁴ Maxime H.A. Larivé, “Welcome to France’s New War on Terror in Africa: Operation Barkhane,” *National Interest*, August 7, 2014, 15, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/welcome-frances-new-war-terror-africa-operation-barkhane-11029>.

¹³⁵ Source: Bastien Lachaud, “Conséquences de La Fin de l’opération Barkhane,” Bastien Lachaud Député de la Seine-Saint-Denis, July 20, 2021, <https://bastienlachaud.fr/2021/07/20/consequences-de-la-fin-de-loperation-barkhane/>.

¹³⁶ Alassane Camara, “The G5 Sahel: Security Implementation and Challenges,” *Open Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 3 (July 2020): 493–506, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2020.103030>.

its non-security aspect. Meanwhile, David Kilcullen, a U.S. COIN expert, in his analyses of classical counter insurgency, cautions against accessing COIN outcomes on enemy-centrism or population-centrism bases.¹³⁷ Kilcullen explains that it is important to study any battle and understand and develop strategies to adapt to its nuances.¹³⁸ Operation BARKHANE is therefore assessed not on its security or non-security orientation, but rather, on its inability to halt the insurgency in the Sahel. To a large extent, therefore, Operation BARKHANE cannot be assessed as successful.

3. Task Force Takuba

Task Force TAKUBA was the measure to bring on board SOF from European partners who would accompany Malian troops in operations. It had other motives that had nothing to do with Mali. Among such other motives was the desire by the French to strengthen relations with other European countries.¹³⁹ It was also obvious that France was overwhelmed with the rising insurgency in the Sahel. Following the French helicopter crash in 2019 that led to the death of 13 French troops and amid the increase in ISGS activities and consequent loss in local confidence in French operations, Task Force TAKUBA was expected to increase force credibility.¹⁴⁰ Task Force TAKUBA's two main objectives were to provide highly mobile, targeted smaller special unit operations to complement conventional operations as well as to fill in capacity gaps of the Malian armed forces.¹⁴¹ Figure 7 is the logo of Task Force TAKUBA.

¹³⁷ David Kilcullen, "Two Schools of Classical Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars Journal*, January 27, 2007, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/two-schools-of-classical-counterinsurgency>.

¹³⁸ Kilcullen.

¹³⁹ Shurkin, "France's War in the Sahel."

¹⁴⁰ Anna Schmauder, Gorman Zoë, and Berger Flore, "Takuba: A New Coalition for the Sahel?," *Clingendael Spectator*, June 30, 2020, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/takuba-new-coalition-sahel>.

¹⁴¹ Schmauder, Zoë, and Flore.



Figure 7. Task Force TAKUBA Logo.¹⁴²

Like Operations SERVAL and TAKUBA, Task Force TAKUBA aimed to increase the kinetic capabilities of BARKHANE. The expansion of Task Force TAKUBA to encompass other EU countries was to give it an international outlook, but the insistence on SOF is worthy of note. We can derive a justification from Arreguin Toft when he supposes that “without more special operations forces—the self-reliant and discriminate armed forces necessary to implement an ideal COIN strategy—what begins as a military operation against an isolated violent minority will tend to escalate into a war against an entire people.”¹⁴³ How true this assertion will hold for the Sahel operations lies in the yet to be determined success of Task Force TAKUBA. Following a misunderstanding between the Malian military junta and France, Task Force TAKUBA has been repatriated from Mali, leaving any prospects in limbo.

D. ANALYSIS OF FRANCE’S COIN STRATEGY IN THE SAHEL

The extent of COIN operations in the Sahel was determined at the 2020 Pau Summit. The outcome of the Pau Summit was the formation of the Coalition for the Sahel, an initiative

¹⁴² Source: Ministero Della Difesa, “Mali – Task Force Takuba,” *Operazioni Internazionali in corso*, accessed October 13, 2022, https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Mali_Task_Force_Takuba/Pagine/default.aspx.

¹⁴³ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict,” *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 123, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092079>.

that brought together the G5 Sahel countries, France (through Operation BARKHANE), the partners who were already involved, and all countries and organizations that wished to contribute to it. The four pillars of the summit were as follows: fighting against terrorism, strengthening the military capabilities of states in the region, supporting the return of state and administrations on the territory, and providing development assistance.¹⁴⁴ It is deductive, therefore, that France remained committed to its global approach, which centers on politics, security, and development. The four pillars of the Coalition for the Sahel are in sync with France’s global approach.

To the observer, however, COIN in the Sahel has generally been security centered, necessitating the term “security traffic jam.” France, the lead actor, tacitly acknowledges the necessity of combining security with politics and development but hopes that others would take up the non-security aspects. The inclination of France, the protagonist in the COIN in the Sahel, to take up security operations while others perform the development and governance aspect in an intervention that Shurkin describes as “political”¹⁴⁵ is confusing. Military operations are guided by politics. How the French intervene in COIN without being political is a question worth asking. The question is how effective is France’s strategy of tackling security in the Sahel and leaving the non-security aspects to other agencies? The resultant increase in insurgency is a verdict of the strategy. The ineffectiveness of the Sahelian strategy is buttressed by Emmanuel Dupuy, president of the Institute of European Perspective & Security Studies in Paris, while commenting during the 2020 Pau Summit. He bemoaned that the over 4500 soldiers, 500 vehicles, and 20 helicopters should have been enough to wipe out insurgency in the Sahel but noted that military solutions alone were not enough.¹⁴⁶ The extent to which the Sahelian COIN strategies are effective lies in the results, a verdict that is near

¹⁴⁴ Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, “G5 Sahel – Pau Summit – Statement by the Heads of State (13 Jan. 2020),” France Diplomacy, accessed July 8, 2022, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/2020/article/g5-sahel-pau-summit-statement-by-the-heads-of-state-13-jan-2020>.

¹⁴⁵ Shurkin, “France’s War in the Sahel.”

¹⁴⁶ Christina Okello, “France Aims to Legitimise Sahel Anti-Jihad Fight at Pau Summit,” RFI, January 12, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20200112-france-macron-seeks-legitimise-Sahel-anti-jihad-fight-Pau-summit>.

devastation. Figure 8 depicts the worrying trend of fatalities since France’s intervention in 2014:

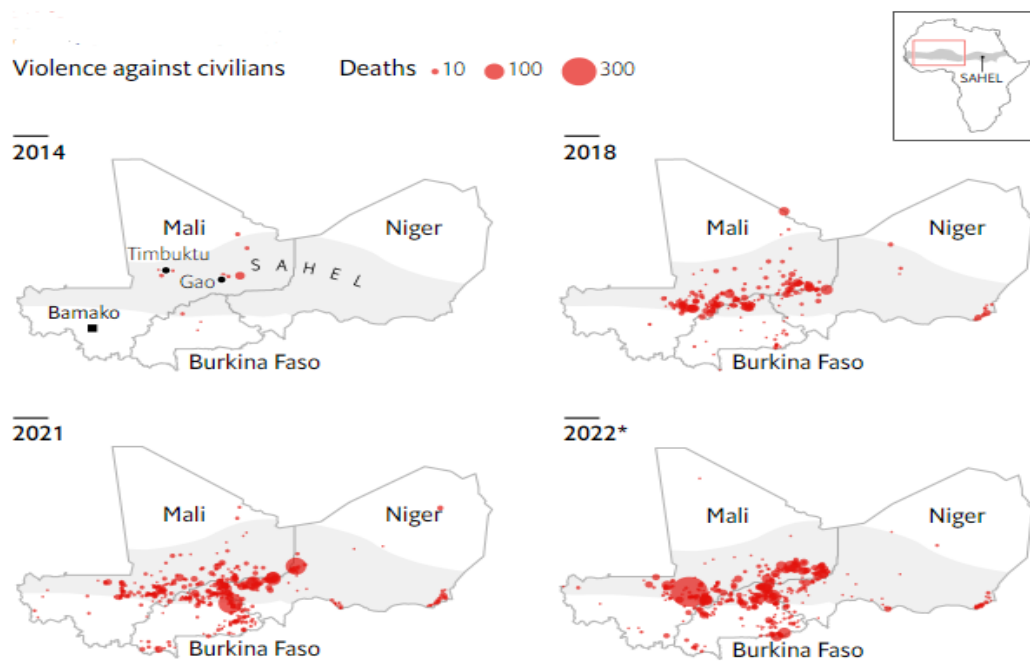


Figure 8. Violence against Civilians in the Sahel.¹⁴⁷

The insurgency continues to spread, and attacks remain on the increase. Whatever strategy there is, the reality is that it is failing to achieve the desired objectives.

The strategic shift that has necessitated the inclusion of SOF (with Task Force TAKUBA) coincided with the military coup in Mali, the consequent unwillingness of France to work with a military junta, the demand by Mali’s military junta for France to withdraw, and the deployment of the Wagner forces from Russia. France and Task Force TAKUBA, however, remain in other parts of the Sahel. De Castenado, an author at Grey Dynamics (a private intelligence firm in London), cautions that “... a majority of SOF personnel increases the COIN capabilities of Task Force TAKUBA. On the other hand, the insurgent nature of

¹⁴⁷ Source: “France Has Withdrawn Its Final Troops from Mali,” *The Economist*, August 19, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/08/19/france-has-withdrawn-its-final-troops-from-mali>.

the conflict means that limited success in targeting militants is likely expected unless non-military efforts are effective.”¹⁴⁸

E. CONCLUSION

The Sahel situation caught the attention of the world in 2013 when Mali came to the brink of collapse due to the onslaught of jihadist insurgents. Even though several countries and international bodies continue to contribute to countering the Sahelian insurgency, they tend to play subservient and supportive roles to France’s operations. When Operation SERVAL was launched, at the instance of the then Malian president, it succeeded in halting the jihadists’ advance to central Mali, cleared the havens of the insurgents, and made Mali untenable for the jihadists. Operation SERVAL was soon to face challenges as the jihadists resorted to insurgents’ tactics. Operation BARKHANE replaced Operation SERVAL as a more permanent measure that expanded the operational scope geographically to encompass the entire Sahel and temporally to become more enduring than Operation SERVAL. Changing dynamics in the operational space led to the deployment of Task Force TAKUBA—an all-European SOF.

Despite these measures, insurgency in the Sahel continues to grow. Pundits and commentators have criticized France for over-securitization of the Sahelian operations, contrary to its best practices of a global approach. But France’s deviation from its global approach to COIN could be understood from its colonialism history and its desire to wean itself from neocolonial tendencies. France’s Sahelian strategy is to normalize the situation and return it to indigenous authorities, as different from the political operations associated with colonialism. After over a decade of operations, the indicators point to a deteriorating insurgency situation in the Sahel. Clearly, the compartmentalization of security and non-security operations by France, as the key COIN actor, has yielded unimpressive dividends.

¹⁴⁸ Iñigo Camilleri De Castanedo, “Task Force TAKUBA: European Special Forces in the Sahel,” *Grey Dynamics* (blog), February 19, 2022, <https://greydynamics.com/task-force-takuba-special-forces-in-the-sahel/>.

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IV. LESSONS FROM THE SAHEL

A. INTRODUCTION

The Sahel experience provides useful lessons for the imminent insurgency in northern Ghana. In an interview with Deutsche Welle (DW) television, Dr. Kwesi Anin, a security analyst and Director of the Faculty of Academic Affairs & Research of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KA IPTC) in Ghana, observes how the professional posture of the Ghana Armed Forces and other deterring factors have ensured that terrorism has evaded the country, acknowledging that terrorists had not deliberately avoided the country.¹⁴⁹ The requirement for Ghana to derive lessons from the Sahel arises out of reasons of proximity, similarity in situations, and porosity of borders, among others. The northern part of Ghana borders the West Africa Sahel region, particularly Burkina Faso. The jihadist insurgency that began in northern Mali in 2012 and continues to spread southwards requires attention from all security actors. Ghana's eastern and western neighbors, Togo and la Cote d'Ivoire, respectively, have not been spared terrorist attacks.¹⁵⁰ The Konrad Adenauer Foundation has suggested that Ghana is a staging area for terrorism in neighboring countries and that accounts for why terrorism has evaded Ghana thus far.¹⁵¹

Apart from the stark commonalities between the Sahel and northern Ghana, the very nature of the spread of the Sahel insurgency poses a threat to Ghana. Ghanaian authorities are not oblivious to this threat and continue to make efforts to prevent it and counter it if it occurs. Briefing media journalists, the Minister of Defense, Dominic Nitiwul, states that Ghana is constructing 15 military bases in the Northern Frontiers to address

¹⁴⁹ Martina Schwikowski, "Terror Attacks: Why Is Ghana Less Affected than Its Neighbors?," Deutsche Welle, July 20, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/terror-attacks-why-is-ghana-less-affected-than-its-neighbors/a-58567339>.

¹⁵⁰ Berny Sèbe, "Côte d'Ivoire Attack: Why Terrorists Are Targeting Francophone Africa," The Conversation, March 18, 2016, <http://theconversation.com/cote-divoire-attack-why-terrorists-are-targeting-francophone-africa-56259>.

¹⁵¹ "Experts: Ghana Must Boost Preparedness to Defend Against Terrorist Attacks," *Africa Defense Forum*, August 23, 2022, <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/08/experts-ghana-must-boost-preparedness-to-defend-against-terrorist-attacks/>.

internal conflicts and secure the borders.¹⁵² Since 2019, Ghana has created three new battalions in its northern territories, bringing the total maneuver units in the north to five. This is a significant number compared to the twelve maneuver units in the whole of Ghana. These developments are additional to other non-security measures in northern Ghana.

This chapter discusses the similarities between northern Ghana and the Sahel, the threats to northern Ghana, and lessons that Ghana can derive as it readies itself for eventualities.

B. COMMONALITIES BETWEEN THE SAHEL AND NORTHERN GHANA

1. Proximity and Porosity of Shared Border

The Sahel nation of Burkina Faso borders Ghana to its north and northwest. These borders are porous, with no man-made markings, and facilitate border crossing along several unapproved routes. People living in towns along the border share familial ties, arising from the arbitrary way the borders were drawn by the colonial authorities. Paul Nana Kwabena Aborampah Mensah et al. of the Center for Development and Democratic Governance (CDD-Ghana) confirms:

In the case of Ghana, the general risk to terrorism depends on the one hand on domestic factors, and on another hand, the risk lay on cross-border cultural ties shared among sections of the population living along borders among regional neighbors. Indeed, scholars indicated cultural ties as a significant risk factor that contributes to the spread of terrorism among countries.¹⁵³

Figure 9 depicts Ghana's border with Burkina Faso.

¹⁵² "GAF to Be Massively Equipped Soon," *Ghana Peace Journal*, July 24, 2022, <https://www.ghanapeacejournal.com/gaf-to-be-massively-equipped-soon/>.

¹⁵³ Paul Nana Kwabena Aborampah Mensah et al., *Enhancing Citizen Participation in Cross Border Security in Ghana* (Accra, Ghana: Ghana Center for Democratic Development, 2020), 22, <https://cddgh.org/enhancing-citizen-participation-in-cross-border-security-in-ghana/>.



Figure 9. Northern Ghana and Burkina Faso Map.¹⁵⁴

The length and porosity of the Ghana-Burkina Faso border makes the insurgency situation in the Sahel a looming threat to Ghana. The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) reports that as of 2019, there were 189 unofficial versus just 44 official entry points on Ghana’s border with Burkina Faso alone.¹⁵⁵

2. Underlying Conflicts

Experiences in the Sahel region portray how jihadist insurgents tend to exploit existing conditions to advance their causes. Like the Tuareg separatist issues that had existed in the Sahel, the northern part of Ghana has seen several chieftaincy disputes and

¹⁵⁴Source: “Burkina Faso Country Map,” Vector Stock, accessed August 19, 2022, <https://www.vectorstock.com/royalty-free-vector/burkina-faso-map-vector-2640527>.

¹⁵⁵ Promediation, *The Jihadist Threat in Northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and Prospects for Containing the Expansion* (Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2022), <https://www.kas.de/en/web/westafrika/publikationen/einzeltitel/-/content/the-jihadist-threat-in-northern-ghana-and-togo-2>.

tribal conflicts, developments that are susceptible to exploitation by jihadists. Steve Tonah, a professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana, writes that: “although chieftaincy conflicts are found throughout Ghana, there is a widespread perception in the country that northern Ghana is particularly prone to such conflicts.”¹⁵⁶ Armed conflict is so widespread in northern Ghana that there is hardly any district that has not experienced armed conflict.¹⁵⁷ Within the Sahel and northern Ghana, conflicts between communities of Fulani herdsmen, the largest nomadic group in the world, are common. Like in the Sahel, the Fulani issues are susceptible to exploitation by the insurgents in northern Ghana. In Ghana, the Fulani have complained about issues of intimidation and discrimination, not only from the locals, but also from security forces.¹⁵⁸

3. Poverty and Deprivation

Like the Sahel, northern Ghana is among the highest poverty-prone areas in Ghana, necessitating initiatives by various Ghanaian leaders to address this problem. From the first president’s implementation of free secondary education for the northern regions to contemporary initiatives like the Savannah Accelerated Development plan, there have been several initiatives to address poverty in northern Ghana. Like the Sahel, a major cause of the poverty and deprivation in northern Ghana is the inadequacy of rainfall for the indigenous people who rely on subsistence farming for their livelihoods. Lessons from the Sahel have shown that armed jihadism is not necessarily an extension of global Islamic jihadism but, rather, a revolt against poverty, lack of basic services, security, and poor governance.¹⁵⁹ While subsistence farming remains the primary occupation of northern Ghana, the erratic rainfall pattern has made access to agricultural land difficult as only areas close to water bodies are fertile for efficient farming.

¹⁵⁶ Steve Tonah, “The Politicisation of a Chieftaincy Conflict: The Case of Dagbon, Northern Ghana,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 2, https://www.academia.edu/es/69598278/The_politicisation_of_a_chieftaincy_conflict_the_case_of_Dagbon_northern_Ghana.

¹⁵⁷ Mohammed Sulemana, “Understanding the Causes and Impacts of Conflicts in the Northern Region of Ghana,” *Ghana Policy Journal* 3 (August 2009): 110–39, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/understanding-the-causes-and-impacts-of-conflicts-in-the-northern-region-of-ghana/>.

¹⁵⁸ Promediation, *The Jihadist Threat in Northern Ghana and Togo*.

¹⁵⁹ Promediation.

C. LESSONS FROM THE SAHEL

1. Conventional Operations Alone Are Not Enough to Combat Insurgency

France's Operation SERVAL confirms the insufficiency of conventional operations by themselves in COIN. Operation SERVAL was initially successful in halting the advance of the Islamic insurgents from reaching Mali's capital. In a purely conventional style, Operation SERVAL not only halted the onslaught of the Islamic insurgents but also destroyed their strongholds and hideouts. Operation SERVAL suffered setbacks when the jihadists scattered across the length and breadth of the Sahel and took to asymmetric tactics. The wide arid lands of the Sahel, as it compares to northern Ghana, enabled the insurgents to spread and seek refuge in neighboring countries, regroup, and commence their asymmetric strategy. As Dr. Gary K. Busch, an international trades unionist and political intelligence consultant, succinctly put it:

The terrain of the Sahel does not lend itself to conventional warfare. There are broad expanses of sand and dunes, broken up by small villages and, occasionally, a town or city. There are no petrol stations, wells, repair shops, water stores, food stocks or fuel reserves in most of the region. Trucks and buses, as well as conventional armor, are difficult to transport in such a terrain. Air bases are usually suited only to small aircraft and lack the fuel and equipment which allow the free flow of cargo. African insurgents are bands and groups of often, irregular soldiers.¹⁶⁰

While not discounting the importance of conventional forces in dominating the population, there is the requirement for special forces to access the otherwise inaccessible locations to maintain the momentum of operations. This combination will ensure that the areas that conventional resources cannot access do not become safe havens for the insurgents.

¹⁶⁰ Busch, "The Logistics of the War in the Sahel."

2. Indirect Strategy Is Key to Counterinsurgency Operations

Normally, the strategies, type of force, and capabilities that are best fitted for COIN operations will be different from other operations.¹⁶¹ Operation SERVAL was a reaction force that liberated the Malian capital and principal towns, destroyed jihadists' strongholds and infrastructure, and killed most of the leaders of the various terrorist groups.¹⁶² To that extent, it could be judged to be a success. Operation BARKHANE relieved Operation SERVAL to address the new asymmetric challenge posed by the insurgents. The subsequent introduction of Task Force TAKUBA (all SOF units) is a tacit admission of the importance of indirect and unconventional strategies. This strategic lesson from the Sahel is akin to the strategic interaction model of Ivan Arreguin-Toft, a U.S. Army Electronic Warfare and Signals Intelligence veteran. The model describes how the right strategy by the right force leads to relative success. In a tacit justification for SOF, Arreguin-Toft's model proposes two distinct types of armed forces—one for conventional threats and one for asymmetric wars.¹⁶³ Figure 10 depicts Ivan Arreguin-Toft's strategic interaction model:

¹⁶¹ Nathan Constantin Leites and Charles Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1970), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R0462.html>.

¹⁶² Tramond and Seigneu, "Operation Serval."

¹⁶³ Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars," 123.

		Weak Actor Strategic Approach	
		<i>Direct</i>	<i>Indirect</i>
Strong Actor Strategic Approach	<i>Direct</i>	Favors Strong Actor	Favors Weak Actor
	<i>Indirect</i>	Favors Weak Actor	Favors Strong Actor

Figure 10. Arreguin-Toft’s Strategic Interaction Model¹⁶⁴

After a decade of French COIN operations in the Sahel, the inclusion of an all-SOF Task Force provides useful lessons for COIN in northern Ghana. The inclusion of Task Force TAKUBA in the Sahel teaches the need to have a mix of conventional forces and SOF to achieve desired COIN effects.

3. The Population Is Central to Counterinsurgency Operations

Invariably, COIN/CT operations in the Sahel, which tend to be biased towards security, giving rise to the “security traffic jam” tag, must ultimately aim at controlling the population. Ghana can learn invaluable lessons as it readies itself to address the looming threat from the Sahel. Dr. Gordon McCormick, a defense analyst at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, provides a population-centered “Diamond Model” for COIN operations. The model is based on a zero-sum game where the state and insurgents are in contention for the control of the population. The model recommends a progression through the stages in contrast to the tendency to go directly for the obvious,

¹⁶⁴ Source: Arreguín-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars.”

which is stage three.¹⁶⁵ Figure 11 depicts the McCormick’s Diamond Counterinsurgency Model:

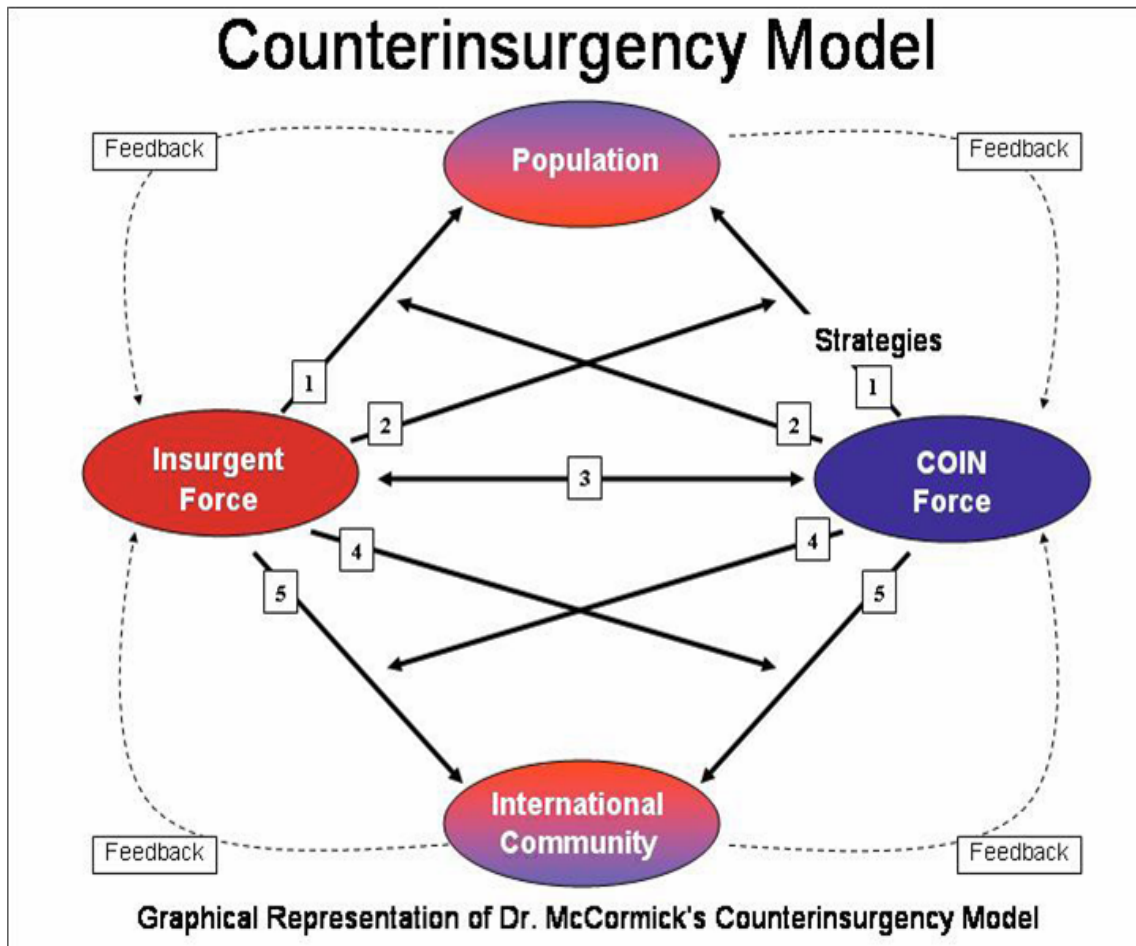


Figure 11. McCormick’s Diamond Counterinsurgency Models.¹⁶⁶

Dr. Kalev I. Sepp, a defense analyst at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, corroborates the centrality of the population when he posits that “insurgents rely on members of the population for concealment, sustenance, and recruits,

¹⁶⁵ Eric P. Wendt, “Strategic Counterinsurgency Modeling,” *Special Warfare* 18, no. 2 (September 2005): 2–13, https://static.dvidshub.net/media/pubs/pdf_8238.pdf.

¹⁶⁶ Source: Wikipedia, s.v. “McCormick Magic Diamond,” last modified February 20, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McCormick_Magic_Diamond.

so they must be isolated from the people by all means possible.”¹⁶⁷ Of course, the population-centered approach is only practicable in a secured environment. In Mali, for instance, while Operation SERVAL was successful in routing the jihadists, the people-centered approach of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) has suffered many reverses due to security risks involved in reaching out to the communities.¹⁶⁸

4. Any State Security Brutality Brings Negative Consequences

Another lesson from the Sahel is how brutalities by state security officials against civilians have contributed to the worsening insurgency situation in the Sahel. As security forces seek results from COIN operations in the wake of increased militant activities, civilian casualties increase.¹⁶⁹ When government forces engage in civilian massacres, mass killings, and mass inflicting of brutalities on civilians, the population tends to turn to the insurgents for protection. The culture of impunity characterizes ill-trained security forces who tend to mete out violence to civilians whom they consider to be offering support to the insurgents.¹⁷⁰ The employment of experienced and well-trained troops in COIN operations is a lesson worth learning from the Sahel. Hearts and minds operations must be a necessary part of military operations if government forces are to deny the insurgents the invaluable support of the population.

5. Latent Local Issues Are Exploited by Insurgents

The insurgency in the Sahel has revealed how latent issues are exploited by the insurgents to further their cause. The 2012 Malian crisis was deeply influenced by the

¹⁶⁷ Kalev I. Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* 85, no. 3 (May 2005): 10, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p124201coll1/id/171/rec/6>.

¹⁶⁸ Jaïr van der Lijn, *Assessing the of the United Nations Mission in Mali / MINUSMA* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2019), 75, <https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2599513/EPON-report%204-2019.pdf?sequence=7>.

¹⁶⁹ Nsaibia, “State Atrocities in the Sahel.”

¹⁷⁰ Nsaibia.

Tuareg separatist sentiments that predated the colonial period.¹⁷¹ Again, the Fulani, the world's largest nomadic group,¹⁷² dominate the Macina Liberation Front and Ansaroul Islam terrorist groups in the Sahel, a development attributable to past Fulani conflicts with other ethnic groups and governments.¹⁷³ Ghana could learn lessons from these developments and address underlying chieftaincy and ethnic issues in northern Ghana to forestall exploitation by insurgents. Clearly, the cancerous illegal mining activities in Ghana fall within this category.

6. Illicit Trade Facilitates Insurgency

Transnational crime and illicit trade are facilitators of insurgency in the Sahel. In the wake of diminishing support from global jihadist groups, insurgents in the Sahel have resorted to illicit trade and transnational crime to fund their activities. The ancient trans-Saharan trade route, the Mediterranean Sea, and proximity to Europe afford a geostrategic advantage to illicit trade by the insurgents. The Sahel example underscores the need to address illicit trade and transnational crime in Ghana, especially the route linking Ghana's coast and northern Ghana. Ghana should aim to address illicit trade and transnational organized crime to forestall insurgents exploiting it for their maintenance.

7. Motorbikes Provide Transportation Flexibility in the Sahelian Terrain

The operational utility of motorbikes as a convenient means of transport in the Sahel is a lesson worth learning for Ghana's operations in the north. Both government forces and insurgents have resorted to the use of motorbikes as a flexible and cost-effective means of transport. The *Unité Légère de Reconnaissance et d'Intervention*, a Malian Armed Forces Quick Reaction Force, are known to mainly use motorbikes and Toyota pickups for mobility. While the terrain of both the Sahel and northern Ghana allows for

¹⁷¹ Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," *International Journal* 68, no. 3 (2013): 424–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702013505431>.

¹⁷² "Who Are the Fulani?," *World Watch Monitor* (blog), accessed August 19, 2022, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/who-are-the-fulani/>.

¹⁷³ Lawrence E. Cline, "Jihadist Movements in the Sahel: Rise of the Fulani?," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 0, no. 0 (March 8, 2021): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1888082>.

cross-country movement of motorbikes, the inadequate road infrastructure makes the use of motorbikes even more imperative. Perhaps, the advent of electric motorbikes provides a more discrete and stealthy transportation alternative.

8. Ungoverned Spaces Offer Refuge to Insurgents

Furthermore, the Sahel crisis teaches the lesson of how jihadists fill gaps created as a result of the absence of governance structures in certain areas in the Sahel. The large arid and unoccupied territories in the Sahel have provided insurgents with a sanctuary where they can regroup and train. Stathis Kalyvas, a Greek political scientist, in his book *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (2006) shows how the population tends to support insurgent movements in areas where the insurgents are strongest and support the government where the government is strongest. He explains that support follows strength and not the other way round.¹⁷⁴ In a tacit agreement, David Kilcullen, an American author, strategist, and COIN expert argues that “... whoever does better at establishing a resilient system of control, that gives people order and a sense of security where they sleep, is likely to gain support and ultimately win the competition for the government.”¹⁷⁵ Suffice to say that there are hardly any ungoverned spaces: when you refuse to govern a space, it will be governed anyway.

9. International Collaboration Is Critical to Counterinsurgency Operations

COIN operations in the Sahel region teach the lesson of the importance of concerted efforts to fight jihadism and the role of international cooperation. The Sahelian countries have proven incapable of addressing jihadists’ insurgencies that have taken on international terrorism identities. Meanwhile, France, while leading the COIN operations in the Sahel region, benefits greatly from U.S. intelligence. Several leaders of JNIM and the ISGS have been killed as a result of this collaboration. Equally, Task Force TAKUBA seeks to include more European forces in the Sahel operations for efficiency and credibility. A cautious

¹⁷⁴ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁵ David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 52.

lesson, however, is how the insurgents in the Sahel are able to exploit the presence of international forces for the propaganda effect of presenting themselves (the insurgents) as liberators. Ghana stands to benefit from its recent collaboration with foreign partners, particularly the U.S., in the areas of intelligence and capacity building.

10. Regional Cooperation Is Necessary for Counterinsurgency Operations

The G5 Sahel initiative, comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, presents useful lessons on the importance of regional collaboration in the fight against insurgency in the Sahel. For countries that have common features, faced with common threats of transnational non-state nature, the need for a concerted front cannot be understated. Ghana needs to collaborate with its regional partners in information sharing and strategies to address their common threats. Like the support that Ansaroul Islam, the Burkinabe terrorist group, receives from ISGS, local insurgency cells in Ghana (if any) are likely to receive support from insurgent groups from the Sahel. Regional collaboration and cooperation ensure concerted efforts to fight insurgencies that do not respect borders. In this regard, Operation Koulangou, the Accra Initiative, and other such initiatives should be enhanced for sustained cooperation among stakeholder countries.

11. Strong Indigenous Forces Are Imperatives for Counterinsurgency Operations

The 2022 withdrawal of France from Mali teaches the lesson of the need for a credible indigenous force. While acknowledging that external support is essential for successful COIN operations, indigenous forces remain the enduring forces of choice. A strong indigenous force has the benefit of time, which third-party forces often lack. U.S. Army Major General Patrick B. Roberson acknowledges how in 2015, the U.S. Special Operations Command deployed the first SOF unit to “forge alliances with the indigenous forces in Syria who would form the coalition to fight ISIS” and notes how “success in Syria was directly related to the quality of ... indigenous partners.”¹⁷⁶ Ultimately, the status quo, when established, must be maintained, and indigenous forces make the best fit.

¹⁷⁶ Patrick B. Roberson, “SOF Perspectives in Fighting ISIS in Syria,” *Special Warfare* 34, no. 1 (March 2021): 14.

Erin Simpson, Director, Strategy Development & Deployment, Space Systems at Northrop Grumman observes that while many third-party states have enormous resource advantages over their indigenous equivalents, they are rarely able to transfer those advantages into political successes in COIN battles.¹⁷⁷ In a related manner, Cohen et al. assert that “the insurgent wins if he does not lose. The counterinsurgent loses if he does not win... People will not support a government until they are convinced the counterinsurgent has the means, ability, stamina, and will to win.”¹⁷⁸ It is imperative for states to have a credible indigenous force not only to lead COIN operations but also to maintain the status quo when established.

12. Drones Technology Is Necessary for Counterinsurgency Operations

The lesson of the importance of technology in modern counterterrorism operations cannot be discounted. Drone technology has been instrumental in COIN operations in the Sahel. Dr. Gary K. Busch, an international trades unionist and a political intelligence consultant, establishes that “in order that a sustained and affordable presence is created to fight the forces of AQIM and other ethnic dissidents in the Sahel it has become clear that the military effort must use minimal air support from the West except for unmanned drones.”¹⁷⁹ Keeping enough troops on the ground to fight insurgents who are scattered in small pockets across the large stretch of inaccessible terrain puts undue pressure on maintenance, resupply, repair, etc. Drones provide a convenient means of sustainment and support to troops.

13. Security Operations Alone Cannot Resolve Insurgency

One lesson that comes out clear from the Sahel crisis is the negative results of the excessive securitization during COIN operations. Ghanaian authorities seem to be fully aware of this reality and have launched “programs to boost the economy in the north, where

¹⁷⁷ Erin Marie Simpson, “The Perils of Third-Party Counterinsurgency” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010), ProQuest.

¹⁷⁸ Eliot Cohen et al., “Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* 85, no. 2 (March 2006): 51, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA486811>.

¹⁷⁹ Busch, “The Logistics of the War in the Sahel,” 3.

unemployment is high, particularly among young men, whom terrorists often target for recruitment, is welcome and requires consolidation.”¹⁸⁰ France, which is the protagonist in COIN operations in the Sahel, through Operations SERVAL, BARKHANE, and Task Force TAKUBA, has focused on security handling of the Sahelian insurgency. The tagging of the Sahel as a “security traffic jam”¹⁸¹ attests to how non-security measures, if any, have been negligible. The over-securitization of the Sahelian operations has contributed to the high civilian casualties and allowed some of them to seek protection from the insurgents in areas where government presence is low. Ghana needs to double its efforts at non-security interventions in the looming threats in its northern territories.

D. CONCLUSION

The requirement for Ghana to take cues from the insurgency in the Sahel arises from the commonalities in conditions that affect the northern regions and their Sahelian counterparts. Ghana’s northern regions are the worst hit by armed conflict and chieftaincy disputes. While a full-blown insurgency is yet to be experienced in the Sahel, lessons from the Sahel hold some truth for Ghana. This reality is tacitly acknowledged in the several initiatives that Ghanaian authorities are putting in place.

The Sahel crisis presents both preventive and reactive lessons for Ghana in general and for security forces. These lessons afford not a template but scenarios to guide Ghana’s preparation and contingency plans for securing its northern borders. It is imperative that these lessons are translated into actionable plans. In acknowledging that COIN operations are interagency affairs, respective stakeholders should draw from these lessons to prepare adequately for eventualities.

¹⁸⁰ ADF Staff, “Flintlock 2022 Shows Coastal Nations Joining the Fight against Sahel Extremism,” *Africa Defense Forum*, March 8, 2022, <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/03/flintlock-2022-shows-coastal-nations-joining-the-fight-against-sahel-extremism/>.

¹⁸¹ Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen, “Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel.”

V. THE GHANA ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AND THE THREATS IN NORTHERN GHANA

A. INTRODUCTION

Ghana Army SOF remain one of the units of choice in addressing the looming threats of terrorism and insurgency along its northern territory. This force has the capability to perform tasks comparable with countries with long-established SOF. This capability has been made possible through a combination of foreign and local training and exercises. After about a decade of operations in the Sahel, France has resorted to the inclusion of an all-SOF unit, Task Force TAKUBA. Given that the insurgency in the Sahel is a threat to Ghana's northern region, Ghana could learn lessons from the Sahel and employ its SOF efficiently and effectively.

When in 2012 the Ghana Armed Forces established its SOF, the then-Director of Public Relations of the Ghana Armed Forces, Colonel Mbawine Atintande, outlined how such a force had become imperative in view of the threats of piracy and terrorism that had not been an issue in previous years.¹⁸² The 64 Infantry Regiment and the 69 Airborne Force were consequently designated as the special operations regiments of the Ghana Army. Since then, selected personnel of the units have received specialized training locally, regionally, and internationally. In July 2021, the ASOB was formed, comprising a brigade headquarters, the 64 Regiment, the 69 Airborne Force, and the Special Forces Training School. Thus far, the Special Operations Brigade remains one of the brigades in the hands of the military and state authorities to secure the northern borders with Burkina Faso, in the Sahel region. This chapter describes the selection, training, and capabilities of the ASOB and suggests ways to employ it to address the looming insurgency in northern Ghana, having analyzed the Sahelian crisis in the previous chapters.

¹⁸² Albert K. Salia, "Special Forces Unit To Protect Nation - Col Atintande," *Modern Ghana*, September 3, 2012, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/382444/special-forces-unit-to-protect-nation-col-atintande.html>.

B. MISSION AND VISION OF THE GHANA ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS BRIGADE

Brigadier General Mathew Essien, Commander of the ASOB, envisions a two-tier special operations group.¹⁸³ The Tier One Special Forces, known as Task Force 649 (TF649), is carefully selected, highly trained, and specially equipped to undertake the most specialized and sensitive operations. The rest of the 64 Infantry Regiment and 69 Airborne Force, having completed the appropriate training courses, form the Tier 2 special forces groups that provide ready support to or complement the operations of conventional forces. The two-tier concept is to provide the needed operational support to conventional troops while easing the usual pressure on Tier 1 Special Forces, who are undoubtedly limited in supply.

The central idea is for the ASOB to conduct special operations in peace and in war, as part of a Task Force Commander's campaign efforts to mitigate risk; deter, disrupt, or defeat the adversary; while gaining time for strategic and operational options.¹⁸⁴ Figure 12 below is the Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Badge:

¹⁸³ Brig. Gen. Mathew Essien, Interview on the role of Ghana Army Special Operations Forces within the context of the insurgency and extremist threats to Ghana's northern border with the Sahel region, Face-to-face Interview, August 31, 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Essien.



Figure 12. Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Badge. Source: Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Archives.

C. SELECTION OF PERSONNEL

The selection process of the ASOB identifies mentally tough, quick-thinking, and innovative personnel who can maintain emotional balance under difficult, risky, and complex operational situations. Additionally, it aims to select highly skilled soldiers who are trained to operate a range of advanced specialist weapons and equipment over long distances using a wide range of insertion methods. The average pass rate for the selection of personnel is fifty to sixty percent. Of the eighty personnel who were shortlisted for the 2022 basic training, forty-two successfully graduated as Tier One Special Operators.

1. Pre-Qualification

Serving Ghana Army personnel interested in becoming qualified SOF must be recommended for special force selection by their respective commanding officers. Such personnel should be qualified for the Basic Noncommissioned Officers Tactical Course (for soldiers) and the Young Officers Course (for officers). Thus, recruits and officer cadets

at training do not qualify for selection to the SOF. The following pre-qualification is expected:¹⁸⁵

- Must be a Ghana Army soldier.
- Must not be more than 30 years of age.
- Must have a security clearance from the Defense Intelligence Department of the Ghana Armed Forces.
- Must have the mental fortitude to keep going, regardless (determination).
- Must have excellent administrative skills (personal administration in the field and in barracks).
- Must pass a series of aptitude tests.
- Must pass a mandatory medical examination.
- Must pass the fitness test.
- Must pass psychological and aptitude tests.

2. Tactical Proficiency Selection

Having met the pre-qualification assessment, aspirants go through a six-week tactical proficiency selection as a prerequisite for the special forces basic course. The aim of the six-week selection is to test the resilience and stress adaptability of the aspiring special forces soldier in the field. At the completion of this training, aspirants who display potential in basic tactics, ingenuity, common sense, motivation, and physical and mental robustness in the field are selected to commence the special force basic training.

¹⁸⁵ Essien.

D. TRAINING

1. Training Partners

The U.S. and the United Kingdom remain the major training partners of the Ghana Army SOF. Canada, Israel, Egypt, France, and India offer specialized training for selected personnel from time to time. The areas of specialized training include counterterrorism training in Egypt, commando training in India, Israeli Close Quarter Battle Instructors training (among which is the famous *krav maga* unarmed combat), close quarter battle and combat medic training with the French, and dog handling training in Australia. The specialist-trained personnel, complemented by their foreign counterparts, serve as the nucleus of instructors who run the SOF training programs. The Jungle Warfare and the Airborne Training Schools in Ghana conduct jungle and paratrooper training, respectively, for the basic course. Figure 13 is a picture of the ASOB Commander and some personnel of the U.S. Green Berets:



Figure 13. Brig Gen Mathew Essien with Personnel of United States Army Green Berets. Source: Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Archives.

2. The Special Forces Basic Course

The Special Forces Basic Course is an eight-month-long course aimed at equipping special operators with the skill to undertake any standard special operations tasks beyond the capacity of conventional forces. It is a continuous selection process, and trainees who do not meet the standards at every major phase of the training are withdrawn. The training has a conventional phase encompassing navigation/map reading; an urban warfare phase; a combat swimming phase; and an air assault phase. The jungle warfare phase and the air assault and parachute training phase complete the training. These phases are mixed with other special skills in marksmanship, setting up and operating demolition charges, close quarter battles, room clearing, riverine operations, counter IEDs, signals training, and combat medic training. Personnel who make it through the special forces basic training are awarded the coveted special forces badge as shown in Figure 14:



Figure 14. Ghana Army Special Forces Badge. Source: Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Archives.

3. Jungle Warfare Training

As part of the basic special forces training, troops have six weeks of training in jungle tactics, fashioned along the lines of the Jungle Experts Course, at the Jungle Warfare

School (JWS) in Achiase, Ghana. The Jungle Warfare School in Ghana was established in 1976 to train officers and men of the Ghana Armed Forces in counter insurgency warfare and internal security operations.¹⁸⁶ The motivating factor for the establishment of the school was the presence, in Ghana and its surrounding countries, of large forest areas. Lessons learned by Allied forces from World War II were other key motivating factors. The Jungle Warfare School has since been attended by soldiers of armies of several countries, including the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Australia. Additionally, officers and men from the Nigerian Army, Sierra Leone Army, Armed Forces of Liberia, Guinean Army, Burkinabe Army, and the Ugandan Army train in the Jungle Warfare School as part of the courses they attend in Ghana. Courses run in the Jungle Warfare School scale from basic, through advanced, to the Jungle Expert course. Other specialist courses are run to suit specific needs. Figure 15 shows Ghana Army SOF undergoing jungle training:

¹⁸⁶ Pulivarti Shejal, “U.S. Soldiers Train at Ghana Military-Led Jungle Warfare School,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1197920/us-soldiers-train-at-ghana-military-led-jungle-warfare-school/>
[https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FNews-Stories%2FArticle%2FArticle%2F1197920%2Fus-soldiers-train-at-ghana-military-led-jungle-warfare-school%2F](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1197920/us-soldiers-train-at-ghana-military-led-jungle-warfare-school/).



Figure 15. Ghana Army Special Operations Forces Personnel “Captured” as Prisoners of War during Jungle Warfare Training. Source: Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Archives.

4. Basic Parachute Training

The parachute training course is designed, as part of the special forces basic course, to qualify personnel as paratroopers. The basic parachute course trains personnel on day and night parachute descents with and without cargo. The training is done at the Airborne Training School in Tamale, Ghana. What is now known as the Airborne Force of Ghana started as an airborne training school. It was later transformed into an airborne force, which is currently the 69 Airborne Force under the ASOB. The 69 Airborne Force now runs the Airborne Training School. Apart from the special forces, the school conducts paratrooper training for officer cadets and selected soldiers of the Ghana Armed Forces. Figure 16 depicts Ghana Army SOF personnel conducting ground training for live descent:



Figure 16. Ghana Army Special Operations Forces Practice Ground Training for Live Descent. Source: Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Archives.

5. Advanced Special Forces Training

The advanced special forces training is aimed at training qualified special forces personnel in the following:

- Advanced driving skills
- Methods of breaching obstacles
- Sniper tactics
- Mountaineering
- Language training
- Military working dog handler
- High-altitude high opening (HAHO) and high-altitude low opening (HALO)

Figure 17 is a picture of the ASOB Commander with some personnel:



Figure 17. Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Commander with Some Personnel. Source: Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Archives.

The advanced training aims to create specialist special operations personnel. In addition to their operational commitments, personnel who demonstrate instructional qualities are identified and groomed to become trainers for prospective and existing Ghana Army SOF personnel.

E. TRAINING EXERCISES

1. Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET)

The Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) involves the U.S. Special Forces training exercises in areas where U.S. special forces may operate in the future. The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) conducts the JCET program with the primary purpose of providing “special operations units specific training that can only be accomplished in friendly foreign countries.”¹⁸⁷ The training exercise affords the host country’s SOF troops

¹⁸⁷ “AFRICOM Special Operations Forces Train with Partners in Ghana,” United States Africa Command, June 2, 2022, <https://www.africom.mil/article/34509/africom-special-operations-forces-train-with-partners-in-ghana>.

the opportunity to sharpen their skills and benefit from interoperability with U.S. forces. In Ghana, JCET is organized twice every year for selected SOF personnel. JCET 2022 went beyond the traditional military training exercises to include four-day humanitarian assistance operations in Bole, in northern Ghana.¹⁸⁸ The civil-military support elements provided medical supplies worth U.S.\$30,000 to clinics and hospitals within the communities. Figure 18 depicts a training session between the Ghana Army SOF and U.S. Special Forces:



Figure 18. Special Forces Personnel Train with Ghana Army Special Operations Forces at the Battle Training Camp, Bundase, Ghana.¹⁸⁹

2. Exercise EAGLE CLAWS

The Ghana Army SOF conduct exercises in preparation for possible deployment in the northern regions of Ghana. Exercise EAGLE CLAWS is an annual four-day training

¹⁸⁸ Special Operations Command Africa.

¹⁸⁹ Special Operations Command Africa.

exercise to train special forces and conventional troops on interoperability with the 10 and 11 Mechanized Battalions deployed to secure the northern parts of Ghana, in what is christened Operation CONQUERED FIST.¹⁹⁰ Exercise EAGLE CLAWS affords troops of the 64 Regiment and 69 Airborne Force the opportunity to practice reinforcement of Operation CONQUERED FIST and interoperability with other agencies like the Customs Division, Ghana Immigration Service, Ghana Police Service, National Disaster Management Organization, and National Ambulance Services. Figure 19 shows Ghana Army SOF personnel during Exercise EAGLE CLAWS 2021:



Figure 19. Ghana Army SOF Personnel Rappel to Support Operations in the North during Exercise EAGLE CLAWS 2021. Source: Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Archives.

¹⁹⁰ “Exercise Eagle Claws 2020 Ends in Tumu,” Ghana Armed Forces News, June 29, 2020, <https://www.gafonline.mil.gh/news/344>.

3. Exercise AFRICAN LION

Another capability-building and training exercise for the Ghana Army SOF is Exercise AFRICAN LION, a U.S. Africa Command exercise, which brought together more than 7,500 service members from June 6 to 30, 2022. It was the first of what will be an annual exercise. Ghana, Morocco, Senegal, and Tunisia were other participants. Exercise AFRICAN LION 22 was a command post, combined-arms live fire maritime exercise. Additionally, it sought to exercise participants on bomber aircraft, force insertion of paratroopers into the field, and response to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats. Participants again practiced civic action in support of counter-violent extremist organizations.¹⁹¹ Figure 20 below is a picture of the U.S. and Ghana Army personnel at briefing for Exercise AFRICAN LION:

¹⁹¹ “African Lion,” United States Africa Command Exercises, accessed July 19, 2022, <https://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/exercises/african-lion>.



Figure 20. U.S. and Ghanaian Troops at a Briefing for Exercise AFRICAN LION 2022¹⁹²

4. Exercise CAMBRIAN PATROL

In 2021, an eight-man team of the Ghana Army SOF took part in Exercise CAMBRIAN PATROL for the first time. The Exercise is a ten-day patrol covering over sixty kilometers, hosted by Headquarters 160th (Welsh) Brigade in the United Kingdom.¹⁹³ The Exercise is designed to test the physical and mental endurance of participants. It is a British all-arms exercise with international participation. Skills assessed include orders procedure; close combat skills; battlefield casualty drills; counter-chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear drills (C-CBRN); countering the explosive ordinance threat (C-EO); and media handling. Other areas include operational law and ethical behavior, recognition of aircraft, vehicles, weapons, mines and other equipment, obstacle

¹⁹² “Exercise African Lion 2022 Commences,” Ghana Armed Forces News, June 16, 2022, <https://gafonline.mil.gh/news/1096>.

¹⁹³ “Exercise Cambrian Patrol 2022,” Cambrian Patrol, accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.cambrianpatrol.net/>.

crossing drills, etc.¹⁹⁴ Figure 21 shows the Ghana Army SOF team for CAMBRIAN PATROL 2021:



Figure 21. Ghana Army SOF Team for Exercise CAMBRIAN PATROL in Pose with a British Army Soldier. Source: Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade archives.

5. Exercise FLINTLOCK

Since 2005, Exercise FLINTLOCK has been conducted annually as the U.S. Africa Command’s premier and largest annual special operations exercise in the Sahel region of Africa.¹⁹⁵ The Ghana Army SOF were among the over 1,300 troops from the 11 countries that participated in Exercise FLINTLOCK 2021, co-hosted by Senegal and la Cote d’Ivoire.¹⁹⁶ FLINTLOCK 2022 brought together Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Chad, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. International participants included Austria, Belgium,

¹⁹⁴ Kofi Tutu, “Ghana Army Participates in Ex Cambrian Patrol,” *Kofi Tutu* (blog), October 16, 2021, <https://kofitutu.wordpress.com/blog/page/2/>.

¹⁹⁵ “Flintlock,” United States Africa Command Exercises, accessed July 19, 2022, <https://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/exercises/flintlock>.

¹⁹⁶ ADF Staff, “Flintlock 2022 Shows Coastal Nations Joining the Fight.”

Brazil, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.¹⁹⁷ FLINTLOCK 2022 was a success as it brought awareness to most of the West Africa coastal states that the southward spread of the Sahel situation is imminent. Ghana is scheduled to host FLINTLOCK 2023 for the first time.¹⁹⁸ Figure 22 is Ghanaian SOF conducting a raid during FLINTLOCK 2022:



Figure 22. Ghana Army SOF Personnel Conduct Raid Exercise during Exercise FLINTLOCK 2022 (Picture by Sgt. Kacie Benak/U.S. Army)¹⁹⁹

F. PROPOSED ROLES OF GHANA ARMY SPECIAL FORCES IN NORTHERN GHANA

This thesis notes the caution offered by Major Bjørn-Erik Solli of the Norwegian Special Operations Command and advisor at the NATO Joint Warfare Centre. He rejects any attempt to restrict special operations to a fixed definition, explaining that “the next

¹⁹⁷ United States Africa Command, “Flintlock.”

¹⁹⁸ ADF Staff, “Flintlock 2022 Shows Coastal Nations Joining the Fight.”

¹⁹⁹ ADF Staff.

special operations mission can be unique and require unrestricted creativity in planning and execution.”²⁰⁰ This thesis, however, underscores the need to focus the Ghana Army SOF on appropriate roles in the early stages of its evolution to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. The need for the focus arises from the fact that even though the SOF provides capabilities beyond those of conventional forces, it is not a panacea for all situations. Buttrussing this point is the fact that the SOF cannot be mass-produced.²⁰¹

Retired U.S. Army Colonel, John Martin Collins, provides five guiding and useful SOF truths: “Humans are more important than hardware, quality is better than quantity, SOF cannot be mass-produced, competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur, and most special operations require non-SOF assistance.”²⁰² These tenets provide basic guidelines for employing SOF. Along these guidelines, and based on the selection, training, and exercises the Army SOF undergo, vis-à-vis the peculiarities of northern Ghana, this thesis modestly suggests some tasks for the Ghana Army SOF:

1. Direct Action (DA)

The ASOB could be employed to provide “short-duration strikes in hostile, denied, or sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.”²⁰³ This could be done either as an independent operation or in support of conventional forces facing setbacks necessitated by such difficult targets. Bernd Horn, a retired Canadian Regular Force infantry and SOF officer and military educator, notes:

SOF has consistently proven to be a strategic resource that provides political and military decision-makers with a wide range of precise kinetic and non-kinetic options to deter, pre-empt, disrupt, react to, or shape strategic or operational effects domestically or abroad.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Bjørn-Erik Solli, “The Essence of Special Operations,” *Three Swords Magazine*, no. 37 (2021): 88, https://www.jwc.nato.int/application/files/6216/3281/0331/issue37_20.pdf.

²⁰¹ John Martin Collins, *Special Operations Forces: An Assessment* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA282476.pdf>.

²⁰² Collins.

²⁰³ Collins, 4.

²⁰⁴ Bernd Horn, “The Strategic Utility of Special Operations Forces,” *Canadian Military Journal* 14, no. 4 (Autumn 2014): 66, <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol14/no4/PDF/CMJ144Ep66.pdf>.

Direct action in the form of search, locate, and destroy (SLD) would ensure the Ghana Armed Forces would retain the initiative against the insurgent. The Ghana Army SOF, with their air mobile capabilities, possess the required skill to perform this task. The scarcity of resources and the need to operate in a larger operational space imply that troops would be in short supply and high demand. The Ghana Army SOF, supported by air and artillery, would ensure that relatively smaller forces are able to cover vast areas efficiently.

2. Special Reconnaissance and Information Operations

Special reconnaissance creates a state of relative certainty for politically or diplomatically sensitive operations conducted in a hostile, contested, or denied environment.²⁰⁵ Given the large, sparsely populated/unoccupied space in Ghana's northern regions, insurgents could have access to space that will serve as a haven. Through a varied means of insertion, the Ghana SOF have the capacity to conduct operations to access the otherwise inaccessible areas of northern Ghana to provide relevant information for further exploitation by the special forces themselves or conventional/other security forces. Additionally, the Ghana SOF could compose special reconnaissance teams to conduct a battle damage assessment on insurgent targets destroyed by indirect fire assets in denied and difficult terrain. They should be given the additional task of exploiting damage done by such indirect fire. Special reconnaissance is key in limiting collateral damage and civilian casualties. As SOF conduct special reconnaissance and information operations, the chances of target discrimination increase, a necessary dictate of COIN operations. The ASOB, with their high level of training, versatility, small unit deployment, and endurance, are best suited for these tasks.

3. Quick Reaction Operations

As in the Sahel, the complexity of the conflict and the multiplicity of issues demand forces that can quickly adjust to ever-fleeting circumstances. The Ghana Army SOF, with their airmobile and expeditionary capability, have shorter battle procedure time. Lessons from the Sahel indicate how the insurgents, like ISGS, have spread across the territories,

²⁰⁵ Solli, "The Essence of Special Operations."

thereby overstressing conventional force capabilities. The lack of good roads and logistics constraints implies that conventional forces would have difficulty addressing fleeting threats. The ASOB should therefore be employed to address fleeting situations that require immediate responses. Such interventions could serve as a stopgap for conventional forces, with relatively longer battle procedure time, to take over, as required.

Given that the insurgents in the Sahel often resort to hit-and-run tactics, there is the requirement for a high-mobility air deployable interdiction force to counter them. The insurgents in the Sahel are known to operate on motorbikes with cross-country capabilities and the ability to escape. To this extent, the para and heliborne troops of the SOF become viable options for employment in northern Ghana. The ASOB should be employed as heli and para-borne interdiction forces to interdict insurgents escaping via otherwise inaccessible areas. This strategy implies that a quick reaction and air mobile SOF personnel should be attached to units operating in the northern regions.

4. Expeditionary Operations

Mauritania's Special Intervention Groups (GSIs) and Cameroon's Rapid Intervention Brigade (BIR)²⁰⁶ are useful examples for deployable forces in the Sahel and, by extension, northern Ghana. Mauritania's GSIs, for instance, operate small units of about 200 strength that are "well equipped with light vehicles and supplies, especially fuel, water, and ammunition, for sustained independent operations lasting several days in the remote desert."²⁰⁷ In similar ways, the Ghana Army SOF have the expeditionary skills to occupy and exploit gaps left in conventional force deployments in northern Ghana. This type of operation would ensure dominance in the populations, leaving no safe areas for the insurgents.

²⁰⁶ Michael Shurkin, "Strengthening Sahelian Counterinsurgency Capacity," *Africa Security Brief*, no. 41 (August 2022): 1–12, https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ASB-41-EN_7_29.pdf.

²⁰⁷ Shurkin, 8.

5. Key Leadership Engagement

Key leadership engagement (KLE) is the establishment of rapport with tribesmen, chiefs, community leaders, opinion leaders, and others through which the populace could be positively influenced to gain support for security forces operations. The Ghana Army SOF should be employed to conduct key leadership engagements in northern Ghana. KLE helps to win the communities to the side of security forces and secure critical information on any insurgent incursions. With small team footprints, SOF could prove invaluable in establishing the needed communication and trust between communities and the Ghana Armed Forces, thereby severing ties between the communities and insurgents. The language training (especially Hausa and French) affords the Ghana Army SOF the skills to engage key leaders in the northern region, while comprehending visitors from the Sahel Francophone countries.

6. Covert Observation Posts

In the current situation, wherein the insurgency has not yet impacted northern Ghana, the Army SOF should be deployed in teams to provide covert observation posts to monitor the situation. These posts can be established with SOF in civilian attire and living within the communities. This strategy can provide accurate, up-to-date, and professional real-time information for planning and preparation. In addition, it would provide the special forces personnel human and physical terrain awareness that would inure to their benefit when they are eventually employed against insurgency in the future.

7. Training Assistance and Capability Building

In wake of looming threats to the northern borders of Ghana, there is a need for continuous training, planning, and preparations. There is a requirement for directed interagency training and preparation targeted at the threats from the north. Ghana Army SOF has demonstrated the capacity to lead in interagency training and preparation to address the imminent terrorism in Ghana's northern territories. Already troops from the Special Operations Brigade provide training in helicopter rappelling, para-dropping, and close-quarter battle, among other skills for personnel from other units. SOF troops are assets in developing the skills of the military outposts currently under formation in northern

Ghana.²⁰⁸ They have demonstrated this capacity in the organization of Exercise EAGLE CLAWS.

8. Tactical Advice and Support

The always-limited number of special SOF implies that they should be employed efficiently. In less sensitive COIN operations, it could be more efficient to attach limited numbers of special operators to conventional units operating in the northern regions to act as technical advisors and provide technical support as required. Given the set capabilities of the Ghana Army SOF, it could be a force multiplier to influence the outcome of operations in northern Ghana. This would require a detachment of special operators to conventional units operating in northern Ghana.

G. CONCLUSION

COIN operations in the Sahel unearth lessons on the need to combine security and non-security measures and the requirement for both conventional and SOF. The relatively young Ghana Army SOF require focusing on appropriate tasks to prepare them for the role. While this research does not attempt to prescribe inviolable roles for the Ghana Army SOF, the nuances of the emerging threat to the northern regions demand certain roles. Within this caution, SOF are proposed to perform such roles as direct action, special reconnaissance, covert observation posts, key leadership engagement, training assistance, technical support/advice, and quick reaction support. These modest roles, which are by no means exhaustive or prescriptive, are derived from the evolving capabilities of the Ghana Army SOF. Further evolution of Ghana Army SOF training and operations could produce new and varied capabilities. In equal measure, prospective tasks of the SOF should be matched with their training and tooling.

²⁰⁸ Ghanapeace, “GAF to Be Massively Equipped Soon.”

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VI. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the Sahelian crisis unearths some findings from which recommendations are made to guide security operations in northern Ghana. Ghana remains on the alert as the Sahelian insurgency spreads southwards. While the whole of Ghana is not insulated from the insurgency, the commonalities and proximity of northern Ghana and the Sahel and the porosity of the borders make northern Ghana more susceptible. This reality has donned on the Ghanaian authorities, who continue to adopt measures to address the looming insurgency in northern Ghana. One such measure is the formation of the ASOB.

While acknowledging that COIN operations are a whole-of-government approach, the military, and for our purpose, the ASOB remains one of the government agencies for COIN operations. This chapter summarizes the salient findings from the Sahelian crisis and makes some recommendations to guide the Ghana Army SOF in northern Ghana.

B. FINDINGS

1. Interventions in the Sahel Crisis Have Failed to Yield the Desired Results

Insurgency in the Sahel continues to rise. Local, regional, international, and global interventions have failed to yield desired outcomes. The development has led to a humanitarian crisis that is projected to worsen. France's Operation SERVAL's initial success was short-lived as the insurgents scattered across the Sahel and took to asymmetric tactics. France's Operation BARKHANE could not suppress the insurgency either. The introduction of Task Force TAKUBA, an all-European special operations task force, was met with the withdrawal of France from Mali, following a misunderstanding between France and the Malian military junta. Meanwhile, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger have come together to form the G5 Sahel initiative, which seeks to address development, security, and governance in their countries. These initiatives have equally not been enough to reduce the insurgency.

2. The Sahel Has Become the New Turf for Global Terrorism

The war on terrorism has caused terrorism to chart a new course. The hard-pressed Islamic insurgents in areas like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria have found safer havens in the Sahel. Several factors make the Sahel conducive to Islamic insurgency. The insurgency has taken the nature of the global contest between al Qaeda and the Islamic State as expressed in the JNIM and ISGS terrorist groups.

3. Prevailing Conditions in the Sahel Have Facilitated the Insurgency

Prevailing conditions ranging from geographical, political, economic, religious, social, and ideological paradigms have been exploited by the insurgents to further their cause. The high Muslim population has made the Sahel more susceptible to religious proselytization. The traditional tribal conflicts like the latent Tuareg separatism in northern Mali and the Fulani conflict with other tribes have been exploited by the insurgents. Economically, the ancient trade routes that served to transport natural resources and raw materials have turned into illicit trade routes, providing the insurgents with the needed funds. Globalization, in turn, has facilitated transnational organized trade and given a boost to illicit trade, giving rise to a globalization-terrorism nexus. Poor governance and misrule by the governments of the Sahel countries have created political gaps that have been exploited and widened by the insurgents.

4. The Sahel Risks Becoming the New Turf for Global Power Competition

The complexities of the insurgency have further been complicated by the involvement of the Russian Wagner forces in Mali. The question remains whether the Sahel will become the new turf for global power competition as Russia pushes for greater influence in the Sahel region. The Malian military junta's demand for the withdrawal of France and the deployment of the Wagner forces from Russia is a desperate measure to address the seemingly unending insurgency in the Sahel but could have far-reaching implications for global politics.

5. Counterinsurgency Operations in the Sahel Have Been Over-Securitized

COIN operations in the Sahel have been over-securitized, leading to some pundits to describe the development as a security traffic jam. Even though France has a whole-of-society approach to COIN operations, its strategy in the Sahel has been biased towards security. Operation SERVAL, Operation BARKHANE, and Task Force TAKUBA have all been security-focused.

6. Prevailing Conditions in Northern Ghana Predispose It to the Insurgency in the Sahel

Ghana is bordered to the north by Burkina Faso in the Sahel. The border between the two countries is porous with no man-made structures to mark. The similarities between northern Ghana and the Sahel come in the form of ecology, high levels of poverty, latent security issues, tribal conflicts, economic issues, large unoccupied areas, and a high Muslim population. Togo and Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana's respective eastern and western neighbors, have experienced terrorist attacks, while Ghana has not yet experienced any. These, among other things, have made insurgency in Ghana more imminent.

7. The Sahel Crisis Provides Invaluable Lessons for Ghana

The reality of the Sahelian threats to northern Ghana is duly acknowledged by the Ghanaian authorities who have undertaken several initiatives to forestall the insurgency and address it when it happens. The Sahel insurgency situation presents Ghana with several lessons worth learning: conventional operations alone are not enough to overcome an insurgency, the indirect approach is the way forward to COIN operations, the population is central to COIN operations, any state security brutality brings negative consequences, local issues are exploited by insurgents, illicit trade facilitates insurgency, motorbikes provide transportation flexibility for the Sahelian terrain, ungoverned spaces offer refuge to insurgents, international collaboration is key to COIN operations, regional cooperation is necessary for COIN operations, drone technology is necessary for COIN operations, and strong indigenous forces are imperatives for COIN operations. Because COIN operations

are multi-functional operations, they are multi-dimensional operations in which several agencies have a role to play.

8. The Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Can Help Address the Looming Insurgency in Northern Ghana

The Ghana ASOB was promulgated in 2015 in tacit acknowledgment of the contemporary threats of terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational crime. Since then, the Army SOF have received both local and foreign training that has made them suitable for addressing the looming insurgency in northern Ghana. Training and exercises both locally and with partner forces like the U.S., United Kingdom, Israel, Egypt, Australia, India, etc., have enhanced the capabilities of the Ghana Army SOF to make them fit for COIN and counterterrorism roles, beyond the reach of conventional forces.

9. Some Roles Are Suitable for Ghana Army Special Operations Forces

It is proposed that the Ghana Army SOF be employed to address the imminent insurgency situation in northern Ghana. Among these roles are: direct action (DA) to search, locate and destroy, special reconnaissance and information operations, quick reaction operations, expeditionary operations behind enemy lines and inaccessible territories, key leadership engagements to win support for security forces, covert observation posts for intelligence and battle damage assessment, training assistance and capability building of conventional forces, and tactical advice and support for conventional forces.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Army Special Forces Should Be Kept as Small as Necessary

The Tier One SOF should be kept as small as possible to ensure quality and forestall draining conventional forces of most of their quality human resources. This will ensure that conventional forces retain their operational credibility to offer much-needed support to

SOF. An efficient conventional force is a necessity of effective SOF, acknowledging the five truths of SOF.²⁰⁹

2. Special Forces Should Be Appropriately Employed

As leaders seek quick success, the tendency exists for SOF to be overtasked. The SOF should be suitably employed to avoid overburdening and undue stress. Overburdening the SOF would have the tendency to render conventional forces redundant and, hence, rusty. Conventional forces must be employed whenever possible. The Ghana Army SOF should be only employed when the tasks are sensitive, high risk, and beyond conventional capabilities.

3. Training Should Focus on Current Operations Such as the Developments in the Sahel

The Ghana Army SOF should follow closely the insurgency in the Sahel. Even though northern Ghana has its share of chieftaincy disputes and tribal conflicts, the Sahel crisis poses a current threat of full-blown insurgency in northern Ghana. Acknowledging that no two insurgencies are the same, the proximity, the porosity of borders, and similarities in the situations in the Sahel and northern Ghana can provide directions to Ghana on how to prevent and prepare for insurgencies in the Sahel.

4. Equipping and Retooling Should Consider the Peculiarities in Northern Ghana

It is recommended that the Ghana Army SOF should use the Sahel situation to guide equipping and retooling. The north of Ghana poses current threats to Ghana's security, ostensibly from the Sahel crisis. The Sahel crisis for instance has shown the usefulness of air assets, drone technology, intelligence, motorbike mobility, etc., and the limitations the terrain places on stores and spares. Arms and equipment should be procured bearing in mind the restrictions that northern Ghana places on mobility, maintenance, repair, recovery, spares, and sustainment. The large and unoccupied areas mean that simple and easily repaired equipment that uses simple spares should be preferred. Stores and spares

²⁰⁹ Collins, *Special Operations Forces*.

that are easily procurable in the open market could be preferred options. Binoculars and global positioning systems that use dry cells, for instance, could be preferred to rechargeable ones in areas where there is no electric power.

5. SOF Training Should Consider Lessons from the Sahel Crisis

It is recommended that the Ghana Army SOF include training that focuses on dynamics in northern Ghana and the Sahel. For instance, the insurgency in the Sahel has unveiled the negative impact of state security brutality and unprofessional conduct. Such tendencies tend to sour relations between security forces and the civil populace, developments that tend to sever relations between government forces and the civil populace and allow insurgents to win the hearts and minds war. Again, the Sahel insurgency has unveiled the inefficiencies of over-securitization of COIN operations. As the insurgency unfolds, the ASOB should adjust its preparation with lessons from the Sahel.

6. The Ghana Army Special Operations Brigade Should Support the Training of Conventional Forces

The ASOB should endeavor to use the expertise gained from training with partner forces to improve the capabilities of conventional forces. SOF personnel who have undergone specialist training should form training teams to train conventional forces in skills such as close-quarter battle, close-quarter reconnaissance, raids, helicopter-borne operations, etc. This will ensure that conventional forces are enabled to conduct basic to advanced operations, allowing SOF to concentrate on high-risk and sensitive operations that are beyond the conventional force capabilities. A strong conventional force is key to successful special operations.²¹⁰

D. CONCLUSION

Ghana is on the brink of insurgency as the Sahelian insurgency spreads southwards to the coastal states. The Ghanaian authorities are not oblivious to this and have adopted measures to secure Ghana's borders with the Sahel. The measures include the formation of

²¹⁰ Collins.

the ASOB. The Army SOF, through a stringent selection process, training, exercises, and equipping have capabilities comparable to well-established SOFs from other countries. These capabilities are recommended for employment in northern Ghana, where it borders the Sahel, to help address the looming threat of insurgency.

The lessons from the Sahel should inform training, employment, resourcing, and strategy. Ghana has the benefit of learning practical lessons from the Sahel insurgency. The professionalism of troops, simplicity of equipment, importance of air assets, utility of motorbike mobility, and the functionality of drone technology are some of the lessons to guide the Ghana Army SOF. There is a need for the relatively new Ghana Army SOF to focus on emerging threats to guide their selection, training, and resourcing. Such a measure will ensure that troops are better prepared to fight the current war.

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