What if France Ended Operation Barkhane?

Findings of the RAND Webinar on Operation Barkhane
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Introduction

On 4 March 2021, RAND hosted a webinar, under Chatham House Rule, on the subject ‘What if France Ended Operation Barkhane?’ RAND invited 20 international experts to form a panel and participate in a moderated discussion, with four presenting in the first session and the remainder joining in for the second. The webinar was attended by 100 individuals from six different countries, who asked questions of the panel. This document is intended to present an accurate and balanced summary of what was said, whilst ensuring the anonymity of the panel and delegates. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of RAND, nor any of the three RAND personnel involved in organising the event and preparing this document, Michael Shurkin from RAND Corporation, and Sarah Grand-Clément and Paola Fusaro from RAND Europe.

First session

In the first session, four experts – two American and two French – were invited to give ten-minute presentations on their views of what would happen if the French ended Operation Barkhane or were to reduce the size of Barkhane significantly. The experts held a number of views in common. They generally agreed that the departure of French troops would not precipitate a dramatic collapse of the three countries at the heart of the Sahel crisis (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), nor directly affect security in Senegal and the so-called littoral states south of Burkina Faso (i.e. Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin).

There were several reasons for this. There was general agreement, for instance, that France would forge new security agreements that would enable it to keep supporting Sahelian government forces and that other outside actors might step in to support local governments in various ways. These actors might include Turkey, Russia, and China. This is not to say that Sahelian security forces would improve, but that outside help would enable them to persist. The speakers also assumed that the conflict between Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) would continue and perhaps worsen. In the absence of Operation Barkhane, more and more communities will be forced to pick sides.

The speakers emphasized the local nature of the conflict and the fact that much of the insecurity would be driven by local actors caught up in local conflicts. This implies that instead of state collapse in response to Barkhane’s termination, there would be more localized conflict with local parties grappling for new power arrangements. It was assumed that the region’s larger armed groups and its Islamist groups would be involved. Yet, the experts commented that the localized nature of the conflict meant that one or two Islamist groups were unlikely to prevail to such a degree that it or they might consolidate power and establish a sustainable emirate. Similarly, they argued that the ending of Operation Barkhane would not affect the littoral countries because the situation there was contingent on local actors and the local context.

The speakers voiced scepticism that the terrorist threat in metropolitan France would increase; one did, however, note that a French withdrawal would be a major blow to the country’s prestige and soft power because ‘it would be perceived as a defeat’. The speakers agreed that a French withdrawal would make life more difficult for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali.
(MINUSMA), and would probably spell the end of the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) and the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP).

One speaker mentioned that the Algiers Accords would become more difficult to implement. They argued that groups like the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA) and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA) would make a greater effort to establish both their presence and a ‘governance architecture’ in northern and central Mali.

On the subject of negotiations, the speakers agreed that Sahelian governments would have to negotiate with the terrorist groups. Although this might result in outcomes that were less than optimal for France, it would not necessarily yield outcomes that were intolerable, since the speakers assumed that the Islamists would also have to compromise due to military and political pressure. One speaker noted that French military pressure was behind the willingness of JNIM to state that its war with France was strictly limited to the Sahel, which is unusual for Al Qaeda and its affiliates. There appeared to be a consensus that France, because of its rhetoric that equated the war in the Sahel with the war against terrorism at home, had locked itself in a logic of war that precluded negotiation – a situation they thought did not serve France’s interests.

One speaker emphasized the need for France and its Western allies to clarify their own policies regarding what is acceptable and what is not acceptable regarding political Islam. This would make negotiation possible as well as help them to discern between groups that had to be fought and those with whom some political accommodation might be possible. They concluded that ISGS should be fought because Islamic State branches more broadly have been connected to attacks in Europe. The Al Qaeda affiliates in the Sahel, on the other hand, are less of a threat because of their declared focus on the Sahel, meaning negotiating with them should not be ruled out.

Second session

The second session expanded the number of participants and featured a broader range of views. This led to less consensus and, conversely, more disagreement.

There was debate over the orientation of JNIM and the extent to which it has a local focus rather than a regional or international one. This debate is important because it speaks to the question of the group’s ambitions, its amenability to negotiation, and whether or not it might be satisfied with the achievement of limited objectives. No consensus emerged, though there seemed to be an agreement that there is no clear distinction to be made between JNIM’s local and international interests. It was, and would remain, both locally focused and affiliated with Al Qaeda, resulting in uncertainty over its ambitions. That said, some of the participants thought JNIM was more locally focused, while others were more sceptical regarding the likelihood of JNIM detaching itself meaningfully from Al Qaeda. One speaker mentioned that the HCUA had split from JNIM precisely because they were in favour of a wholly local focus, suggesting that JNIM’s ambitions were larger.

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1 A 2015 agreement signed between the Malian government and the Coordination of Azawad Movements, an alliance of armed rebel groups, to restore peace in the country.
Another speaker largely rejected the idea of negotiation with terrorist groups. They argued that leaders like Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa, leaders of armed rebel and jihadist groups, are not representative of their communities; as such, negotiating with them would not lead to peace, for it would inevitably leave other portions of their communities dissatisfied. The speaker contrasted these leaders’ lack of representativity with the aims of local governments for a republican project of an inclusive democracy, which ultimately holds more promise and should not be abandoned. Another speaker, however, argued that historically, the ostensible champions of republicanism in the Sahel have played on ethnic divisions to maintain peace and control rather than working to transcend them and unify people under a republican banner. In contrast, JNIM has, in some instances, done a better job of reaching out to ethnic communities and serving their interests, while at the same time offering a more universalist vision and giving many groups representation they had not previously enjoyed.

There were a range of views regarding Operation Barkhane’s actual influence and the extent to which its departure would affect the situation on the ground one way or another. One speaker argued that Operation Barkhane’s termination would not make a meaningful difference because Operation Barkhane has not been effective so far. Specifically, it was deemed to have: not affected who controls what locality; not improved the quality of local forces and governance; and, finally, not fostered respect for human rights. Therefore, it was felt that its departure would change little. Another speaker went further and argued that, if anything, Operation Barkhane had a destabilizing effect, in part because it has created an incentive for local governments to increase violence against civilian populations. The lack of credibility of the French threat to withdraw support, moreover, means that local governments do not think it necessary to heed French injunctions to improve governance. It was felt, therefore, that Operation Barkhane should be seen as a cause of conflict and not just one of the actors. Relatedly, another speaker said the timing of a French withdrawal could affect the balance of power between JNIM and ISGS. They argued that if the French withdrew now, the balance of power in the conflict between JNIM and ISGS would tip in ISGS’s favour. ISGS, according to the speaker, has a radicalizing and fragmenting effect on local communities, whereas JNIM has a more stabilizing effect because it tends to act in a state-like capacity.

In contrast, other speakers thought the security consequences of the termination of Operation Barkhane would be significant. One highlighted the geographical proximity of the Sahel and argued that France and Europe could not afford to take the risk of the emergence of a territorial Islamic state like ISIS in Syria and Iraq so close to its shores. The possible cascading effects on security for Europe would be massive, including in terms of wider humanitarian consequences. Consequently, while France might leave the Sahel, ‘it will be back ultimately’. Another speaker evoked the fragility of Sahelian states, and implied that it was greater than many of the other participants seemed to realize. Sahelian states would struggle to hold together and might collapse rapidly if the French left. Finally, another speaker asserted that a critical factor for negotiations was military pressure, meaning that removing Operation Barkhane would decrease that pressure. Moreover, there was a need to create local stabilizing mechanisms, though it was not clear how that might work in the absence of central governance.

The speakers’ emphasis on the local nature of the conflict suggests that one should not talk about a homogenous effect or set of consequences across the region following the French departure. There will be differences between countries and even between regions within the same country (i.e. northern and central
Mali and the region around Bamako, the Tillaberi region of Niger, coastal states). There is, therefore, a need to understand what the effect could be at local and regional level and not just at the national level.

Conclusions

Although most of the participants did not think there would be a quick or even a complete collapse of Sahelian states (with dire ramifications for the so-called littoral states) if France terminated Operation Barkhane, there was clear consensus that there would be an increase in local violence as many communities grappled with each other and with various armed groups. For some, there were grounds for optimism, especially if they viewed Operation Barkhane as having a destabilizing effect, and also if they judged JNIM to be locally focused with relatively limited ambitions. The participants debated JNIM’s focus, which emerged as a key point dividing those who were relatively optimistic about the consequences of Operation Barkhane ending from those who were more pessimistic about the outcomes.

All agreed that JNIM and ISGS alike merged local conflicts and local politics with radical ideologies, which linked them to some extent to regional and even transnational agendas. JNIM, however, had distinguished itself from ISGS by expressing openness toward negotiations while also insisting that its war with France was limited to the Sahel, meaning it was not interested in targeting France or French interests elsewhere, notwithstanding its Al Qaeda affiliation. According to some, France therefore could and should explore coming to an agreement with JNIM. Others, however, were less certain and less hasty to dismiss the Al Qaeda connection and JNIM’s ideological underpinnings. Interestingly, there was less discussion of ISGS, and it appeared to be the case that the participants agreed it represented a greater threat to local stability as well as French and European interests than JNIM. They did not discuss the likelihood of ISGS prevailing in any future scenario.

Another difference among participants concerned the value of Operation Barkhane. For some, as we have seen, it did more harm than good. For one speaker, it was a blend of good and bad that cancelled each other out and largely had no real effect, meaning the termination of Operation Barkhane would not ultimately matter. On the other hand, some stated that the possibility of negotiating with JNIM was, in part, a product of military pressure the French were able to bring to bear, implying, as one speaker noted, that removing that pressure might preclude meaningful negotiations. Many appeared to agree that at least in the near term the end of Operation Barkhane would lead to greater conflict at the local level. Ultimately, no one thought France’s departure was a realistic proposition, regardless of whether or not they thought France’s departure might be a good or bad idea.

The views aired at the webinar implied a need for three avenues of further inquiry:

- One is whether or not Operation Barkhane could adapt so as to mitigate the negative effects some attributed to it and enhance the positive ones.
- A second relates to the nature of JNIM and understanding the complex interplay of local and ideological drivers at work, which defies reductionist analysis.
The third involves imagining a future Sahel in which what remains of post-colonial states coexist with Islamist groups that exercise political control over possibly larger geographic areas, potentially with at least tacit international sanction.