



The Uplifting Africa Program

6/23/2022

The Legacy of French Intervention in Africa



French Foreign Legion soldiers in northeastern Mali, 2020.

Photo Credit: The New York Times

John O'Connell
The Uplifting Africa Program

www.upliftingafrica.org

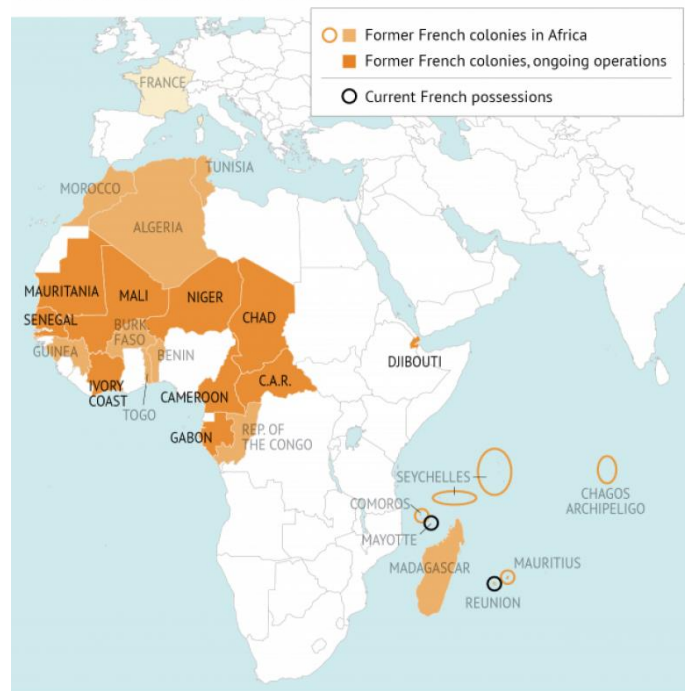
The Uplifting Africa Business Coalition

The Legacy of French Intervention in Africa

France in Africa Post-Colonialism

The end of European colonization in Africa in the middle of the twentieth century did not necessarily mean the end of European involvement in the continent. Former colonial powers continued to exert their influence on nations formerly occupied by them, and one of the more prominent countries that engaged in this practice is France, which has maintained not simply a political and economic presence in the continent but also a military one with ground troops. Former colonies in Africa provide raw materials for French companies which allow for cheap access to resources and this prompted the French government to support military assistance against serious threats that could harm friendly African governments thus perpetuating a status quo of African leaders who remained loyal to France.

Former French Colonies in Africa



Copyright Stratfor 2016 www.stratfor.com

Map of French colonies and operations in Africa. Photo Credit: Stratfor

Historically France has acted alone in its interventions, but the international reaction and relevance of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda became a turning point for French interventionism. France intervened at important moment for Rwanda, but international reactions were mixed as some credited French actions as saving thousands of lives while others argued that it attempted

to recover and relocate Rwandan leaders who may have been complicit in encouraging the genocide. As a result, France has changed its approach to be more multilateral and cooperative in its interventions with other nations, though it still sometimes conducts interventions on its own.

In 2013, the Government of Mali found itself on the defensive against Islamist rebel forces that had seized the northern part of the country in 2012. It began to look as if these rebels would be able to defeat Mali's military and seize the capital Bamako which prompted a request to France to intervene. France launched Operation Serval, which involved air and land forces and a rapid deployment. Within months the rebel attack was defeated, major cities in the north such as Timbuktu were liberated and with 1,000 rebel forces taking casualties out of a total of 2,000. This successful operation ended in 2014 with the start of Operation Barkhane.



Extent of Rebel Territory in Mali before Operation Serval, January 2013. Photo Credit: Wikipedia

Operation Barkhane

In the aftermath of Operation Serval, the rebel forces were beaten, having been forced out of the cities, but not destroyed. President François Hollande in 2014 announced an operation to continue the progress made in Mali, yet also would expand the French presence in the region to additional countries where insurgents also operated. These countries were Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger, all former French colonies that still manage close ties to their former overlord and welcomed the French assistance in their nations to root out opposition insurgent groups in their countries. By 2021 there were 5,500 French troops, hundreds of armored vehicles, and dozens of aircraft, as well as support from other nations such as the United States – which had a little over a thousand troops in the area. They sought to limit the influence of insurgent groups in these nations in order to limit the probability of terrorist attacks in Western countries.

Operation Barkhane is unique because while it is the most prominent example of French interventionist policy today. It is also an operation where France has sought the assistance of its global allies and partners to make the intervention look less like neocolonialism at work but rather an effort to increase security in the Sahel. For starters, the United Nations has 15,000 “blue-helmet” peacekeepers in Mali to assist with humanitarian and military operations. France has also made efforts to “Europeanize” the operation, with the European Union creating a program to train the Malian Army and some European nations like Estonia and the Czech Republic have sent commando forces. Regional armies and allies are also involved in Operation Barkhane, yet despite these efforts to include combined multilateral forces, the operation it is still clearly and politically a French intervention in the Sahel.



U.S. Africa Command Forces in Timbuktu, Mali. Photo Credit: Dvids

Security Implications: Success or Failure?

French President Emmanuel Macron announced a formal end to Operation Barkhane in July 2021, stating that France should not, “replace a sovereign nation and buildup its future in its place.” During this time however the security situation in the Sahel has completely unraveled. Terrorist groups still control a vast portion of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and attacks have taken place across the Sahel region by these groups. French presence in these countries turned the local population against them over time, especially as deaths from the conflict skyrocketed. In 2016 around 800 people perished in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, though in 2020 that figure was over 6,000 (2021 was not much better with around 5,500 deaths). Overall, the security situation in the region has collapsed despite the presence of thousands of French troops. The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs recently published a study reviewing the UN Mandate in Mali and stated that, “The overall security situation has deteriorated in Mali and beyond Mali in the Sahel since 2013.” Operation Barkhane can thus be considered a failure as Islamic rebel groups failed to be contained and continued to operate and inflict casualties on civilians in the region.



Operatives of Russian mercenary Wagner Group in Gossi, Mali, 2022. Photo Credit: French Armed Forces

In the aftermath of French de-escalation and the end of Operation Barkhane, other groups have sought to fill the void left by their military forces as governments in the area seek to curb violence and extremism. One of these groups is the Russian mercenary force called the Wagner Group, which has been linked to massacres of hundreds of civilians (456 from January to May 2022) creating more instability in the region. The security situation of the Sahel is expected to continue to decline further. Western involvement is expected to decline further especially due to global economic indicators pointing towards stagnant growth as well as supply shocks from other international conflicts such as war in Ukraine, a major supplier of food to Africa. More local, coupled with additional mercenary groups are likely to become involved as the governments become desperate. Conflict in the Sahel is another symptom of a world undergoing major stress amid change. The rise of multilateralism, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of right-wing nationalism, and other difficult challenges are creating an environment that is unstable. France is unlikely to conduct anything such as Operation Barkhane in its former African colonies again: the world is changing and French policy is adapting. African governments must now find solutions that will result in a secure and stable Sahel region.

Sources

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/07/france-military-leaving-west-africa-colonialism-macron/>
<https://effectivepeaceops.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EPON-MINUSMA-II-Report.pdf>
https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-france-africa-counterterrorism/2022/01/11/2c6c27a2-6d65-11ec-974b-d1c6de8b26b0_story.html
<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/02/14/what-have-french-forces-achieved-in-the-sahel>
<https://www.mei.edu/publications/mali-and-sahel-new-tensions-and-old-and-worsening-security-problem>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgY8REyCEvw>
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/french-military-africa>
<https://www.leidensecurityandglobalaffairs.nl/articles/operation-serval-the-french-intervention-in-mali>
https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/operation_barkhane
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/04/russian-mercenaries-wagner-group-linked-to-civilian-massacres-in-mali>

