



The Impact of the Situation in Afghanistan on Military Missions in Africa

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The Taliban victory in Afghanistan was enthusiastically received by some armed Al-Qaida-affiliated jihadist groups in Africa with whom they share a sense of fighting for a common cause. Countries participating in international military operations in Somalia and the Sahel are limiting their involvement because of the growing political cost. In the case of Somalia, the risk of Islamists seizing power has increased. In Mali, the likelihood of the extremists' participation in ruling the country has grown. To prevent a repeat of the Afghanistan scenario, EU states and the U.S. will modify their military engagement.

Africa today is one of the most important areas of operation for armed Islamist groups. Somali Al-Shabaab, whose leaders' ideas were shaped by ties with the Pakistani-Afghani Islamists in the 1990s, is the world's strongest local Al-Qaida branch. The Sahel zone is the most spatially stretched area at risk of attacks by jihadist groups (both related to Al-Qaida and ISIS). The fight against them in the last decade relied on international forces. In Somalia, this was the AMISOM mission, which included EU-funded African Union (AU) troops, as well as training and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) support from the U.S. In the Sahel, they have comprised the French *Barkhane* mission, the UN (MINUSMA), regional G5 forces, and, more recently, special forces from EU countries (*Takuba*). Despite the many years of commitment, they have not reduced the fighters' capabilities to attack or recruit. For France, the U.S., and some African countries, the political costs of the mission have increased significantly. Therefore, it seems reasonable, like in Iraq and Afghanistan, to gradually withdraw troops. However, the Taliban's resumption of power in Kabul in August this year—enthusiastically received by Somali and Sahelian jihadists as portending victory—forced a revision of this approach. There is an ongoing search for a formula that will avoid state collapse—especially in Somalia—if the field is turned over to jihadists.

Mission in Somalia. [The AMISOM military mission](#) has been operating since 2007 to support the weak federal government

in regaining control over the state's territory. In 2011, the forces pushed Al-Shabaab, then dominant in the country, out of the capital, Mogadishu. From then on, it led the frontline fight in the interior. Initially, AMISOM consisted of a contingent from Uganda, later also from Burundi and Djibouti, and took command of independent interventions by Kenya and (partly) Ethiopia in Somalia to reach a force of more than 20,000 soldiers. The newly formed Somali government forces were gradually granted support roles in AMISOM operations, and only since the beginning of this year have they been conducting independent offensive operations. Of these, the U.S.-trained *Danab* units are the most capable.

According to the internationally agreed 2017 Somali transition programme, the AMISOM mission is expected to end in December 2021. By then, Somali forces are to assume responsibility for security. At the beginning of this year the U.S. withdrew its ground forces (about 700 people, mainly trainers). Ethiopia called back about 3,000 people (from outside the AMISOM mission), due to the internal [conflict in Tigray](#), and Kenya is preparing for a full withdrawal of its about 3,500 troops. The EU is reducing the mission's funding. The beginning of the retreat has opened space for extremists: This year, Al-Shabaab easily took over cities abandoned by the intervention or Somali forces. In addition to controlling much of the southern interior, the extremists are increasing their

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presence in the capital where they are likely to collect more in taxes than the state authorities.

If the intervention in Somalia actually ended, the extremists would immediately take over Mogadishu. Therefore, from the middle of this year, intensive consultations on the shape of further engagement in this country have been underway. They are hampered by the tensions in Somalia accompanying the ongoing complex process of indirect elections. The events in Afghanistan will have a key impact on the new consensus. The likelihood of a full termination of the intervention, as expected by a large proportion of Somalis, has dropped to zero. The chance of establishing a new AU mission based on AMISOM, which would be the simplest organisationally, has also diminished. On the other hand, there is growing international support for the creation of a hybrid AU-UN mission with broad civilian competences.

Missions in the Sahel. In the last decade, France has played a major role in the fight against extremist groups operating primarily in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Its [intervention missions](#) have been present on the ground since 2013, and the current, *Barkhane*, has reached 5,100 troops. However, due to the lack of visible improvement in security in the region and its growing criticism both in France and the Sahel countries, France has long been preparing for a partial withdrawal. President Emanuel Macron also hopes that such an announcement improves his chances of being re-elected in 2022. The impetus was provided by political events in Mali: After the second coup in May 2021, France temporarily suspended working cooperation with Malian troops. It was also concerned that the country's leaders would engage in talks with certain factions loyal to Al-Qaida.

In June, Macron announced that France would dismantle three bases in northern Mali and give up its dominant role in the Sahel to international forces. France is to reduce its forces in the region to about 2,500-3,000 within a few years partly by transferring them to international structures, especially the European *Takuba* (where, however, they hope to retain a leading position). The French declarations made it easier for the [new authorities of Chad](#)—the most important country in the G5 coalition—to take a similar decision, but they implemented it immediately. In August, they announced the withdrawal to the country of half of the 1,200-strong contingent whose combat value was crucial to contain the expansion of jihadists.

After the fall of Kabul, the French and international press compared the decisions to reduce involvement in the Sahel to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. As a result, associations

with the chaos of the American pull-out could have politically harmed the French ruling camp. To prevent this from happening, the government argues that the “adjustment” of measures serves to internationalise responsibility for the Sahel. However, from the point of view of the Malian authorities, who are increasingly distancing themselves from France, the emerging security vacuum must be filled. Therefore, they have returned to talks with Russia about the deployment of about 1,000 Wagner Group mercenaries. Reports in mid-September that a contract for the mercenaries was about to be finalised sparked a vehement reaction from French leaders who fear that the arrival of the Russians would mean France would lose control over the reform process of international engagement.

Prospects and Conclusions. The situation in Afghanistan will affect the future of international military missions in Africa in two ways: It will prevent them from ending too soon but also force a shift from a military approach to prioritising states' ability to regain citizens' trust as a condition for marginalising extremists (counterinsurgency). For this, states must improve their social services, justice, and development.

Somalia's situation most closely resembles that of Afghanistan. Here, too, the risk of the seizure of full power by Muslim extremists is greatest because of their strength and experience in governing. In both Somalia and the Sahel, the prospect of further cuts in military support will encourage local authorities to talk to the jihadists over the opposition of France or others. In Mali, they could try to pull-in factions recruiting local Tuaregs and Fulanis to participate in the political system while continuing the fight against transnational factions (ISIS in the Greater Sahara, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb). This would happen at the cost of the partial Islamisation of legislation and an increase in Russia's influence.

France, wishing to protect itself against criticism comparing its policy to the mistakes of the U.S. in Afghanistan, will be motivated to mobilise third countries to assume joint responsibility for the region. Therefore, it will strive to expand the Alliance for the Sahel, which works for the region's development, and to add more European states to the *Takuba* force with which it shares important roles with Czechia and Estonia (from October this year, Romanian forces also will join). The possible participation of Polish soldiers in the mission could serve not only to strengthen Poland's voice in discussions on the EU's common foreign and security policy but also would become an additional instrument of influence with France in the field of security.