

Assessment of France Counter-terrorism Operation in Mali: Through the Lens of the Military Strategy¹

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Abstract:

The Paper assessed France's counter-terrorism operation in Mali and why it failed to bring about peace and stability in the country through a focused analysis of the counter-terrorism operation's military strategy. The study seeks to understand why the decade-long operation, through its examination of the military strategy, fails to suppress the jihadist groups in the Sahelian country. The methodology employed in the paper includes using both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings of the paper reveal that the military strategy was characterised by an overwhelming use of military force, which only contained the threat and kept the conflict protracted, and also served as an incentive to join terror groups. It also finds out that the military strategy lacks a coherent military objective. This can be viewed from two perspectives: 1) its over-ambitious military objectives, and 2) the operation strategy's inability to adapt to the evolving nature of the conflict; instead, the strategy is regarded as a “one-way plan”. The paper concluded by recommending that an overwhelming military-focused approach does not solve the terrorism problem; rather, it intensifies it and calls for the adaptation of alternative approaches.

Keywords:

Counter-terrorism;
Terrorism; Military
Strategy; Conflict; Mali.

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Introduction

Mali gained independence from France in 1960. Since then, the country has been engulfed in a series of overlapping challenges that stem from both internal and external factors, which have also strained the political, social, and economic situation of the country. The complexity of the crisis facing the landlocked nation includes multiple military coups, separatist insurgency, Islamist extremist terror attacks, and a dire humanitarian crisis has set the country on a stage of instability that will have a wider impact on the Sahel region (World Peace Foundation, 2014).

The Separatist Tuareg rebels launched an uprising against the Malian government in 2012 to demand the autonomy of the northern region. The rebellion was marred with violence, and it witnessed the birth of an alliance between the northern rebels and jihadist groups, who have maintained a low profile in the country since the 2000s (Whitehouse, 2021). The coordinated attacks between the two non-state armed actors put the country's stability on the line (Gregory and Thibault, 2015). The growing strength of the rebels and jihadist group resulted in the capture of several territories in the north, and the inability of the Malian armed forces to contain the threat further descended the country into chaos, as the rebel-jihadist coalition advanced towards the capital. This prompted a swift military intervention from the French government to restore the sovereignty and legitimacy of the government, at the request of Bamako (Sergei and Bart, 2015).

The French military launched Operation Serval in 2013, primarily to displace the jihadist groups from their stronghold in the north and restore government control, and the operation was achieved with swift victory (ibid). The French military further entrenched itself in the fight against terror groups in the country and the wider Sahel region, leading to the formation of Operation Barkhane. The long-term operation Barkhane was a region-wide counter-terrorism operation, with the French military deploying its military force against the jihadist groups in the Sahel, stretching across Mali, Burkina-Faso, Niger and Chad (BBC, 2014).

This period, however, witnessed the growth and expansion of jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a coalition of Sahel-based al-Qaida affiliates and the emergence of the Islamic State in the Sahel (Lebovich, 2019). The conflict is often depicted as a protracted conflict, also labelled as the French Forever War, in parallel to the unwinnable United States war in Afghanistan. In addition, nearly 10 years after the military operation following its withdrawal from Mali in 2022, the intervention has been characterised as a failure (Nathaniel, 2021). Attacks perpetrated by the jihadist groups in the country have significantly increased, as jihadist groups have expanded their territories to border states, and are now threatening coastal West African states (Leif, 2022). The Malian state itself has plunged into political instability, with two military coups leading to the overthrow of the democratic government and increasing diplomatic uproar between the junta and the French government has led to the expulsion of French forces from Mali (Al Jazeera, 2022).

This research examines the factors that led to the failure of France's counter-terrorism military strategy, despite its overwhelming military presence and wherewithal. France fails to improve the security situation in Mali, following almost a decade of counter-terrorism operations and billions of euros spent. It therefore makes the case that the lack of an alternative approach to the terrorism menace, in place of the global-traditional solution of military force, will continue to make the fight against terrorism a futile conflict.

The paper consists of five sections. Following the introductory section, it evaluates the research methods and conducts a literature review on the motives of France's military intervention in Mali. Second, it provided a theoretical anchor to analyse the counter-terrorism operation. Third, the study provides an overview of Operation Serval and Barkhane and lastly, explores the reasons behind the failure of the military strategy and concludes.

Methodology:

The paper draws on the use of quantitative and qualitative methods, which include 3 interviews with an academic, a Sahel security expert and a UN official based in London, Wales and Paris, respectively, between November and December 2023, to gain insight on the subject matter. It was then qualitatively complemented by international media reports on the Malian conflict, think tanks, non-governmental organisations and institute reports, books, journal articles and papers. The data was then subjected to a thematic analysis to explore and analyse relevant themes and patterns surrounding French military strategy, its conduct of the counter-terrorism operation, and what led to its failure.

Why France Intervened in Mali:

The motive behind France's intervention in Mali has been contested among scholars, with several studies analysing the justifications that prompted the intervention. However, according to the French government, France intervened militarily to prevent the emergence of a terrorist sanctuary that would pose a significant security threat to France and its Western partners (Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2013). Some studies perceived the intervention as France's continuation of its neo-colonial policies in its former colony. They argued the Intervention is an extension and expansion of French history of military intervention in the region, and its presence in the country is not to fight against terrorism, rather to protect the French government's economic and political interests in the country and beyond in the Sahel region, which will be under enormous threat if there's a jihadist takeover in the country, and a potential spillover to strategic economic sites in neighbouring Niger. (David, 2013; Madi, 2013; Sergei-Boeke and Bart Schuurman, 2015). Other studies also maintained a post-colonial position on the intervention, Carmen viewed it through a francAfrique narrative, which implies the unequal relationship that exists between France and its colonies. Carmen maintained that the attitude of the French policymakers, particularly the extension of the short-term

operation Serval into the long-term Barkhane, indicated France's intention of continuously exerting influence and maintaining the post-colonial hegemonic control over Mali and its resources (Carmen, 2015). While Isaline and Mahamadou viewed the intervention as France's repayment of debt to the country, due to its long-standing colonial and post-colonial relations. They viewed the intervention as a post-colonial responsibility that France had to fulfil due to past colonial favours Mali has rendered to the French empire and to strengthen the existing relationship, and the French government honouring the request to intervene by the Malian authorities, serves as a sign of maintaining the partnership (Isaline and Mahamadou, 2014).

Realist like Tony Chafer argues otherwise, that the French intervention in the country was aimed at projecting France's influence and its global power ambition, at a time when its influence was waning. He further argued that France considers Africa as a privileged arena for asserting influence and contended that, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, France perceived a responsibility to act on matters of peace and security, particularly in relations to its former colonies. (Tony, 2016).

However, Sussan Wings offers the most compelling and convincing argument that resonates with the realities of the French-led military operation, as Wings posits that the intervention was aimed at portraying France as a reliable counter-terrorism partner, following the United States model and narrative of “war on terror”. Sussan Wings explains that the conflict in Mali, has been framed within the framework of the war on terror, and French desires to intervene, expand and extend with the launch of operation Barkhane and also the establishment of European special forces base and other French-led military assemblages such as the Takuba Taskforce, proved that it has positioned itself as a reliable partner in the fight against terrorism in Mali (Sussan, 2016).

Theoretical Anchor:

The paper's core argument is to find out why the military strategy employed by the French military in the counter-terrorism operation in Mali failed. To this end, the paper adopts the military/war model approach, which reflects military thinking on how counter-terrorism operations should be conducted through the application of military force and power. The theory perceives terrorism or an act of terror as an act of war or insurgency, which it posits should be countered with military force. Counter-terrorism within this framework treats terrorist groups as analogous to a state engaged in war with another state. Therefore, all military resources typically directed at a state should also be employed against terrorist groups. (Brittnee, 2017).

The central argument of this theory is the use of maximal force designed to over the enemy(terrorist), it perceives the war against terrorism as a possible never-ending fight, which can be protracted and span several generations, which is why most military approaches to counter-terrorism are termed as “forever-war”, and further argues that the military fire-power should be maintained as long as the threat of terrorist attack persists (Roland, 2019). Furthermore, the war model is suited for a decentralised, ideology-driven and transnational terrorist network, which relies on some advanced

military technological power such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), armed drones, missile technology, precision-guided strike, targeted assassination of high-value targets and the use of special forces (ibid).

The theory suits the overall conduct of the French counterterrorism operation, and is suitable for the context of the military strategy employed, with the initial deployment of over 3,000 French troops in Mali, under Operation Serval, and ramped up to over 5,000 troops on the ground under Barkhane, spreading across 4 Sahelian countries (Stephen, 2022). Furthermore, the establishment of French military formations includes the Takuba task force and the EU-training mission. Similarly, the use of advanced and cutting-edge military hardware consisted of approximately 20 helicopters, 200 light vehicles and 200 armoured vehicles, 6 to 10 support aircraft, 4-6 fighter aircraft and 5 drones (Bruno, 2017). Additionally, the targeted assassination and neutralisation of high-value jihadist individuals, such as Mohamed Ould Nouini, known as Abou Hassan al-Ansari, leader of Al-Mourabitoune in Mali in February 2018, and Djamel Okacha, known as Yahya Abou Al-Hammam, leader of the Timbuktu Emirate in February 2019 (Strnad, 2022), through drone strikes and special forces operations. The deployment of such military resources highlights that the French operation was primarily military-centred, lacking alternative approaches in its strategy against the terrorist groups.

France Counter-Terrorism Operations in Mali:

The French military operations in Mali began with Operation Serval, a short-term and light-footprint operation to displace the jihadist groups from their stronghold in the Northern region. The success of the operation Serval led to the establishment of Operation Barkhane, a region-wide counter-terrorism operation aimed at containing jihadist groups scattered across the Sahel and preventing their resurgence.

Operation Serval:

The initial reaction of the French Government to the deteriorating security situation in Mali was one of hesitation, as Paris declined to immediately deploy troops to the Sahelian country (Douglas, 2018). However, as the situation deteriorated rapidly, with jihadists seizing control of northern Mali and advancing southward towards the capital, the French military launched Operation Serval on January 11, 2013. The operation was notable for its fast, measured and efficient approach, which saw the deployment of about 4,000 French troops, with the intent of keeping a light footprint and avoiding the impression of a European occupation force, and it succeeded in achieving both (Micheal and Pascale, 2021). Operation Serval was conducted in different phases. 1) halt the jihadist advance 2) re-take the Northern territory for the Central government in Bamako 3) pursue the militants into their mountain stronghold 4) begin the process of political reconciliation and stabilisation (ibid).

Operation Serval was deemed successful with an effective approach and also achieving the objectives of the initial French intervention, in driving away jihadist

groups from the south, and ensuring the Bamako government remains in power, clearing jihadist group control of the northern territory, and rendering them ineffective to some extent to conduct large scale operation. Scholars have attributed several factors to its military success. First, France's combat air power was crucial in halting the jihadist advance and subsequently supporting ground troops in the reconquest of Mali's north. Second, the operation benefited from good tactical intelligence, French troops' combat experience and limited media coverage. Mali had become a priority for French intelligence services, providing critical insights into the capabilities and intentions of various terrorist groups. According to French military sources, the troops' experience in Afghanistan significantly enhanced their professionalism and capacity to operate in the harsh environment of Northern Mali. Furthermore, limited media coverage allowed the French military operational flexibility and may have contributed to the absence of significant international criticism. (Sergei and Bart, 2015).

Nevertheless, despite these achievements, the operation exhibited numerous shortcomings and appeared incomplete, as Bruno Charbonneau argues that “despite the early tactical successes of Serval, as early as 2014, France assessed that it could not leave Mali. The situation was not stable, and the fear was to see the jihadists make a comeback. But the French needed a success story, so they claimed, ‘mission accomplished’ for Serval and transformed it into operation Barkhane” (Oxford Research Group, 2019, para. 6)

Operation Barkhane:

Despite the overwhelming declared success of Operation Serval against the terrorist groups, it didn't eradicate the terrorist groups and the threat they posed. With Operation Serval's short-term duration drawing down, the French realised that completely withdrawing was not a suitable solution for Mali and the whole region. Operation Barkhane differed from Operation Serval, as it transformed the counter-terrorism campaign into a region-wide operation. Barkhane also succeeded the decade-long operation Épervier in Chad. The operation spanned across 5 Sahelian states of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad (BBC, 2014). The region-wide counter-terrorism effort has three main objectives: 1) supporting partner nations' armed forces in the Sahel-Saharan region, 2) strengthening coordination between the international military forces, and 3) preventing the re-establishment of safe havens for terrorists in the region (Tony, 2016).

Operation Barkhane was conducted in Phases. The first phase was within 2014-2015, and it is bounded by the beginning of the operation Barkhane and the signing of the Peace Accord. This operational phase was labelled as the phase of Emergency. This shift was necessitated by the increase in violent attacks across various parts of Mali, despite the initial setback experienced by jihadist groups. However, two factors contributed to the destabilising security situation, one was the handing over the power and control to the Malian forces, leading to reports of violent abuses, sexual assaults and torture of the

civilian population. Another contributing factor was the emergence of violent clashes between farmers and herders in central Mali (Strnad, 2022).

The second phase was within the year 2015-2017, according to the French Rapport d'information, it is called "containment of the terrorist in the north" as part of the implementation of the Algiers agreement for peace and reconciliation, it rarely expresses the French approach, as it did not help with the implementation of the APR, and the accord that was seen as a significant success in holding the peace between the Tuareg and the central government, suffered from the same fate as previous agreement, as the Malian government failed to step up to the implementation, which makes the Signatories lost patience and fate in the APR (ibid). The period also witnessed the emergence of a coalition of jihadist groups in the Sahel, which formed JNIM, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen) in 2017 (ICG, 2021, in Strnad, 2022).

The third phase was from 2018-2020, which was observed as the hardest period during France's presence in Mali. This period was characterised by a significant portion of unstable situations as attacks were coming from the rising violent activities of JNIM. The escalation in violence in this period was the biggest seen since 2013, and both the civilian population and foreign forces of the UN mission and Barkhane and the Malian forces were victims. France continued their operation, which was not different from the previous period, with the neutralisation of high-value targets, including top commanders and leaders of jihadist groups in the region. This period also witnessed the deployment of additional troops under Operation Takuba Task Force, and the creation of the G5 Sahel, a Sahelian military coalition to jointly combat the region's terrorism threat (Strnad, 2022).

The last phase before the withdrawal of French troops from Mali was from 2020-2022, with the rise in violent attacks still on the rise. However, mid-August 2020 saw the overthrow of the democratic President Keita in a military coup (Strnad, 2022). which brought the military regime to power, and the military justified their action due to the growing rate of violent attacks. Further political obstacles mount as another counter coup by the Malian military, again led by Colonel Assimi Goita. In reaction to the second coup, France suspended its military operation, and days later, the French President announced the withdrawal of the French forces from the Sahelian country (ibid).

Why Counter-terrorism Operations Military Strategy Failed

It is pertinent to emphasise that the failure of these operations stems from both the French government and military, as well as from the Malian Authorities. Beyond military strategy, several additional factors contributed to the shortcomings. (Nathaniel, 2021). Nevertheless, the central focus of the study is on the military strategy. The research reveals two main contributing factors that led to the disaster of the military strategy. First, it is the overwhelming use of military force; most Western nations consider the use of force, as the most effective method of dealing with the terrorism

threat (Isabelle, 2008). However, what Western policymakers and military general fails to realise is the ripple effect of military force.

The use of force has been prioritised by the French in the Sahel, and in the longer term, it escalates the situation rather than addressing it (1), raising questions about the effectiveness of a first-hand counter-terrorism approach. (Judd and Marielle, 2020). The French military strategy has been centred on the use of elite special forces operations, conventional French forces engaging in combat operations, gathering intelligence, conducting drones and airstrikes against high-value targets, and lastly training, empowering and support for the Malian armed forces. The formation of the military strategy was centred on the premise of the swift success of the Serval operations, with which the overwhelming use of military forces saw the defeat of the jihadists and the recapture of their stronghold in northern Mali, and the basis that terrorist groups are the roots of instability in the country, which needs to be removed through the use of force (ibid).

These assumptions led to the buildup of an overwhelming military-centric strategy, that led to the deployment of over 5,000 strong force under Barkhane, together with the establishment of other French-led military assemblages of Takuba task force (roughly 600 troops), similarly also the use of cutting edge military hardware including approximately 20 helicopters, 200 light vehicles and 200 armoured vehicles, 6 to 10 support aircraft, 4-6 fighter aircraft and 5 drones, all deployed over two permanent bases in Gao and N'Djamena (Bruno, 2017).

In practice, the growing over-militarisation of the conflict led to the operation being characterised as an assassination campaign and rapid-response mission targeting jihadist leaders in Mali (Thurston, 2024). This approach failed in diminishing the threat posed by the jihadist group. The French military's assumption that assassinating key leaders would degrade the groups proved inaccurate (ibid), as such efforts were insufficient to achieve long-term degradation. The strength of these groups lies in their ability to recruit locally, particularly in contexts where the state is perceived as violent or predatory (2). This was evident in the continued rise and consolidation of jihadist factions under the al-Qaida affiliate JNIM, and the emergence of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

In context, this military-centric strategy of the counter-terrorism operation exacerbated and contributed to the growth of terrorism due to the frequent and highly intense military operations that resulted in tragic mistakes during the operation and continues to make the operation look flawed, and collateral damages from this operation fuelled resentment against the state. This was best illustrated in a drone strike operation against the terrorist groups, which erroneously led to the target of a wedding celebration, killing at least 21 civilians (BBC, 2021). Correspondingly, the French military partnership with the Malian armed forces, self-defence groups and local militias to protect local civilians, reverberated into the targeted killing of the ethnic local group, particularly the Fulani, exacerbating communal tension, and driving local populations towards the protection of jihadist (Eloïse, Tony & Ed, 2023).

The intense militarisation of the operation hindered the stabilisation of conflict-affected communities. This, in turn, served as a push factor for vulnerable individuals and communities to join or collaborate with the jihadist groups, which continued to exploit local grievances. Consequently, jihadist recruitment expanded, allowing these groups to survive, grow and perpetuate violence, thereby complicating the counter-terrorism efforts of the Malian state and its security partners.

Secondly, the absence of a coherent military objective is most particularly under Operation Barkhane. The launch of Operation Serval came with a feasible military objective, which was to halt the jihadists advancing towards the capital, safeguard the government in Bamako and protect the territorial integrity of Mali (Michael and Pascale, 2021). A few months into the operation, the aim was achieved, and France declared a military Victory, as Sergei and Bart contend, that operation Serval avoided being in a protracted conflict due to the clear political goals, coordinated international diplomacy and the effective use of military force (Sergei and Bart, 2015).

However, Operation Serval only weakened the groups' capabilities to mount an offensive, but they were not defeated. The liberation of major northern cities by Operation Serval forces made the jihadist group retreat into the mountainous area, mixed with the local population and began launching guerrilla attacks against the French forces. The French military realizing the persistent threat posed by the jihadist group, led to the establishment of Operation Barkhane, a region-wide counter-terrorism operation, with a dual objective; first, to weaken the terrorist groups and support the armed forces of the participating countries in their efforts to contain the activities of armed groups, and secondly to help the national armies to rebuild so that they could take over counterterrorist operations from French forces and prevent the re-establishment of terrorist sanctuaries in the region (Benjamin, 2022).

This study reveals that the lack of a clear military objective can be viewed from two standpoints: first, the over-ambitious stated objectives of the operation, and secondly, its lack of adaptability and flexibility to the evolving security situation. The over-ambitious objectives as proposed by (Goffi, 2017) (Nina, 2022) reaffirmed that operation Barkhane had an objective, but it was not feasible. Goffi contends that the operation, with its objectives, remains vague and scattered. He further added that the operation Barkhane of about 3,000 to 4,000 troops representing the enormous and vast territory of the Sahel stretching four Sahelian states, is unsustainable (Goffi 2017), highlighting how troop deployment across the region might strain counter-terrorism efforts. Nina also noted that while the objectives is clear, the feasibility of the strategy is not, she poised that fighting armed terrorist group, is as history has shown a fight without a clear enemy, and subsequently also without a clear end” nullifying the French objectives of eliminating the threat posed by terrorist group in the vast Sahelian territory including Mali (Nina, 2022). in a similar vein Nina further argues “increasing local security forces capacity is a long-term project with an indefinite end-goal, it entails significant number of resources, both financial and material, and political buy in from the local authorities” (ibid). In support, Nsaibia and Duhamel notes that the Malian government lack of

political will to tackle the armed groups further undermined the ability of the security forces in the country (Nsaibia and Duhamel, 2021) and the regional militaries as well looks no better prepared to counter the jihadist threat (Nathaniel, 2022), of which the French policymakers fail to realize early and adjust its strategy and objectives accordingly.

On the other hand, there is a lack of adaptability and flexibility of operation of Barkhane to the changing nature of the conflict. When Operation Barkhane was launched in 2014, as primarily a counter-terrorism-focused operation, the security threat it encountered was different from Serval, with the end of Serval which dislodged jihadist groups from their stronghold, they dispersed into the population in central Mali and neighbouring countries, as Eloise et al note Barkhane now faced a conflict parallel to a local insurrection and inter-communal conflict than to either a conventional war or terrorism (Eloïse, Tony & Ed, 2023).

They further argued that France's shift from the Mali-focused operation Serval to the region-wide operation Barkhane is perceived by French military and policymakers to adapt their strategy to the evolving nature of the security threat. However, the Barkhane approach of pursuing armed groups and eliminating the terrorist threat rather than addressing the fundamental change in the insurgent strategy took priority. The jihadist groups' tactic centred on population control, which this population-centric approach of the jihadist groups provided the cover, intelligence, and resources and people power they needed, while the French Barkhane still emphasize it counter terrorism, enemy-centric operation, and the use of overwhelming force, which makes it difficult to counter the terrorist growing threat (Ibid).

The French strategy of operation Barkhane did not adapt successfully to the changing nature of the conflict it faced. When the jihadist groups turned to waged population-centric tactics or more of an insurgency, operation Barkhane still relied on its counter-terrorism strategy, and it, therefore, required operation Barkhane to channel its operation closer to the counter-insurgency, where providing support to the population is crucial to protect them from the insurgent groups, and to ensure peaceful relations between communities (Eloïse, Tony & Ed, 2023).

It is important to note that the French government had an open window of opportunity to negotiate with the terrorist groups, when the Malian authorities under President Boubacar Keita, initiated the move to negotiate with the groups, however, the approach was refuted by the French government, based on the no negotiation policy with terrorist group (Thurston, 2020). During this period, it intensified its military operation against the Islamic State in the tri-border Liptako-Gourma area (Strnad, 2022), missing the chance of an alternative approach to the conflict. Lastly, what France and its international partners fail to understand is that the war on terror in the Sahel, and Mali in particular, is composed of a complex security and local dynamic that is beyond military military-centred approach. The exclusive use of force risks prolonging the conflict, reinforcing terrorism, and legitimising extremist narratives. Therefore, a credible and effective governance structure must accompany counter-terrorism efforts.

Conclusion:

Almost a decade of French military involvement in Mali and the broader Sahel. The current strategy fails in neutralising the threat posed by these groups. The overwhelming use of military force continues to keep the conflict protracted, with civilian casualties skyrocketing during the period of the military campaign, and the inability to change and adapt the military strategy to the evolving nature of the conflict keeps the conflict at a stalemate, with no victory in sight. The period has also witnessed the emergence and expansion of jihadist groups across the Sahelian countries, and cross-border into littoral West-African countries. Political instability has devastated the region with the rise of a military junta taking power across the Sahelian states, including Mali. This change in political power has effectively altered the security architecture of Mali, with the shift towards Russia and its private military company forces, Africa Corps, formerly Wagner group, for military partnership and assistance in the fight against the jihadist groups. However, it is important to understand for the new military government and its Russian partners to achieve victory in the war against the group, it should refocus its approaches from the heavy reliant on the use of military force, and lessen its military focus on counter-terrorism strategy, not to achieve the same result as the French, instead should pursue other alternative approaches.

Alternative approaches, such as local dialogue and negotiation with the jihadist factions, should be promoted and strengthened. Although the military junta has ruled out negotiations, it will be in their best interest to reconsider this position. Furthermore, delivering credible governance and structural reforms is essential to eliminate the systemic drivers and entry points that these groups exploit for expansion. Without such measures, the counter-terrorism efforts of the junta and its Russian partners risk failure, ultimately resulting in a prolonged and intractable conflict.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on the Contributor

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