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Algeria and the French withdrawal from the African Sahel region

الجزائر والانسحاب الفرنسي من منطقة الساحل الافريقي

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Abstract:

The French withdrawal from the African Sahel region marks a significant shift in its strategy towards its former colonies such as Mali, Niger, and Chad. A variety of factors have compelled France to adopt a plan for a gradual withdrawal and to pull back its stationed forces. This creates the potential for a substantial security vacuum and a growing influence of other Western powers, such as Russia and China, due to the strategic importance of the region. As well as the increased risk of security challenges, such as state-building crises, the rising threat of jihadist organizations, and transnational organized crime, all of which impose serious repercussions on international security in general and particularly on the security of its peoples and neighboring countries, particularly Algeria, which is now compelled to intensify its intelligence and military efforts to protect its borders and strengthen its political, diplomatic and economic relations with these countries.

Keywords: African Sahel Region - Mali Crisis - Operation Barkhane - French Withdrawal - Algeria

المخلص:

يشكل الانسحاب الفرنسي من منطقة الساحل الافريقي تحولا مهما في استراتيجيتها تجاه المنطقة، وذلك بعد سنوات من وجودها العسكري في دول على غرار مالي والنيجر وتشاد بوصفها مستعمرات سابقة لها؛ حيث دفعتها مجموعة من العوامل الى اعتماد خطة انسحاب تدريجي وسحب قواتها المتمركزة فيها، وهو ما يفسح المجال لحدوث فراغ أمني كبير وتنامي دور ونفوذ القوى الغربية الأخرى فيها، على غرار روسيا والصين في اطار سياسة التنافس الدولي على أهم مناطق النفوذ التي أصبحت منطقة الساحل الافريقي في السنوات الأخيرة واحدة منها بحكم أهميتها الاستراتيجية ومواردها الطبيعية التي تزخر بها، فضلا عن استمرار التحديات الأمنية المتداخلة التي تعاني منها دول المنطقة مثل أزمة بناء الدولة، وتنامي خطر المنظمات الارهابية والجريمة المنظمة العابرة للحدود الوطنية، وما تفرضه من تداعيات خطيرة على الأمن الدولي بشكل عام وعلى أمن شعوبها وأمن الدول المجاورة خاصة الجزائر التي أصبحت ملزمة بتكثيف جهودها الاستخباراتية والعسكرية لحماية حدودها الجنوبية وتعزيز علاقاتها السياسية والدبلوماسية والاقتصادية مع هذه الدول.

الكلمات المفتاحية: منطقة الساحل الافريقي-أزمة مالي- عملية برخان-الانسحاب الفرنسي-الجزائر.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Sahel countries have witnessed multidimensional and interlinked security crises that have created a complex security and geopolitical landscape, including: food insecurity, rising poverty, unemployment, political corruption, adverse climate conditions, and the spread of violence and extremism. These issues have hindered development and imposed security concerns not only at the domestic level but also regionally for neighboring countries like Algeria, regarding the potential spillover effects of these security challenges on their national security. The situation has been exacerbated by the aftermath of the Libyan revolution in 2011 and the return of fighters who were part of Gaddafi's forces to their home countries in the Sahel, along with the proliferation of weapons and military equipment and their easy access to extremist groups. Amid this turmoil, Mali experienced political and security unrest in 2012 due to a Tuareg rebellion, prompting the Malian government to seek French military assistance to establish security control and confront the threat of terrorist group expansion within the country. Subsequently, French military operations multiplied in Mali and other countries in the region under the pretext of helping to achieve security and stability and protecting its economic interests while enhancing its influence, which had become threatened by the growing interest of major powers in the region such as Russia, China, and Turkey, given the strategic importance of the Sahel region and the severe security challenges faced by its countries. However, this approach did not last, as France recently decided to withdraw its military presence from Mali and other countries in the region, announcing the end of its presence there and redefining its strategy towards the region, which implies a worsening and complicating security situation and a negative impact on Algeria due to its geographical proximity.

This article will reveal the motives behind this withdrawal and its implications for

Algeria, starting from the following main question:

How does the French withdrawal from the African Sahel pose a threat to the security and stability of Algeria?

Key sub-questions that emerge from the main question include:

- 1) What does the French strategy in the African Sahel consist of?
- 2) How did the internal dynamics in the Sahel countries, along with other factors, contribute to France's decision to withdraw, and what are its implications for Algeria?

Importance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in highlighting the French withdrawal as a fundamental shift in its policy towards the strategically important countries of the African Sahel region, which is derived from its location and natural resources, as well as the serious security threats it faces. These threats not only affect the security of the countries in the region and their populations but also the security of neighboring countries like Algeria. This step could lead to a state of security vacuum, which means that improving the internal situations in the countries of the region in the near term is impossible, and this will have repercussions on the security of Algeria, which remains vulnerable to breaches of its national security that exceed the conditions experienced during the French military presence.

Objective of the Study:

The study aims to shed light on the French withdrawal decision from the African Sahel region by analyzing its various causes and impacts on the internal situations in the Sahel countries and on the stability and security of Algeria.

Methodology of the Study:

The descriptive-analytical method was utilized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study topic, in addition to the historical method.

2. The French Policy in the African Sahel region: security and strategic motivations:

The African Sahel region, located between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, stretches from the Red Sea in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. It includes a group of countries, most notably Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania (the countries that make up the G5 Sahel for security and development cooperation). These countries share a combination of contradictions; they are characterized by their strategic location and abundant natural resources, including oil, gold, uranium, and phosphate, while simultaneously suffering from a complex security crisis that encompasses all political, security, economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Additionally, there is increasing international competition for their resources in the absence of serious national visions to achieve development and advance their economies for the benefit of their peoples.

Many researchers attribute the current situation in the Sahel countries to the colonial policies that entrenched their dependency, the fragility of their systems, and the fragmentation of their ethnically diverse populations. This refers primarily to France, which colonized most African countries, including those in the Sahel. Despite gaining independence in the 1960s, France worked to maintain loyal elites in these countries—who assumed power through military coups—to protect its economic interests and influence in the region, thereby solidifying its military presence. The region has witnessed approximately 40 French military interventions since the 1960s, with the most recent being operation "Serval" in 2013 and operation "Barkhane" in 2014¹, making France the dominant external actor in the region.

The French strategy in the African Sahel aims to achieve a set of interests at the political, strategic, economic, security, and military levels. In terms of security and military; France has sought to establish its military presence in the region, either through its military forces, which number around 5,000

soldiers distributed across several countries to support local armies in the fight against terrorist organizations whose activities have been continuously increasing in recent years, or through military cooperation agreements with its governments regarding the provision of technical assistance and military training to their armies, in order to achieve two main objectives:²

- 1) Preparing and qualifying armies to face security challenges, achieving stability in their countries, and protecting their territories and sovereignty.
 - 2) Ensuring the continuity of French dominance over its former colonies, thus maintaining their political, security, and economic dependence.
- 1) Additionally, military bases have been established in several countries, including a military base in Djibouti, which serves as a focal point for its military presence in the region, as well as a base in Abidjan, Ivory Coast³. France also intervened militarily and directly in Mali; its military intervention in Libya following the 2011 revolution, with the participation of its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, led to the flight of thousands of Tuareg fighters who were part of Gaddafi's forces back to their home countries, specifically Mali, carrying various types of weapons. During that period, Mali experienced an internal crisis in 2012 due to a rebellion by the Tuareg led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, with assistance from jihadist organizations active in the region, which managed to gain ground in the north of the country. This prompted the Malian government to request military assistance from France, which was realized after the issuance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085⁴ to restore peace and security in Mali and put an end to terrorism. This justification was used by France to legitimize its military intervention in response to the Malian government's request, framing it as part of the war on terrorism rather than interference in its

internal affairs⁵. Consequently, France intervened militarily in Mali under Operation Serval (2013-2014) and then in other countries in the region through Operation Barkhane (2014-2022) to impose security control and extend government authority over its territories in the face of the expanding activities of terrorist groups operating there, which threaten the security of their peoples and French interests alike, most notably Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Boko Haram.

At the economic level, economic interests cannot be excluded from France's policy in the Sahel. Through its intervention in the region, it ensures the protection of its existing investments, secures access for its companies to natural resources, and guarantees external markets for its products.

By safeguarding its security and economic interests, France seeks to enhance its position in the global system as a strategic objective it has aimed to achieve; however, it has faced challenges related to the failure of its security-military policy and the satisfaction of the concerned countries.

3. French withdrawal: reasons for the decision and its implications for Algeria

On February 17, 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the withdrawal of French military forces from Mali⁶ after nine years of military intervention in the region. The failure to achieve security and stability was a reason for revising the French strategy and choosing the option of military withdrawal, particularly regarding Operation Barkhane, which "failed to achieve what was planned. Instead of improving the situation, Barkhane faced an increase in losses, an escalation in rebellion, and a decline in support both on the ground and at home."⁷ The security reality in the region indicates a spread of terrorism rather than its containment, leading to the continued suffering of populations caught in a vortex of violence, poverty, and forced displacement.

In summary, the reasons for the French

withdrawal from the African Sahel region can be summarized in the following points:

- 1) The growing public hostility towards the French presence in the Sahel, as France was unable to fulfill its promises to support local forces in fighting terrorism and achieving security through its military operations; violence continued, and the number of civilian casualties increased. The failure of Operation Barkhane to achieve its objectives contributed to the rise of anti-French sentiments in Sahel countries, with these interventions being perceived as a new form of colonialism.⁸ Additionally, France was accused of adopting a policy of double standards due to its contradictory responses to military coups that occurred in recent years in the region's countries; it showed support for democracy when non-aligned military councils successfully carried out coups, while at the same time providing support and backing to authoritarian regimes aligned with it⁹. All of this made the former colonial power an unwanted partner in the region after having been a key security partner for nearly a decade.
- 2) Internal pressures in France, where public opinion has expressed dissatisfaction with French intervention in the region, urging the government to focus efforts on reforming domestic conditions in France and avoiding the material and human losses incurred by the French military in the region; the costs of the French military presence have taken up the largest share of the French defense budget, which poses a burden on the French economy already facing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰
- 3) The overthrow of pro-French elites in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which have witnessed military coups and the rise of military elites not aligned with France to power in Mali in 2020 and 2021, in Guinea in 2021, and in Burkina Faso in 2023, has impacted diplomatic relations between France and these countries; in

Mali, the military council has shown no desire to cooperate with France due to its failure to fulfill its role as a security partner, prompting it to seek other partners, precisely Russia.¹¹

- 4) The absence of a developmental dimension in the French strategy and its focus on security, despite the fact that the crisis in the Sahel countries is multidimensional and not limited to security threats alone; the lack of developmental projects in itself is a cause of insecurity and the spread of violence. For example, the prevalence of poverty and unemployment among youth drives them to frustration and hopelessness, making them susceptible to recruitment by organized crime gangs and terrorist groups, which in turn increases their membership and sustains their activities, leading to a continued cycle of violence.
- 5) The disinformation campaigns led by Russia through social media targeted at the peoples of the Sahel countries contributed to fueling public rejection of the French presence on one hand, and created an opportunity to strengthen its position in the region and facilitate the operations of its military group "Wagner" on the other hand. Subsequently, it presented itself as an alternative security partner capable of achieving what France has failed to accomplish, which it views as a selfish colonial state acting in accordance with its own interests in collaboration with the allied governments.¹² Additionally, it seeks to secure new markets for Russian weapons in the region's countries, exploit its natural resources, and enhance its international influence.
- 6) The security situation in the Sahel countries is complicated at all levels; in terms of governance, there is a lack of democracy, widespread corruption, and repeated military coups. Militarily, there is weak security control over their regions, which has been exploited by terrorist

organizations to carry out their activities. Additionally, there are widespread human rights violations and a poor distribution of development projects, especially in rural areas, exposing the population to the dangers of poverty, hunger, and lack of educational opportunities. Consequently, it is difficult for France to confront this complex security crisis alone unless the Sahel countries demonstrate a genuine willingness to cooperate with their security ally and seriousness in addressing the challenges they face to achieve the security and well-being of their people. Furthermore, France's focus on the military aspect and neglect of other dimensions of the crisis, which are real causes of the complications in the region, has ultimately led to accusations of neo-colonialism.¹³

After France executed its decision to gradually withdraw from the Sahel region and terminate military cooperation agreements with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and in light of the ongoing security challenges facing their populations, several indicators of developments in the situation have emerged in a phase that is considered - by France - to be among the most significant, including the following:

- Escalating Security Threats: Despite France's failure to halt the activities of terrorist groups in the Sahel region, its withdrawal is likely to exacerbate the threat posed by these groups, which have intensified their operations and attacks with the departure of French forces. The most notable incident was the attack led by Al-Qaeda on September 17, 2024, against a military airport and a gendarmerie school in the Malian capital, Bamako, resulting in the deaths of over 70 soldiers. This demonstrates the capability of these groups to penetrate the security of the Malian state¹⁴, indicating a continued state of insecurity and chaos in the region, with repercussions for its people that are likely to last for years to come. This is further confirmed by the

Global Terrorism Index for 2024, which ranks Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger among the ten countries most affected by terrorism worldwide.¹⁵ Consequently, the Sahel region will remain a hotspot for terrorism, which means that Algeria will continue to face political and security instability in the area, along with an increasing threat from terrorist and criminal organizations and arms smuggling networks, raising concerns about the spillover of their activities across borders. This compels Algeria to strengthen its military presence along its southern borders to protect its national security, resulting in additional expenses, as the military budget for 2025 has increased by over \$25 billion.¹⁶

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- Increasing rates of illegal immigration: The security vacuum left by France also fuels fears of an increase in illegal immigration waves from the citizens of these countries towards Algeria, either to settle there or to transit to Europe. This imposes social, economic, and health pressures on Algeria, as well as security concerns regarding the exploitation of migrants by terrorist and criminal groups, potentially transferring their activities to Algeria. Therefore, Algeria has rushed to deport thousands of African migrants back to their countries.
- Continued Tension in Relations Between France and Sahel Countries: The Sahel countries have clearly shown their unwillingness to maintain any connection with their former security partner. This situation remains contingent upon the current ruling elites, who adopt policies hostile to France and reject its presence in the region, leading to strained relations. This was expressed by the French president during the annual ambassadors' conference on

06/01/2025, stating that "France was right to intervene militarily in the Sahel region against terrorism since 2013, but African leaders forgot to say thank you, and that none of them can manage a sovereign state without this intervention."¹⁷ This means that the region is experiencing a geopolitical vacuum and conflicting agendas and interests, allowing new actors in the area such as Russia, which seeks to reaffirm itself as a major power by securing a foothold in Africa and solidifying its military and economic presence¹⁸. Additionally, China relies on soft penetration policies to achieve its economic interests; it is enhancing its investment opportunities in the African Sahel countries and aims to dominate the oil market in the region.¹⁹ For Algeria, this signifies a continuation of instability amid this international competition, which primarily aims to serve the interests of these incoming countries and the absence of serious visions from them to resolve the region's complex issues.

4. RESULTS

The study reached a set of results:

On the security level:

Terrorist organizations are benefiting from the security vacuum left by the French withdrawal to increase their activities, smuggle weapons, and train fighters, which raises the likelihood of the spread of violence to the southern borders of Algeria. Algeria is compelled to enhance its military presence in the south and increase levels of vigilance and preparedness, which in turn imposes additional burdens on the state's public budget.

On the political level:

Despite freeing itself from French dominance, the Sahel countries are faced with a complex security situation, in addition to the state failure they are experiencing and the incapacity of their political institutions, along with the recurrence of military coups. This is likely to continue for the coming years and will affect other economic, social, and

security areas. The decline of French influence in the region allows Algeria to establish itself as a reliable partner for these countries, especially since it does not have ambitions and interests like other international powers competing for influence. Thus, Algeria can initiate its security and developmental vision to assist them in resolving their complex security crises, although this remains contingent on the acceptance of the ruling elites, especially after the recent tensions in relations between Algeria and these countries following Algeria's downing of a Malian drone that violated its airspace, and the protests from the three Sahel countries: Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

On the economic and social level:

The deterioration of security conditions in the Sahel countries disrupts any Algerian cooperation and economic partnership projects with these countries, thus hindering development efforts and perpetuating waves of illegal migration towards Algeria. This imposes economic burdens and security and health risks on Algeria, particularly in the southern provinces.

Generally, this withdrawal presents both challenges and opportunities for Algeria. It exposes the country to increased security, economic, and humanitarian risks, while at the same time providing an opportunity to strengthen its regional position and renew its relations with the Sahel countries, as well as to resolve disputes among them in preparation for revitalizing its initiatives for security cooperation and economic development.

4. CONCLUSION

For decades, France has remained the dominant power in the African Sahel region, relying on its colonial history and its military interventions in Sahelian countries in recent years to combat terrorism and protect its economic interests. However, this situation has shifted in recent years; a combination of factors has led France to decide to withdraw from the region. Notably, there has been a rise in popular hostility towards the French presence in Sahelian countries, along with the

emergence of non-loyal elites coming to power in Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, who have called for the withdrawal of French troops. In contrast, these countries have welcomed the arrival of other international powers, such as China and Russia, which have sought to compete with the French presence in the context of global competition for influence in various regions worldwide, including the strategically important Sahel region, rich in natural resources.

This withdrawal presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, while this withdrawal allows Sahelian countries to rid themselves of French dominance, it also enables them to strengthen their military capabilities and take serious steps towards adopting effective development strategies for the benefit of their peoples. Furthermore, it allows for political reforms in consultation with all segments of their societies and facilitates cooperation with other international powers whose policies differ from the colonial backdrop of French policy. This could ultimately help achieve security and economic and social development.

On the other hand, this withdrawal represents a shift in the regional security landscape that has prevailed for decades, particularly for Algeria, which views the region as a strategic extension of its national security and its southern borders. This is especially true given the weakness of political institutions in most Sahel countries and the absence of an effective strategy to combat security threats, particularly from terrorist groups, trafficking networks, as well as the increasing waves of illegal migration. This situation keeps Algeria in a constant state of alert to protect its southern borders from the encroachment of these threats into its territory, leading to a heightened focus on strengthening its military capabilities and intensifying its diplomatic efforts. Consequently, this hinders its economic initiatives with regional countries, as the primary emphasis remains on achieving security from a military perspective.

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