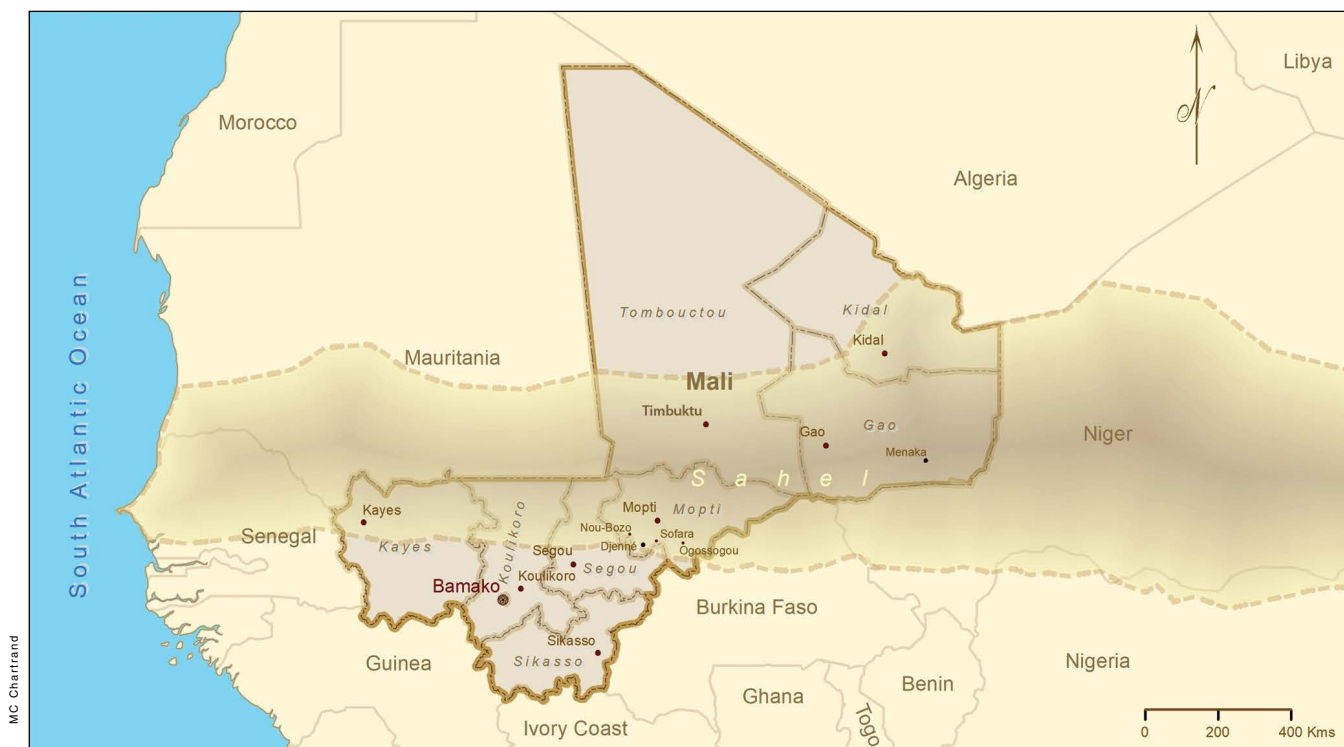




Map of Mali and neighbouring countries.

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Dynamics in Mali

by Ismaël Fournier

Ismaël Fournier is a former infantryman with the 3rd Battalion of the Royal 22nd Regiment, who deployed with them to Bosnia in 2001, and then to Kabul and Kandahar in Afghanistan in 2004 and 2007 respectively. Severely wounded in an IED explosion during the latter deployment, and after multiple restorative surgeries, Ismaël made a professional change to the military intelligence branch. Since then, he completed a baccalaureate, a master's degree, and a PH. D from Laval University in history. Leaving the armed forces in 2019, he is currently employed by the Department of National Defence as an analyst specializing in strategy and tactics related to insurgencies and counter-insurgencies.

Introduction

Since the launch of the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, violent extremist organisations (VEOs) have been increasingly active in Mali and the rest of the Sahel region. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), which is composed of multiple insurgent groups, is currently conducting insurgency operations in most of the Malian State. Moreover, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is operating in the vicinity of the tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. To increase control of rural areas, these VEOs employ irregular warfare (guerrilla) tactics. In other words, they will minimise conventional and overt warfare and maximise hit and run tactics, ambushes with small arms and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), complex attacks with vehicle borne IEDs (VBIEDs), as well as subversive

operations. Key to these groups' freedom of movement and freedom of action is their access to geographical lines of communication and to the civilian population. The former allows insurgents to move from their bases of operation to their objectives, the latter will provide intelligence, recruits, food, and, in some cases, safe havens for the insurgents. VEO leaders will frequently deploy overseers in the villages to control the population and impose their will on the villagers. In other instances, insurgents will come and go as they please in undefended villages to preach radical Islam, impose Sharia law and collect whatever they require.

Part of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations will aim to deny insurgents access to villages via the deployment of static security forces that will remain in the populated areas to protect the civilians. Without access to villages, insurgents lose their ability to blend in with the population, lack support, manpower (recruitment) and the intelligence required to conduct their operations. VEOs will find themselves in an even more precarious situation if their bases of operation are targeted as well. Another COIN related initiative is to deny VEOs' access to their lines of communication by conducting intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR) operations as well as ambushes on insurgents. COIN also implies that the insurgent's supply lines and border access are cut off through interdiction operations. Once confronted to these security measures, insurgents are tactically disadvantaged and forced toward two options: be caught in the open and be subjected to the security forces overwhelming firepower, or disengage in order to find



Growing Islamist terror tactics in the Burkina Faso region, February 2013.

shelter in isolated areas. If rural villages, key lines of communication and border areas are secured by counterinsurgents, insurgents will be trapped and forced to remain hidden with no supply, recruits and intelligence which, eventually, leads to the insurgency's demise. This is exactly the situation in which the Islamic State's insurgents in Afghanistan found themselves in shortly before their complete surrender to security forces in November 2019.¹ These COIN tactics have also been conducted in the past in several operational theatres such as in Algeria against the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), in Malaya against the Malayan National Liberation Army, in Vietnam against the Viet Cong, in Iraq against Al Qaeda, and in Colombia against the FARC guerillas. While still the subject of many debates, these COIN doctrines have ultimately proven to be, at different levels, highly efficient in each of the aforementioned conflicts.

While the fight for the French colony of Algeria was doomed to a political failure between 1954 and 1962, the FLN was tactically defeated by French COIN. The communist insurgency launched in 1948 in Malaya was militarily and politically defeated by a robust and efficient British COIN campaign in 1960. In Vietnam, the once powerful Viet Cong insurgency was eliminated as an effective fighting force in the years following the Tet offensive in 1968. The US and South Vietnamese

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COIN campaign, which was under the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), severely degraded the Viet Cong. From 1972, regular forces of the North Vietnamese Army took over most communist military operations, which were concentrated not on guerilla, but on conventional warfare with tanks, infantry and artillery. In Iraq, between 2007 and 2011, Al-Qaeda was severely crippled following the Surge campaign led by General David Petraeus, as well as by the Joint Special

Operation Command's targeting operations. Finally, the most proficient military initiatives against the FARC guerillas in Colombia were related to COIN initiatives.² Each conflict is characterized by different political, social, military and geographical dynamics. A COIN initiative that proved to be efficient in one theatre will not necessarily apply to another theater. However, security operations related to COIN are universal and paramount to attain success, regardless of the theater in question. This article aims to demonstrate that VEOs' ability to remain combat effective in Mali is a direct consequence of the absence of truly defined COIN operations in the country's rural areas. While COIN involves political, military, economic, civic and social lines of operation, this article will focus on security issues related to COIN. Thus, the emphasis will be centered on VEOs' access to the civilian population and insurgent access to borders and lines of communication in rural Mali.

VEOs and the Civilian Population

JNIM unites five VEO organisations: Ansar al-Din, Al Murabitoun, Macina Liberation Front, Almansour Ag Alkassoum, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). These groups operate in different areas of Mali and the Sahel. ISGS, a DAESH affiliated group, operates in the tri-border area of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Finally, Ansaroul Islam, an independent group that cooperates with JNIM and ISGS, operates in northern Burkina Faso. While autonomous, each of the JNIM groups work together. Even though



General David Petraeus (right), commanding general of the Multi-National Force Iraq, 14 June 2007.



An anti-government protester in Burkina Faso, 30 October 2014.



Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo 2D02EYB

French soldiers and United Nations peacekeepers from Burkina Faso patrol in Timbuktu, 5 November 2014.

they are rivals from two separate umbrella groups, JNIM and ISGS are also known to cooperate to some degree.³ These VEO groups were able to expand their area of operation due to easy access to the civilian population and to their geographical lines of communication. Mali's rural population remains one of the core center of gravity of the VEOs. If the latter manages to dissociate the population from the security forces, control it physically, and gain its active or passive support through fear, VEOs will have an immense tactical advantage over government military forces. As underlined by Lieutenant-Colonel David Galula, a highly respected French COIN tactician who fought in Algeria:

*"[For insurgencies], the exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness."*⁴

Galula elaborated upon his COIN theory in his manifesto: *Counterinsurgency Warfare, Theory and Practice*. He underlined that as an insurgent group gains support, its capabilities grow. New capabilities will enable VEOs to gain additional support. In terms of popular support, what is a gain for the insurgency is a loss for the government, and vice versa. Mali's VEOs' current ability to operate with such effectiveness is contingent on the absence of "clear-hold-build" (CHB) operations. CHB is executed in a specific, high-priority area experiencing overt insurgent

activities. CHB is thoroughly described in the US military FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency Manual. The latter's revision was under the supervision of General David Petraeus, who needs no introduction, and who was inspired by Galula's theories when he had the FM 3-24 written. The manual states that CHB has the following objectives:

- Create a secure physical and psychological environment;
- Establish firm government control of the populace and area;
- Gain the populace's support.⁵

COIN efforts should begin by controlling key inhabited geographical zones. The objectives are to CHB one village, area, or city, and then reinforce operational successes by expanding the CHB ops to other areas. This process is often referred to as "the oil spot" theory. This approach aims to develop a long-term, effective local government framework that secures the people while meeting its basic needs. Success reinforces the local government's legitimacy in the eyes of the population. In many ways, the overall operational plan of VEOs is very similar to those of counterinsurgents. In Mali, insurgent groups gradually expanded their area of influence by spreading their forces and their influence from one region to the other. They progressively enhanced their control of rural areas

and enforced their laws in the villages, gaining the support or submissiveness of the civilians in their areas of operation. This is why CHB operations are so important in order to degrade an insurgency. The primary tasks specifically required to accomplish CHB are:

- Provide continuous security for the local populace;
- Eliminate insurgent presence;
- Reinforce political primacy;
- Enforce the rule of law;
- Rebuild local government institutions.⁶

Such initiatives will require civil authorities, intelligence agencies, and security forces (foreign and domestic) to work hand in hand. The main reason why such a small insurgency (approximately 1,300-1,800 insurgents in total) remains capable of sustaining its current level of activity in Mali is because security forces are not conducting proper CHB operations. Securing an area through conventional warfare tactics is a crucial phase to accomplish when conducting a COIN campaign in a given area. In that regard, VEOs have shown much vulnerability once they were confronted by French Operations *Serval* and *Barkhane* clearing missions. However, with very few troops deployed to provide continuous security for the local populace (first step of CHB), the VEOs will, at some point, be able to regain some influence and infiltrate the

cleared area once again. While French military operations currently represent the greatest threat to VEOs, Operation *Barkhane* is more a “macro-COIN” initiative than a thorough COIN military campaign. French troops are too few and too dispersed to execute a concrete COIN mission which aside from military operations, must include political, civic and social initiatives as well. As for UN forces, the mandate of the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) does not allow its troops to conduct such COIN and security operations in Mali.

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The second step of CHB (eliminate insurgent presence) will only have long term effects if troops remain in the area of operations alongside the civilian population. As soon as security forces vacate an area, VEOs will unavoidably return and resume their insurgency in the region. Multiple reports have shown that several areas of Mali are not protected by the Forces armées maliennes (FAMA) units, which explains why insurgents are still able to operate in previously secured rural areas. The situation is so dire that several tribes are forming their own militias to ensure their own protection. For instance, members of the Dozo tribe created brigades in several towns in Mopti to counter VEOs. The chief of the Dozo in a village near Djenné explained to a National Geographic reporter that “the government’s “do-nothing army” failed to protect his people from Islamist



Peacekeepers from Senegal serving with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) patrol sensitive areas in central Mali, Mopti, 5 July 2019.

UN photo 795107



MINUSMA investigates human rights violations in Koulogon, in the Mopti region in Mali, 8 January 2019.

fighters, so they've taken on the responsibility themselves".⁷ This exacerbated the problem as these militia groups reportedly targeted Fulani people who are widely believed to be associated with VEOs. For instance, Dozos belonging to the Dan Na Ambassagou tribe were accused of having killed nearly 150 people in March 2019, in the village of Ogossogou.⁸ Moreover, armed groups such as the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), the Imghad Tuareg Self-defense Group and Allies (GATIA) and the Ganda Izo (a Fulani group) have joined forces to compensate for the shortcomings of the FAMA in the Menaka region to confront VEOs since 03 Apr 18.⁹ Such drastic initiatives are fueled by the absence of security forces deployed in the villages to protect the people and ensure that law and order are respected.

The third step of CHB (reinforce political primacy) can only be done if local government officials are able to work in the rural communities without fear of being harassed or killed by the insurgents. The VEOs' control of multiple areas, due to the security forces' lack of proactivity, impedes the government representatives', village elders' and town mayors' ability to safely govern in their areas of responsibility. In such conditions, accomplishing the last two steps of CHB (enforce the rule of law and rebuild local government institutions) is unachievable. In consequence, VEOs are free to control the villagers. As specified in FM 3-24:

[I]n almost every case, counterinsurgents face a populace containing an active minority supporting the government and an equally small militant faction opposing it. Success requires the government to be accepted as legitimate by most of that uncommitted middle, which also includes

*passive supporters of both sides. Because of the ease of sowing disorder, it is usually not enough for counterinsurgents to get 51 percent of popular support; a solid majority is often essential. However, a passive populace may be all that is necessary for a well-supported insurgency to seize political power.*¹⁰

A passive populace will allow VEOs to gain "passive support" from local villagers. Developing passive support early in an insurgency is often critical to a VEO group's survival and growth. Such support is "tacitly" given to the insurgents by the population, which has a great effect on the VEO's long-term effectiveness. Passive supporters do not provide material support. However, they do allow insurgents to operate and do not provide information to counterinsurgents. This form of support is often referred to as "tolerance" or "acquiescence."¹¹ Another main form of popular support for insurgencies is termed as "active internal support" which includes the following:

- Civilians or groups joining the VEOs;
- Providing logistics and financial support;
- Providing intelligence;
- Providing safe havens;
- Providing medical assistance;
- Providing transportation;
- Carrying out actions on the behalf of the VEOs.¹²

VEOs in Mali have benefited from both passive and active internal support. For instance, AQIMs' stranglehold on the north-western part of the country in Timbuktu is largely the result of its contacts with locals in the countryside. AQIM is reported to have enjoyed a significant degree of active internal support in this area. AQIM allegedly received logistical and information support from several individuals in the Western Sahel. These individuals allegedly provided recruits, supplies and basic necessities to AQIM members. In addition, locals are known to have provided AQIM with intelligence on activities in their area. This is largely due to AQIM's attempt to establish tribal connections with key individuals in their area of operation through marriage and business.¹³ In other cases, villagers with no ties or who are not necessarily sympathetic to VEOs will simply tolerate them given the absence of security forces to protect them. Local support to VEOs is also often generated by using violent coercion and intimidation techniques on the population. Coercion is often highly effective in the short term, particularly at the community level. However, violent actions against the general populace, or attacks that negatively affect people's way of life, will also undermine the insurgent's image in the long term, especially if the latter wishes the population to openly support the insurgency. Coercion can be very counterproductive for insurgent groups, especially if the targeted population can be relied on to support the VEOs and if counterinsurgents are proactive in the area.

“In other instances, VEOs destroyed public buildings and denounced the presence of State authorities in the region.”

Insurgents can occupy villages permanently or periodically. Villages occupied permanently will see a small or medium group of insurgents operate inside the village, or in its vicinity, on a daily basis. Their goal is to control the population, enforce Sharia law, tax the inhabitants, collect food, intelligence, and recruit new insurgents. Villages can also act as safe havens for insurgents who will blend in to deceive security forces operating in the area. Villages occupied periodically will see VEO insurgents infiltrate the villages, harass and threaten the population, preach radical Islam and collect whatever basic necessities they require. After a short period of time (which ranges from hours to a couple of days), insurgents will leave the village which will unavoidably be targeted again by the VEOs in the near future. For instance, in the Mopti region of Mali, inhabitants of the village of Sofara lived under the control of insurgents belonging to the Macina Liberation Front. Villagers were deprived of their right to organize festivities, such as weddings, baptisms, etc. Numerous testimonies collected in several localities in the central region of Mali show constant cases of intimidation, torture and other forms of violence. Insurgents came and went as they pleased on a periodic basis to control and intimidate Sofara's inhabitants.¹⁴ The village of Nou-Bozo, also in Mopti, has been under the control of multiple VEO insurgents as well. People were constantly monitored by the insurgents who forbade the villagers from moving in or out of the village. The inhabitants were subjected to beatings and threats when they refused to comply with the directives given to them.¹⁵



UN photo 814841

MINUSMA increases patrols in central Mali, Mopti, 4 July 2019.



UN photo 795042

UN police patrol the Menaka region in northeast Mali, 9 January 2019.

In other instances, VEOs destroyed public buildings and denounced the presence of State authorities in the region. Villagers were threatened not to report the VEOs' presence to the security forces and were warned that the insurgents would be back.¹⁶ The Malian Government's preoccupation with securing southern Mali and returning stability to northern regions has resulted in the limited presence of the FAMA in central regions. When present, FAMA soldiers' violent behaviour towards the Fulani population often exacerbates the situation. Such behavior has facilitated VEO propaganda and recruitment operations among the Fulani people. This is a typical "good insurgency" facilitated through "bad counterinsurgency" dynamic. The credibility of security forces must remain untarnished if civilians are to fully trust and support them. Otherwise, VEOs will fill the void and increase their grip and influence over the population. Even if local security forces were courteous toward the villagers and conducted COIN initiatives to sever the insurgents' contact with the civilian population, it would only be practical if larger VEO formations are cleared from the targeted area. While Operation *Barkhane* had damaging effects upon VEOs in that regard, the problem remains: how do we keep an area cleared of insurgents once conventional forces are re-deployed to secure another insurgent infested area? Again, this can only be achieved through CHB which is contingent on the support of the population. Although it is feasible to disperse and expel large insurgent groups from a given area through a military clearing operation, it remains impossible to prevent the return of small groups of insurgents that will attempt to re-establish their influence and political network. Aside from elements of the US

Marine Corps, US forces committed the same mistakes in the first four years of their combat engagement in Vietnam: they cleared an area of communist forces and left, leaving no static forces behind to rebuild, protect the villagers and stop the insurgency's resurgence. They were thus required to clear the area once again, sometimes twice, because insurgents were free to re-infiltrate the area and the villages following US troops' departure.¹⁷

The only way to reverse this pattern is through a supportive population protected by permanently deployed counterinsurgent platoons in the area of operation. Accordingly, villages and their inhabitants' security must constitute the central objective of security forces. However, in Mali, military and constabulary forces are inactive in several areas and are regularly overmatched by VEOs in combat. For instance, over 50 Malian soldiers were killed on November 1st 2019 when their fortified base was overrun in full daylight by several dozen ISGS insurgents in the region of Menaka.¹⁸ Devastating attacks such as these critically affects FAMA's credibility to the eyes of the local population. To overrun a fortified defended position in an open field in full daylight requires, at the very least, a 3 to 1 ratio of force in favor of the attackers. Given the location and the nature of ISGS's objective, the attack should have resulted in severe casualties for the insurgents. However, multiple reporting shows that no insurgent were confirmed killed in action during the attack. Malian soldiers truly underperformed during this incident, which is a consistent tendency for all of Mali's security forces when confronted by VEOs. In contexts such as these, civilians are less prone to fully

support their military for they perceive it as weak, unreliable and untrustworthy. Malian locals have often stated that FAMa troops have “abandoned” them to the insurgents and asked themselves how they could ever trust the Malian military.¹⁹ There is a lot of psychology in COIN: if counterinsurgents are able to convince the population that they are stronger than the insurgents and that they have the intent as well as the means to protect the villages, civilians will be naturally predisposed to fully support the security forces and the government. However, VEOs’ tactical edge over FAMa units and the sporadic proactivity of Malian security forces in most of the villages completely invalidate this COIN rule in Mali. When the population feels safe, it usually willingly provides intelligence to security forces. Most villagers will support the party which is more likely to offer them stability and security. Even if villagers are hostile toward VEOs, the former will be driven by fear, especially if security forces are absent or inactive in the vicinity of their village. In such cases, the inhabitants will not dare to commit themselves against the VEOs unless long term protection is guaranteed to them. This tendency was observed during past insurgencies that were much more severe than Mali.

For instance, when strategic hamlets (reinforced villages) were erected in South Vietnam with South Vietnamese security forces deployed permanently with the population, villagers willingly gave intelligence on the insurgents and denounced Viet Cong activities in the area of operation. The situation repeated itself later during

the war when US Marines deployed Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) in South Vietnamese hamlets: joint Marine and government security forces teams were deployed permanently inside the villages, which ensured the inhabitants’ protection and enabled counterinsurgents to deny Viet Cong access to the villages. Human intelligence provided by the villagers enabled the Marines and South Vietnamese forces to locate and ambush the Viet Cong and sever their lines of communication. Villagers willingly informed the Marines on insurgent activities such as troop movements, weapon caches, incoming ambushes and booby traps. Viet Cong defectors and prisoners of war admitted they were unable to use CAP villages as a base and could no longer exploit the civilian population living in those hamlets. They were directed to avoid these sectors entirely by their chain of command.²⁰ This occurred because the population was provided with safety and stability on 24/7 basis. These positive effects were not unique to Vietnam; the British obtained similar results with their strategic hamlet program in Malaya. Communist insurgents were completely isolated and cut off from Malaya’s rural villages and local population. The latter was protected 24/7 by static security forces deployed permanently into the villages, denying hostiles access to the premises. Mobile forces constantly ambushed

the guerillas on their lines of communications, insurgents were isolated in their bases of operation, unable to resupply, deprived of food, intelligence, shelter, and recruits. Combined with a succession of political and civic initiatives, this led to the

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US Marines move into an airstrip near the Rock Pile in the northernmost corner of Vietnam, 16 January 1960.

Trinity Mirror/Mirrorpix/Alamy Stock Photo EKKP6R



Speed of movement was essential in combating the communist insurgents in the Malayan jungle, and helicopters played an essential part, 29 October 1959.

insurgency's downfall.²¹ In COIN, the population is as much a center of gravity for the counterinsurgents as it is for the VEOs. Mali's VEOs are in no way an exception and are as vulnerable as any other insurgency when subjected to such tactics, techniques and procedures. Globally, poor government and military control over rural areas facilitates VEO recruitment ops. Villages are central hubs for insurgent recruiting activities. For instance, in central Mali, VEOs have concentrated their recruitment efforts on the Fulani by exploiting the community's frustrations over rising banditry, government corruption, and competition over land and water. The recruitment of Fulani has inflamed tensions within the Bambara and Dogon tribes which, with the limited presence of Malian security forces, contributed to the formation of more ethnically aligned self-defence groups.²²

Dozens of Fulani community leaders interviewed by Human Rights Watch have expressed concern about the Islamists' infiltration into their villages and their ability to recruit scores of young Fulani men. Some of these men were volunteers, others were forcefully recruited. This tactic has two purposes: first, it increases the VEOs manpower. Second, it secures the secrecy of their operations (if a villager's child is recruited by the VEOs, the parent will not speak of the insurgent's activities in order to avoid any risk or insurgent retaliation against the child).²³ Such

VEO recruitment capabilities, as well as access to villages, will set the stage for ambushes and attacks like the one conducted by ISGS insurgents against a joint US-Nigerien convoy in Tongo Tongo village in Niger on the 4th of October 2017. Intelligence given to insurgents on US Forces' presence in the area came from VEO agents or sympathisers that operated in the vicinity of Tongo Tongo village.²⁴ With insurgents and VEO supporters operating with impunity inside the villages, reconnaissance and intelligence gathering operations are easily conducted, which facilitates the execution of ambushes on security forces. However, if the latter are imbedded inside the villages, the insurgent's freedom of action, recruitment operations and intelligence access will be degraded. The VEOs' inefficiency will be drastically compounded if security forces deny the insurgents access to their lines of communication.

VEO Lines of Communication and Freedom of Movement

As much as controlling the civilian population is paramount to the success of VEOs, their operational gains will be highly limited if they do not have access to their geographical line of communications. Freedom of movement is essential to any insurgency in order for it to operate freely in its area of operation. When in static mode, VEOs will usually remain



A French soldier on patrol in Timbuktu as part of Operation *Barkhane*, 21 November 2014.

in two key areas: in the vicinity of the villages they control and/or in bases of operation in isolated areas (usually forested areas). These key hubs are interconnected through lines of communication that stretch to key border areas where smuggling and trafficking activities will occur. Logistics, reinforcements and illicit goods transit through these borders. Lines of communication also enable insurgents to move their fighters from point A to point B, which allows them to access other villages and initiate attacks against security forces patrol groups or army bases. Lines of communication are nothing less than vital arteries for the insurgents. In order to succeed against VEOs, counterinsurgents must sever these arteries. AQIM is reported to have access to sizeable financial and logistical resources in Mali. This is partly due to the group's involvement in various facilitation and illicit trafficking businesses which require access to lines of communication and tribal connections. It is access to such transit routes and supply lines that allowed AQIM to grow its insurgent network and area of influence. AQIM also generates revenue from narcotics trafficking, forging loose alliances with trafficking networks and then either taxing goods in transit or charging protection fees.²⁵ Access to lines of communication may also enable VEOs to gain access to very basic supplies. For instance, the Sahel is dotted with several AQIM caches of reserve petrol supplies, water reservoirs, car tires and spare parts. Moreover, lines of communication in northern Mali gives AQIM insurgents access to safe havens. During COIN operations, counterinsurgents' activities will normally include

"area saturation patrolling," an initiative that enables security forces to degrade insurgents through interdiction operations, ambushes and targeted raids.²⁶ Currently, the main military force that uses area saturation patrolling tactics with consistency is the French military via Operation *Barkhane*. The latter have shown the positive effects of area saturation patrolling on the VEOs' capacity to exploit their lines of communication and safe havens. For example, AQIM insurgents developed a mountainous redoubt in the Ametetai valley, an area of about 25km² full of caves, crevices and valleys in the Ardar des Ifoghas. AQIM chose this specific location because it was the only sector that provided natural water sources. From there, they were able to plan, move their fighters, and launch their operations. The insurgent group also held their hostages in such locations. That specific base was eventually destroyed by French and Chadian forces.²⁷

However, safe havens such as these are numerous in the Sahel. COIN would require that lines of communication giving access to safe havens or attack positions be severed through multiple checkpoints and small unit ambush operations supported with ISR capabilities. This would result in insurgents being isolated and targeted by security forces already deployed in a cordon and search mode in the vicinity of their bases of operation and/or lines of communication. In such a situation, these key areas would be deemed far too dangerous for VEOs to exploit. For example, when AQIM insurgents were decimated by the French and Chadian

forces in the Ardar des Ifoghas, constant ISR with drones was subsequently conducted in that area, which dissuaded insurgents from returning to this safe haven.²⁸ Absence of consistent COIN initiatives such as these explains why VEOs are able to move, resupply themselves and remain combat effective in most of the Sahel. COIN also requires that key border areas be secured and inaccessible to insurgent groups. One of the best instances of such an initiative occurred during the Algerian War: the French military ultimately denied the insurgents' access to Algeria's border by building a gigantic electrical fence (the Morice Line) that blocked the Algerian-Morocco border to the west and the Algerian-Tunisia border to the east. Any infiltration attempt through the fence triggered signals at monitoring stations to which French forces responded with artillery, aircraft and mobile ground units numbering 80,000 soldiers. The FLN insurgency casualty rate became so high that its members stopped any major attempt to cross the Morice Line.²⁹ While a costly and challenging endeavour, as troop coordination and infrastructure goes, the Morice Line demonstrates that efficient COIN requires a major level of initiative and commitment. In recent years, getting across the border of Morocco and Algeria has become quite difficult for the VEOs as both countries have tightened their control of smuggling routes and goods. Algeria started digging trenches along its border with Morocco to deter fuel smuggling in 2013. A year later, Morocco built a 150 km long security fence to strengthen its defenses against the flow of human smuggling and possible infiltration of VEOs. This proactive security approach has made it harder for AQIM and other groups to establish a foothold in Morocco.³⁰

Algeria has beefed up its borders and sent more troops to monitor its borders with Libya, Mali, and Niger. By 2014, Algeria had closed all of its borders except the one with Tunisia, and made them into military zones accessible only to individuals with special security clearance. Accordingly, Algeria has been relatively successful in securing its borders against the flow of fighters from outside the country, and the Algerian military periodically arrests drug and arms traffickers and jihadists, especially in the south and east of the country.³¹ Currently, for Mali and the remainder of the Sahel, border denial operations is an assignment given to the G5 Sahel (FC-G5S). The latter is a military force composed of soldiers from Mauritania, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. Their specific mission is to deny VEOs and criminal groups' access to the main border areas around these five countries. However, only seven FC-G5S battalions were deployed, which is insufficient to impede the VEOs' ability to move and execute cross-border operations in such a huge territory. With FC-G5S forces spread so thin in the Sahel, several gaps will remain accessible for VEOs to exploit. Consequently, unless a major shift of strategy is initiated, insurgents will remain able to bypass FC-G5S battalions and resume their insurgent operations in Mali and the rest of the Sahel.

Conclusion

Rural stability is the cornerstone of any successful COIN campaign. While COIN encompasses political, military, economic, cultural, civic and social lines of operation, security remains key to any long term success. However competent local politicians will be, and however efficient and beneficial economic and civic actions will be, they will fail without a proper security apparatus based on COIN. Rural security will only be achievable if VEOs are denied access to the rural villages and to their lines of communication. In other words, without the security provided by military elements, every other COIN initiative will have very short term effects. VEOs' ability to have such an amount of influence in Mali's rural areas, as well as their ability to control large amounts of territory in the Sahel, are the consequence of the deficiencies in COIN security operations. While VEOs have shown great vulnerability when confronted by large conventional clearing operations launched by Operation *Barkhane*, insurgents still remained able to retain some degree of influence and "re-operate" at some point in the "secured area". COIN is a "clear, hold and build" concept. The fact that no static military forces remain in newly secured areas ("clear") to protect the civilians from the insurgents ("hold") and that no concrete civic actions ("build") are initiated jointly to security operations explains why the current operational situation has turned to a stalemate in Mali. In many ways, this so called "stalemate" is turning to the advantage of the VEOs who are increasingly spreading their operations and area of influence to southern Burkina Faso and to the northern part of the littoral countries of West Africa.

"By 2014, Algeria had closed all of its borders except the one with Tunisia, and made them into military zones accessible only to individuals with special security clearances."

In the past, mightier insurgencies than JNIM and ISGS have been severely degraded, and in several cases, completely defeated when confronted to CHB COIN tactics. Mali's VEOs are no exception: they are vulnerable to these tactics as any other insurgency is. Operations *Serval* and *Barkhane* were very successful when the time came to secure an area. However, such efforts will only have temporary results if only the "clearing" phase is applied. Moreover, Mali's VEOs have continuous access to their lines of communication and to most of the border areas of Mali. Denying VEOs' access to these key geographical sectors is paramount if any COIN is to succeed in terms of rural security. The fact that insurgents are able to move from village to village to impose their will on the civilian population without any interference is a clear indication that VEOs' freedom of movement is, in no way, properly targeted by local and foreign security forces. In such conditions, insurgents are able to resupply, move men and logistics from one point to the other and collect intelligence and potential recruits in multiple villages. Such liberty of action is what enables VEOs to fully exploit groups of fighters capable of conducting hit and

run attacks, as well as ambushes and complex attacks against the FAMA, MINUSMA and Operation *Barkhane*. The latter is currently the most efficient military force in the fight against VEOs. However, *Barkhane*'s operations cannot be considered as a concrete and thorough COIN military campaign as it lacks CHB initiatives. As for MINUSMA, its mission parameters forbid its soldier from conducting COIN operations. The latter should normally be assigned to FAMA and constabulary elements supported by French forces. Moreover, to be degraded on a permanent basis, VEOs must be subjected to the other COIN lines of operation (political, economic, civic actions, etc.), otherwise, the insurgency will always remain a potent threat. Given the current situation,

we can't expect that VEOs will be subjected to such a large scale COIN campaign in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, any COIN in Mali is rendered even more complicated when taking into account the tribal factors, intercommunal tensions and the armed group's omnipresence in every province. Consequently, it is highly improbable that we will see any major downshift in the VEOs' current ability to conduct its insurgency operation in Mali in the medium and long terms. Unless a new overall political and military strategy is elaborated, we can expect VEOs to spread their area of influence even further into the Sahel and West Africa.



NOTES

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