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PUTTING THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS AT THE HEART OF MILITARY INTERVENTIONS:

Lessons Learnt from the G5 Sahel Joint Force

ABOUT CENTER FOR CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT

The Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians caught in conflict. CIVIC's mission is to work with armed actors and civilians in conflict to develop and implement solutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to civilian harm. Our vision is a world where parties to armed conflict recognize the dignity and rights of civilians, prevent civilian harm, protect civilians caught in the conflict, and amend harm.

CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young humanitarian who advocated for civilians affected by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Honoring Ruzicka's legacy, CIVIC has kept an unflinching focus on protecting civilians in conflict. Today, CIVIC has a presence in conflict zones and key capitals worldwide. It collaborates with civilians to bring their protection concerns directly to those in power, engages with armed actors to reduce the harm they cause to civilian populations, and advises governments and multinational bodies on how to make lifesaving and lasting policy changes.

CIVIC's strength is its proven approach and record of improving the protection outcomes for civilians by working directly with conflict-affected communities and armed actors. At CIVIC, we believe civilians are not "collateral damage", and civilian harm is not an unavoidable consequence of conflict—civilian harm can and must be prevented.

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OVERVIEW

Sovereign states are responsible for their civilians' protection in line with relevant principles that govern armed conflicts. International humanitarian law (IHL) provides guidelines for safeguarding civilians and infrastructures. Most militaries in the Sahel region understand this responsibility.[1] They believe that safeguarding civilians means protecting individuals and their property from all threats, especially those posed by armed opposition groups (AOGs).[2] However, in contexts like the Sahel where asymmetrical threats are rife, implementing this principle becomes more difficult and the risk of harm to civilians increases.

Although more attention is given to the protection of civilians (POC) in the region, abuses committed by Sahelian security forces, which in some cases lead to more than half of total civilian victims,[3] are overshadowed by those perpetrated by AOGs[4] and community militias involved in community conflicts and/or the fight against AOGs. Consequently, the need to address protection challenges for institutional actors is enormous.

This brief aims to have a better understanding of the efforts made by state armed forces to ensure effective POC. It will look mainly at the regional Group of Five for the Sahel's (G5 Sahel) armed alliance, the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S). The FC-G5S aims to address insecurity by responding to AOGs activism, particularly among its member states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger). It also aims to draw lessons for national armies on how to better protect civilians; mitigate and track civilian harm before, during, and after operations; and respond to damages caused.

> ***CITAC** (MISAD in French) **is a mechanism used to monitor and report conduct during operations, especially incidents that affect civilians by armed actors** (state or non-state).*

Although POC is mentioned as part of the mandate the mission of security and defense forces, it is not always systematically applied during the military operational cycle.

To mitigate civilian harm, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights supported the Executive Secretariat and the G5 Sahel Joint Force in developing a civilian protection strategy for the G5 Sahel countries.[5] It also established the Compliance Framework.[6] This is an innovative set of mechanisms and concrete, systematic, and complementary measures aimed at preventing, mitigating and responding to human rights violations and IHL violations committed by security and defense forces. It was designed to be a risk reduction framework to prevent harm to civilians during offensive military operations, including when combatting AOGs.

CIVIC worked closely with the FC-G5S and Sahelian national armies to support them in their efforts to prevent, analyze and respond to harm caused to civilians under Pillar 6[7] of the Compliance Framework. They did this through training and establishing a Civilian Casualties Identification, Tracking and Analysis Cell (CITAC), launched in January 2021 within the FC-G5S.

CITAC (MISAD in French) is a mechanism used to monitor and report conduct during operations, especially incidents that affect civilians by armed actors (state or non-state). CITAC is a complementary mechanism to existing protection efforts by the FC-G5S and CIVIC collaborated with the Joint Force to deliver trainings on CITAC. Despite its limited use to date, this has resulted in some adaptations to POC practices, including with civil-military cooperation and dedicated pre-deployment training.

Mali's withdrawal from the Joint Force in May 2022 and of Burkina Faso and Niger in December 2023 disrupted the operations of the FC-G5S. Interviews conducted for this research indicate that while CITAC has been helpful in some instances, the reduction of FC-G5S military operations after CITAC's launch in January 2021, hindered the testing of this new mechanism.[8]

Implementing CITAC's mechanism is also complicated by the chain of command in the Force as the national general staff of armed forces often commands operations conducted by the battalion dedicated to the Joint Force. This makes it difficult to distinguish whether the operation is attributed tothe Joint Force or the national army.[9] CITAC is not yet used in cases where harm is attributed to national forces.

Many challenges remain that can be addressed and adapted to existing/upcoming military arrangements in the Sahel and beyond. Such challenges often manifest in sequence before, during or after the operation. The results of this study show that although national armies, including FC-G5S former battalions, benefited from training in IHL and international human rights law, specific POC training should be delivered early (ie. from pre-deployment) and at all levels (battalions and command).

POC includes civilian harm tracking and mitigation measures, civil-military cooperation, strategic communication, and amends processes. Thus, training in POC considers the asymmetric conflict context, it is broader than IHL and is practical in orientation. The FC-G5S drafted a POC strategy that is yet to be implemented and could significantly contribute to addressing POC challenges.

Several factors explain the problematic relationship between civilians and the military in the Sahel that limit POC efforts. Research results suggest that the Force should increase its number of female staff, as they contribute to strengthening the relations of trust with communities. It also finds that the objective of the FC-G5S is not always clear to communities, hence a need for more effective public communication around its mandate.

Civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) is an integral part of building trust with communities, but if not done carefully, it can expose them to retaliatory attacks from AOGs suspecting them of collaborating with the security and defense forces (SDF). Such trust is also important for regional forces to access reliable intelligence: when the SDF are alerted to an attack, they often intervene late because of a lack of reliable



February 2020, north-eastern Burkina Faso: *Military patrol in Dori*

information, yet secure communication channels for communities' early warning are vital and make the Force more effective.

Civilians are often compelled to remain in areas where AOGs operate, because they lack the resources to move, or don't want to settle in refugee or internally displaced camps because of difficult living conditions. This makes the SDF suspect them of collaborating with armed groups, and exposes them to risks of being targeted during military operations. Humanitarian access is also jeopardized as militaries question humanitarian organizations delivering aid to communities living in AOGs operation areas.

Research findings also highlight difficulties in accessing justice for those captured during military operations. Civilians believe that some alleged AOGs accomplices are actually innocent.[10] Also respondents have indicated thatt communities living in FC-G5S operation areas need help distinguishing between the Force and other state-armed actors present in the same area, such as national armies. This is essential to contribute to a transparent civil-military engagement. The FC-G5S should have a clear and unified uniform to help communities recognize them. And finally, there should be a clear and precise set of procedures for amends in cases where the Force is involved in an incident.

> ***When insecurity persists and worsens in some parts of the region and military responses to combat insecurity increase, civilians are at a higher risk of harm. It is therefore important to analyze the impact of military operations on the civilian population, and highlight good practices to reduce civilian harm.***

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This brief is the first of a series of two. The first looks at the efforts made by the FC-G5S to protect civilians, and the second explores the perceptions of populations living in the FC-G5S and national armies areas of operation. Interviews were conducted primarily with respondents who have a good understanding of the issue. These included former and current members of the FC-G5S, former members of the FC-G5S CITAC Committee, partners supporting the efforts of the Force in terms of POC, and civilians living in the area of FC-G5S operations.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection for this brief was conducted between July 2022 and August 2023 in the capitals of four G5 Sahel countries—N'Djamena, Niamey, Nouakchott, and Ouagadougou. Data collection also took place on a local level in Téra in Niger and N'beiket Lahwach in Mauritania, where the G5 Sahel Joint Force battalions were located. After the withdrawal of Mali from the G5 Sahel, data was not collected in this country. However, research was conducted in Bassiknou in Mauritania to get the perspectives of refugees from Mali, and several interlocutors gave CIVIC general contextual updates on the situation in the country. Also, desktop research was undertaken on the themes under study in the G5 Sahel countries.

The language of "terrorist" or "terrorism" was used by interview participants and is therefore reflected in CIVIC's report as the respondents' perspectives rather than an institutionally proscribed terminology or categorization.

CIVIC interviewed 24 people from two main categories of interlocutors who have a good understanding of the topic: security and defense forces staff (national and G5 Sahel Joint Force), and sources who, through their functions or socio-professional activities, have access to information on violence against civilians in the areas covered. These include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international NGOs, civil society organizations, state and traditional authorities, research institutes, and media. CIVIC interviewed international NGOs to provide context regarding the overall security situation.

Participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted 30-90 minutes. CIVIC aimed to interview an equal number of men and women but encountered structural challenges given the high presence of men among the SDF, thus they are over-represented in this category. Names of interviewees and identifiable characteristics were withheld for their protection.

Due to the unpredictable security situation and barriers to access, CIVIC was not able to conduct interviews with respondents living in Dori in Burkina Faso. To compensate, CIVIC conducted interviews with internally displaced people from Dori who moved to the capital Ouagadougou on their experiences and their perceptions of the operations conducted by the Joint Force battalion based there.

The political context in the region also limited access to some data because of the topic's sensitivity and distrust among actors in countries where civic space has become very restricted and any criticism of regimes poses a risk. Another challenge faced by the team was in the type of target audience. This research demanded interviews with military staff, and getting hierarchical authorization to speak to CIVIC was not always easy.

The research was also conducted during a period of instability for the G5 Sahel Joint Force, with the withdrawal of Mali and the coup in Niger. This made it difficult to get the buy-in of certain actors, undermined the relevance of such work, and delayed the data collection process.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings provide useful insights for protection practices, policies and institutional responses that warrant further attention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the G5 Sahel Joint Force

- **Further build the capacity of the Force** by training the SDF (the main contributors of troops to the Joint Force) on human rights, humanitarian law, and the protection of civilians in the pre-deployment stage.

- **Validate and implement the G5 Sahel Joint Force POC draft strategy.**
- **Communicate effectively to communities the mission and mandate of the Force in areas of its presence.** This will help foster better collaboration with local communities through civil-military dialogue.
- **Increase the number of women personnel** in the Joint Force by adapting working conditions Provide female-friendly infrastructure (dormitories, sanitary) and working conditions (rotations) in battalions to boost female recruitment. An increased feminine presence will facilitate contact with women and children.
- **Reinforce intelligence verifying methods for faster and more effective interventions.** The Force should systematically verify alerts it receives from communities by triangulating the information in order to intervene effectively.
- **Raise awareness in the Joint Force that civilians who remain in areas controlled by AOGs are not necessarily collaborators of AOGs.** Some communities prefer to stay in conflict zones, rather than be internally displaced and live in the difficult conditions of refugee camps where humanitarian aid is insufficient.
- **Collaborate with humanitarian organizations to enable access for assistance to civilians in conflict zones. Engage in community dialogues and conduct needs-based assessments and responses.**
- **Monitor, systematize and recognize cases of civilian harm or damage** caused during operations through the use of the CITAC.
- **Improve access to justice for captives of military operations** by properly implementing procedures when arresting suspects, enable follow-up by the military police officer on their detention conditions, establish responsibility if their health deteriorates, and compensate them or their families.
- **Secure civil-military cooperation** by finding ways to interact with civilians without putting them at risk. The Force interacts with communities through civil-military activities. However, in areas where AOGs groups operate, locals suspected of collaborating with the Force are often violently repressed thus putting them at risk.
- **Protect civilians who wish to share information with the Force** by establishing secure communication channels. When communities collaborate with the Force and share information and intelligence, they provide the Force with a strategic advantage.
- **The G5 Sahel Joint Force must be clearly distinguishable** to ensure that civilians can differentiate them from other military actors (national armies, foreign militaries) present in their area of operations, and to better assign responsibility in cases of incident and harm.
- **Have a standard set of procedures and conditions for amends that state the type of post-harm assistance for each type of incident affecting civilians.**

For the Civilian Casualties Identification, Tracking and Analysis Cell for FC-G5S Operations (CITAC)

- **Systematically implement CITAC to address POC incidents and provide amends to victims;** set up a CITAC Committee at the level of the national army general staff and battalions to ensure that the relevant mechanisms and procedures are systematically followed. CITAC ensures necessary human rights law and IHL principles are integrated at the national level when training SDF; however, the systems often lack a mechanism for systematic monitoring and incident reporting.
- **Expand the scope of trainees.** Train security forces such as the police and gendarmerie on CITAC. If CITAC is implemented at the national level, security forces should be trained as they carry out POC in times of peace in addition to the defense forces. The police and gendarmerie are also essential links of the judicial system for reporting, monitoring and responding to incidents caused by military operations.
- **Provide CITAC Committee with regularly updated lists of all the soldiers deployed** in the Joint Force, or regional, international coalitions by troop-contributing countries. This helps with identifying perpetrators of incidents that cause harm to civilians, and to monitor the prosecution.

CONTEXT

The G5 Sahel was created on February 16, 2014, in Nouakchott, Mauritania. Its members were Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Mali officially withdrew from all G5 Sahel bodies, including the Force, in May 2022, and Burkina Faso and Niger followed suit in December 2023.

It was created when these countries started to face acute insecurity attributed to the activism of AOGs, organized crime, and community conflicts, combined with other factors such as political upheavals and climate change. Its aim was to:

"Guarantee conditions of development and security in the area of member countries; Provide a strategic intervention framework to improve the living conditions of communities; Combine development and security, supported by democracy and good governance within a framework of mutually beneficial regional and international cooperation; Promote inclusive and sustainable regional development. The G5 Sahel also contributes to the implementation of security and development actions in member states through: Strengthening peace and security in the G5 Sahel area; The development of transport, hydraulics, energy and telecommunications infrastructures; Creating conditions for better governance in member countries; Strengthening the resilience capacities of populations by sustainably guaranteeing food security, human development and pastoralism."[11]

The Joint Force, its armed wing, was created in February 2017. It had an initial mandate to fight against terrorism, organized crime and human trafficking; restore state authority; assist with the return of displaced people; contribute to humanitarian operations; and contribute to implementing development-related initiatives.[12]

Map of G5 Sahel and Joint Force locations



When it was created, the FC-G5S comprised around 4 550 military, gendarmes and police staff divided into seven battalions of 650 men (550 soldiers, 100 police and gendarmes) spread over three areas. The first one was with Mauritania and Mali in the West, the second with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in the center, and finally Niger and Chad in the East. Operations carried out in these three areas were planned and conducted from the Operational Command Post (OCP) based in Sévaré, Mali, and the Tactical Command Post (TCP) specific to their areas.[13]

In June 2018, the OCP of Sévaré was targeted in an attack claimed by Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, an al-Qaeda affiliate group,[14] forcing the OCP to move to Bamako. For the Central area, made up of three battalions (Boulkessi in Mali, Dori in Burkina Faso, and Téra in Niger), the TCP was based in Niamey. For the West and East zones, each made up of two battalions, the TCPs were installed in N'beiket Lahwach, Mauritania, and in Wour, Chad.[15]

Due to the multiple threats the region faces, several national, regional and international forces have been deployed. These include the French Operation Barkhane;[16] and the United States,[17] Italy,[18] European Union Task Force Takuba,[19] and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).[20] Their mission has been to support the fight against AOGs, build national armies' capacities, and secure the areas and civilians.

The context in which the G5 Sahel Joint Force operates has changed since its creation. Major shifts on the security and political fronts led to destabilizing the Sahel from 2020. Unconstitutional changes of government in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, which have undermined regional relations and cooperation with Western partners, have had significant consequences for the G5 Sahel and its Joint Force.

Mali officially withdrew from all G5 Sahel bodies, including the Force, in May 2022 to protest, among others, against certain member states' opposition to its G5 Sahel presidency, denouncing France's moves aimed at isolating the country.[21] Bilateral military operations have been Sahelian states' favored option, and since the destabilization of the G5 Sahel, they tend to rely more on them.

Military arrangements and cooperation have also shifted from 2020 when Malian transitional authorities who seized power through a coup demanded the departure of France's Operation Barkhane from Mali[22], which resulted in its moving to neighboring Niger. After the second coup in May 2021, the Malian authorities chose Russia as their main military partner, distancing themselves from regional and Western partners, notably France. Mali forged a new strategic alliance with Russian paramilitary group Wagner,[23] which comes with its share of concern on the issue of POC.

In line with the events, the authorities in Niger who took power following a coup on July 26, 2023, against then-president Mohamed Bazoum, have also requested that the French armed forces leave the country. Barkhane, the French military operation in the region, left Niger in October 2023 and was escorted out by Niger's military as they traveled to Chad, where they are now stationed.

In this newly established environment it became necessary to rethink the regional security system. The governments of the remaining G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger, before the withdrawal of Burkina Faso and Niger) decided to restructure the Force to adapt it to the new regional dynamics.

Several main decisions emerged from the meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the G5 in January 2023 in N'Djamena. For one, they decided to replace the OCP that planned and conducted operations with a coordination structure called the État-major de Coordination de la Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel (EMC). Its mission was to ensure the coordination and monitoring of bilateral and multilateral operations of G5 Sahel member countries.

The number of battalions increased from seven to 14, with most deployed in Niger and Burkina Faso—the countries where insecurity was more prevalent. Niger was to host the new Joint Force command center, the EMC.[24] Its installation was delayed by the coup, and Niger's withdrawal from the G5 Sahel complicates the situation further.

The region has experienced other upheavals that could have an impact on the future of the regional organization. Regime changes have created political tensions between the old and new leaders



Credit : Spc. Wheeler Brunschmid,U.S. Africa Command

21 February 2020, Kaedi, Mauritania: *U.S. and Mauritanian civil affairs teams reach out to communities during Flintlock 20*

of the G5 countries. Additionally, partners and many actors have been questioning the future of the G5 Sahel and whether they should continue engaging with it. Following the announcement by Burkina Faso and Niger to withdraw from the organization after Mali, the two remaining members, Mauritania and Chad, said they'd implement all necessary measures under the founding agreement, including dissolution of the Force.[25]

A new security alliance has emerged with the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) when on September 16, 2023, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter. The new alliance aims to redefine the fight against AOGs and reshape regional collaboration.[26] The AES envisions collaboration beyond security, targeting economic independence and development.[27] This new arrangement has reignited debates on the relevance of the G5 Sahel as Burkina Faso and Niger also withdrew from the organization shortly after the creation of the AES.

No major operations were conducted since Mali's withdrawal in May 2022 and the Joint Force's structural reform in January 2023. However, the six battalions based in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger carried on with reconnaissance patrols in their area of deployment.[28]

In a context where regional alliances and security apparatus are shifting, especially with the creation of the AES and the potential expansion of Wagner's support to Burkina Faso[29] and Niger[30], it is important to draw lessons from previous arrangements and operations and adapt to new developments by putting the protection of civilians at the heart of military interventions.

POC AND ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS OF FC-G5S

Diverse understanding of POC among militaries and absence of G5 Sahel POC strategy

According to the Global Protection Cluster, POC means that civilians and all those who do not take part in combat must not be attacked and must be spared and protected.[31] The general lack of protection in crises affecting civilians caught up in armed conflict and other situations of violence is not a consequence of inadequate legal frameworks, but of poor compliance.[32] Although national forces (who contribute to FC-G5S troops) train in POC and IHL[33] before being deployed in a joint mission, the understanding of the concept of POC gathered during this research varied among military actors.

Depending on their position in the army, military staff have different understandings of POC. Some, particularly foot soldiers who do not have a high level of education, understand it as a set of procedures and measures implemented by the institution of civil protection to keep people safe from disasters such as fires. This protection is given to everyone—civilians and security and defense forces alike. Others see POC as social and economic protection from the dangers of hunger and disease. Others consider it as protection from sexual violence, early marriage, exploitation of children, and abandonment of elderly people.[34]

Higher-ranked officers believe the objective of POC is to ensure the security of non-military people and their property against all forms of threats, particularly during military operations and against abuses of whatever nature: collateral or voluntary.[35]

According to a former Joint Force member, the Force did not have a POC strategy.[36] However, the Compliance Framework project contributed to the conception of tools for civilian harm mitigation such as CITAC, reducing human rights abuses, and promoting POC, among others.[37] In the meantime, CITAC was seen as an alternative to improve military operations in the absence of a strategy.

To address the lack of a formal POC framework within the G5 Sahel, the Executive Secretariat validated a POC strategy document in May 2023[38] awaiting member states' adoption and implementation. An approved POC strategy at the G5 Sahel level could greatly contribute to the shared understanding of this concept among concerned actors, including Joint Force members, and set the framework for its application to operations, doctrines, norms, rules, and training. The analysis and feedback from operations based on the data collected with CITAC can help improve future operations by being more sensitive to the presence and needs of civilians and soldiers' actions on the ground. However, with the instability in the G5 Sahel at the time of drafting this brief, adopting this strategy could face some challenges. This strategy, more broadly could also be useful to national armies.

The disparity in understanding civilian protection between non-commissioned members and the command shows the need to take measures to overcome this limitation. The civilian protection strategy for the G5 Sahel countries could help establish a shared understanding of POC, the tools and mechanisms to implement it, and the training required at which level. It also shows the importance of training in POC at the lowest levels of ranks for foot soldiers. They are the ones at the forefront of operations.

FC-G5S POC measures and good practices

A series of measures were put in place to ensure POC during G5 Sahel Joint Force operations. This includes the respect and implementation of the framework in the absence of an approved G5 Sahel POC policy and strategy, training and awareness raising, and the composition of the operation planning team. It also includes an assessment of the operational environment, civil-military engagement, participation of the police component to track abuses committed by Joint Force members, and mechanisms to monitor incidents and damage caused to civilians. These can be used before, during or after the operation. These good practices are documented in this brief.

Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Compliance Framework and UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy

In the absence of a POC strategy two measures were set upto ensure that no harm was done to civilians by the Joint Force: the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Compliance Framework, and the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP). The Compliance Framework translates international and regional human rights and international humanitarian law obligations into measures and mechanisms that are operationally relevant and practical at a military and security tactical level.[39] The HRDDP on the other hand, sets out due diligence measures that UN entities are expected to take within the scope of their mandates, to ensure that the support they provide to non-UN security forces is consistent with the purposes and principles of the organization in the charter and its responsibility to respect, promote and encourage respect for international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law.[40]

The Force had agreements with the former UN mission MINUSMA, benefiting from operational and logistical support from the mission, conditional on respect for human rights, through the UN HRDDP on Support for Non-United Nations Security Forces.[41] Compliance was required at all times support provided only on conditions of no violations.[42]

POC training and awareness raising

Soldiers are given general information on POC before deployment, with one approach being through rules of engagement: “Rules of engagement refer to the orders issued by a competent military authority that delineate when, where, how, and against whom military force may be used, and they have implications for what actions soldiers may take on their authority and what directives may be issued by a commanding officer.”[43] A respondent suggested that training should be continuous and modules regularly updated to reflect new dynamics on the ground.[44]

Soldiers are also provided with a booklet that contains the soldier’s code of conduct, and the day before each operation, there is a reminder of the content of this document.[45]

Finally, a radio message is issued to troops before the operation begins to remind them to apply the principles of POC/IHL.[46] In this message, the POC is the first mission assigned to the soldiers. To ensure that each soldier listens to and understands the message, the commander is asked to read it to them before the mission begins.

Composition of operation planning team and assessment of operational environment

From an operational point of view, POC is reflected during the planning of operations through the planning team’s composition partly because the legal adviser (LEGAD) is part of it. The role of the LEGAD is to notify military commanders of the fair application of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I and guide them on how to teach the rules set out in these instruments to the armed forces under their responsibility.[47]

If the preventive role of the LEGAD appears necessary to supervise the use of force, it also makes it possible for the Force to understand the judicial implications of conflicts whose evolving nature increasingly places military action at the heart of civilian populations.[48] Having a balanced civilian-military team is strategic for the Force as civilians such as the LEGAD can bring a different perspective to the planning of operations and often speak more freely as they are not tied to military authority.[49]

Also, militaries work on the prevention of civilian harm and structural damage with “application of good preventive measures”[50] and the operational environment is studied through assessing the demographic, social, economic, political, and religious aspects of the area. This diagnosis aims to identify the areas of concentration of populations, plan intervention, and limit damage to communities.[51]

Building trust with communities

Through civil-military engagement, actions are undertaken by the Force to interact with civilians. Civil-military initiatives, such as medical donations to community health centers, often help build relations between the Force and civilians. Civilian-military activities are thus an integral part of the operational plan and are conducted by the military personnel. The Joint Force often conducted civil-military actions

with the support of the French Operation Barkhane through the distribution of food and medicine.[52]

In Téra, in Niger's Tillabéri Region, the officers and soldiers of the Joint Force battalion brought their families to live with them in the military camp. Bringing their families created a feeling of trust with the local populations in the area. The battalion commanders spoke with the village authorities, particularly the district chiefs, to inform them of the battalion's arrival. When an issue arose, they discussed it with the traditional leaders.

A garrison officer was also responsible for all contact between the battalion and civilians. This officer managed all types of incidents such as fights, unwanted pregnancies attributed to soldiers, etc.[53] These measures contributed to building trust with communities in areas where the Force operated, as they were provided a direct interlocutor for their grievances.

Alerting civilian populations to upcoming operations and operational risks

Authorities consider informing communities and making them aware of the risks for civilians linked to military operations and activities as one element of POC. They also make sure to distance communities as much as possible from the field of operations and train the soldiers and members of the forces operating in the field on POC issues.[54]

In the broader context of Sahelian state armed force operations, such as in Burkina Faso, "areas of military interest" were sometimes created, where communities were allowed to evacuate certain areas[55] before an operation was conducted. However, implementing these "areas of military interest" poses civilian protection problems, as authorities didn't communicate with communities on how to ensure their safety during the evacuations. This would be important, as armed groups have been known to plant improvised explosive devices on specific routes in the area.

Another strategy for better POC is the FC-G5S's reliance at times on a town crier[56] to deliver a message to civilians, advising them to stay home or take shelter, as an operation is imminent in the surrounding area. Generally, the messages are in an encrypted language so that AOGs cannot understand them.[57]

CITAC was set up by the G5 Sahel Joint Force to advance POC efforts. It is a mechanism for monitoring and reporting conduct during operations, especially incidents that affect civilians.

The police component of the Joint Force follows up on the prosecution of soldiers accused of committing exactions

In the planning of operations, every mission has a military police brigade officer with them who is in charge of arresting soldiers causing harm and handing them over to the gendarmerie.[58] The police component of the Joint Force includes military police and an investigations unit in each of the five countries of the G5 Sahel. Its objective is to ensure the judicialization[59] of the military operations of the Joint Force, and to ensure respect for human rights in the fight against AOGs.[60]

Also, a CITAC member noted a judicial follow-up after incidents where guilty soldiers were prosecuted. He gave the example of two soldiers who attacked and robbed a merchant in Niger. They were seized by the Force and handed to the gendarmerie. The military police officer of the G5 Sahel Joint Force also sent a report to the gendarmerie, who then transferred the case to the prosecutor. After their hearing, the accused soldiers were sent to prison. In Niger, any soldier who serves more than six months in prison is automatically removed from the army.[61] Sanctions are strict and limit the chances of reoccurrence of these types of incidents.

CITAC for FC-G5S operations: structure and success

CITAC was set up by the G5 Sahel Joint Force to advance POC efforts. It is a mechanism for monitoring and reporting conduct during operations, especially incidents that affect civilians. Data from CITAC enables the adaptation of operations based on experiences and lessons learnt from previous ones.[62]

Organization of CITAC[63]

The organization of CITAC aligns with that of the Joint Force in terms of structure. It includes three hierarchical committees corresponding to the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. It includes one CITAC Coordination Committee at the level of the OCP; one CITAC Committee of the TCP (three in total); and one CITAC Committee at battalion level (seven in total).

Coordination Committee (OCP level): The decision-making and facilitation body between the different committees. It organizes and supports the activities of the committees, reports to the Force Commander (FC), and transmits proposals for prevention or response actions in the event of incidental damage. It receives information from TCP and battalion-level committees and transmits FC decisions to them for execution and monitoring. Finally, it works jointly with the committees for the triangulation of information, the initial analyses, the deepening of analyses, and the formulation of recommendations for action to the FC through ordinary periodic meetings and extraordinary sessions during serious and urgent situations.

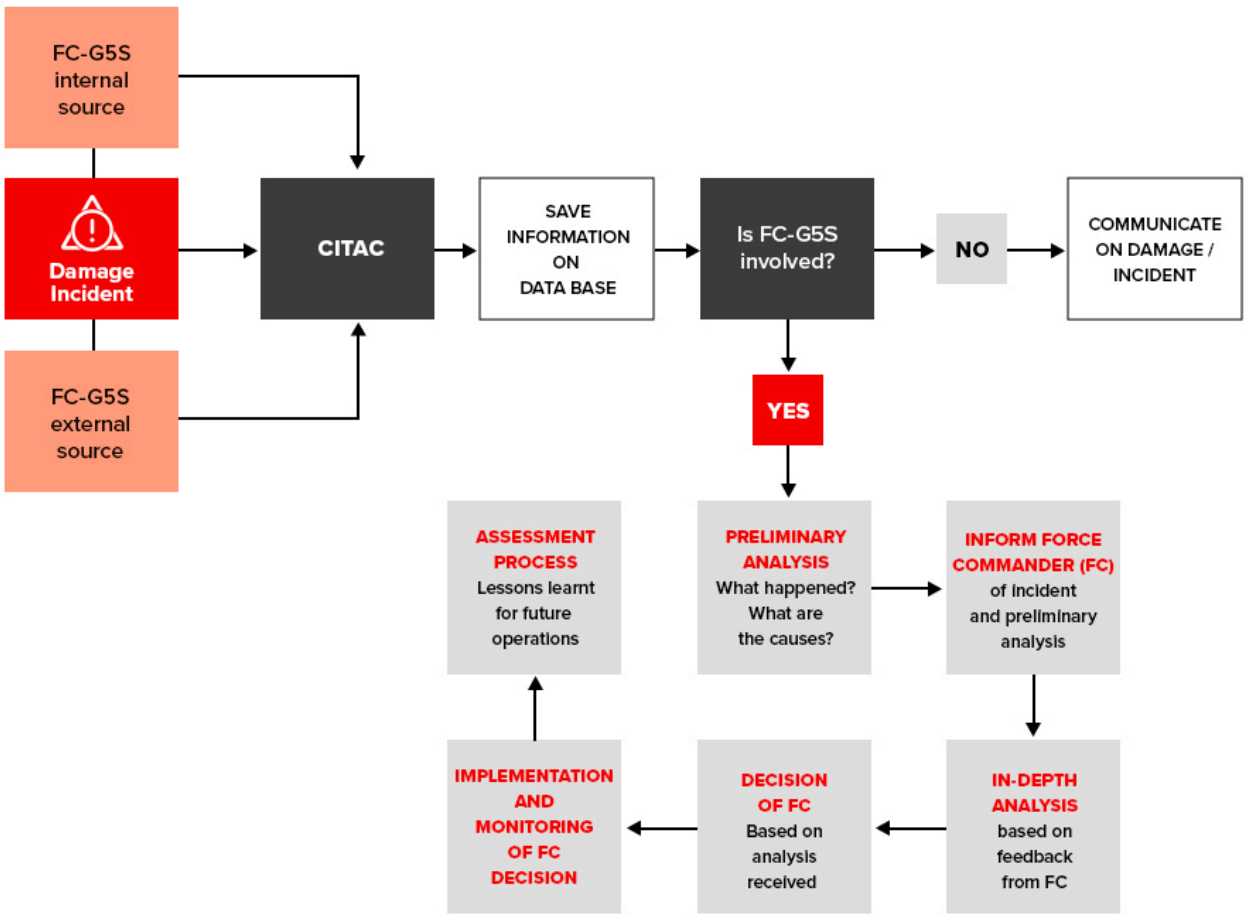
Area CITAC Committee: This committee collects information at area level and monitors battalion level committees. It collects and analyzes information from the CITAC Committee of the TCP battalion(s) and transmits it to the Coordination Committee. It ensures the implementation of FC decisions and coordination recommendations at the area and battalion levels.

Battalion CITAC Committee: This is the main channel for gathering and sharing information with the TCP CITAC Committee and the Coordination Committee at the OCP level. Its purpose is to gather information as soon as it is received. The members of the channel gather information based on the instructions given by the TCP and Coordination Committee. It is responsible for implementing and monitoring the decisions and recommendations made by the CITAC TCP and Coordination Committee.

Composition of CITAC

Coordination (OCP)	CITAC Committee (TCP)	CITAC Committee (battalion)
Chief J3 (Operations): Coordinator	Chief G3 (Land Forces Command Liaison Officer): Coordinator	Chief S3 (Operations Officer): Coordinator
Legal Adviser: Rapporteur	Legal Adviser: Rapporteur	Provost: Rapporteur
Chief J5/7 (Planning): Member	Chief G5/7 (Planning): Member	CIMIC Officer: Member
Chief J9 (Civil-Military Cooperation—CIMIC): Member	Chief J9 (CIMIC): Member	
Police Adviser: Member		
Communications Adviser: Member		
Chief of Joint Command: Member		

Functioning of CITAC



Source : CIVIC

According to Joint Force officers, CITAC raised awareness about POC and gave them ideas on how to handle incidents. “Before, we did not worry about the harm our operations caused, but after the CITAC training, we always take it into account,” said one officer. “For example, when we have to cross a crop field to avoid land-mined roads, we cause damage to the crops, but we will subsequently meet with the communities and crop owners to manage the incident. Sometimes, there is no material compensation; it is enough to explain to the population why we chose this route and apologize for the loss.”[64]

Another said: “The soldiers were civilians before being the army; there are certain things related to civilian perspectives that they understand, and battalion commanders take into account aspects highlighted by CITAC.”[65] For example, they contact the local authorities in the area before setting up the base. Another example is the obligation by battalion members to report any damage, intentional or collateral, that may occur during Joint Force operations, regardless of its intensity, to take the necessary action on time and determine responsibility.[66] CITAC reinforces existing procedures with a harmonized and unified reporting format, and having a dedicated committee ensures monitoring throughout.

CITAC has both military and civilian members who facilitate the planning of future operations, considering various perspectives. CITAC’s chief of operations is also the head of CITAC: he is at the heart of operations planning, implements recommendations more efficiently, and adapts to future operations.[67] The CITAC Committee added a section on the mechanism in the daily operations report that had data collection tables at all levels (OCP, TCP and battalion).[68]

CITAC was also used to address incidents. An example was given by a CITAC member in Bankilaré, in Niger's Tillabéri Region, where the Joint Force operated. He said one night in November 2021, a woman suffering from a mental illness was shot. She did not understand the warning shots and continued heading towards the camp. She died from her injuries. However, the battalion commander at the time met the villagers, particularly the victim's family, to discuss the incident with them, apologize, and appease the situation. An analysis of the incident through CITAC showed that the woman had escaped from a house where she was undergoing traditional treatment aimed at curing her mental illness.[69]

Over time, systematic harm monitoring can:

- Reduce damage, follow the correction of identified trends, and improve operational efficiency.
- Proactively insert elements relating to the limitation of damage to civilians in the planning of specific operations, to identify and pre-empt risks.
- Provide the command with factual and credible data for decision-making, and enable it to provide evidence in the event of a false accusation.
- Support the establishment of a systematic amendment procedure by providing precise data on specific incidents.
- Create a POC-oriented state of mind among troops, and reflect the command's importance for this issue.

CITAC also faced some challenges linked to short staff rotations, which was one year for OCP and TCP staff and three months for battalions on the ground. Dual command of battalions was also an issue as they often operated under their national army general staff orders, even though they were deployed in the framework of the FC-G5S. On other occasions the insecurity of the area prevented force members from attending training as was the case of the Malian battalion based in Boulkessi which could not be trained because of access constraints linked to the high insecurity in the area.

All these considerations show the relevance of having CITAC implemented at the national level.

POC CHALLENGES FOR FC-G5S

Although the Force implemented the measures mentioned above, in fulfilling its primary mission of POC, it often faced challenges linked to the operational environment, nature of the threat, and cultural norms. Not addressing challenges related to communication, operational planning and the environment poses a risk of political exploitation of any incident involving the Force[70] by AOGs, and contributes to weakening relations between the Force and local populations.

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Lateness and scope of training

Training of SDF and particularly the Joint Force on issues of POC comes at a later stage of their enrollment. A Joint Force member noted that soldiers must be trained in POC, civilian harm tracking, and civilian harm mitigation at the base in training centers, not when they are already deployed in full operation.[71] Another says the training cycle presents a challenge: "Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where training is given at the end of the battalion's deployment period, for example, in the fifth month out of six."[72]

However, to implement CITAC at the national level, members of the Joint Force who have benefited from training can apply good practices to other situations and operations and advocate for training on CITAC in their countries. One respondent trained

in CITAC believes: "All those who have benefited from the training are CITAC ambassadors."[73]

An FC-G5S member recommended that CITAC not be limited to training for defense forces, but said it was also necessary to train security forces such as the police and the gendarmerie. He said, "In times of peace, POC is carried out by the security forces. For example, in Chad, there are no terrorist bases; insecurity is attributed to inter-community conflicts, and the security forces intervene. Training at the police and gendarmerie levels will therefore have more impact on POC."[74]

Little or no communication on activities by deployed forces

There needs to be more communication before deployment of the Force, to facilitate the establishment of good relations as well as enabling their identification by local communities. Civilians therefore need help understanding their mission and the need to collaborate with the Force, whose mission is to protect them. CITAC offers possibilities to further address this gap of traditional CIMIC through its community engagement approach. However, this activity had yet to be implemented due to the changes within the Force since the launch of this mechanism.

To solve this issue, one respondent suggested that some public awareness should be done by civilian actors such as local leaders, who can visit remote areas with support from authorities, and explain the mandate of the Force to communities.[75] The Force would benefit from the civilian actor's expertise and experience, facilitating relations with the population.

Communication is essential for the Force. It contributes to reducing rumors, promoting the mission, and informing communities about the Force's role and responsibilities.

Communication is essential for the Force. It contributes to reducing rumors, promoting the mission, and informing communities about the Force's role and responsibilities. It also opens avenues of dialogue with the civilian population and promotes better cooperation with them. Also, at times, civilians do not distinguish between the different forces present. It is then essential for them to be identifiable, and this is done through effective communication and interaction with locals.[76]

Few female troops deployed during operations

Troops face challenges in their interactions with civilians in conflict-affected areas. However, it has been noted that when female staff are part of operations, it's easier for them to interact with women and children, which aids acceptance of the Force by communities during CIMIC activities. They are also helpful in areas where it is against local customs for men to carry out body searches on women. AOGs often take advantage of this by disguising themselves as women. More female personnel are needed in the FC-G5S.[77] However, women are often confined to regional capitals, which are considered safer, and not deployed in red zones where they could have a greater impact on relations with communities.[78]

Insufficient FC-G5S troops to cover large areas and inaccurate intelligence shared by communities weaken relationships

Some military officers say that civilian reports on AOGs positions can be misleading. "Some individuals falsely report the presence of AOGs in their grazing area so that SDF patrols can be intensified and thus guarantee them protection. However, when the SDF do not find any suspects, they tend to no longer take the next reports seriously, and often when the AOGs are actually present, the Force does not intervene."[79]

These false reports weaken the trust between the SDF and populations. The SDF should reinforce their intelligence gathering and means of verifying information sent to them. Confirming a threat would enable them to intervene more effectively. They could also sensitize populations about what information they should share, why, and how.

Civilians want more protection and a better presence of the Force, and the only way to get that is to signal the presence of AOGs. In vast areas, civilians are scattered, and having military positions everywhere to secure them is problematic:"We cannot have soldiers everywhere, but if we withdraw from certain positions the AOGs will arrive."[80]

Other challenges faced by the SDF are linked to the nature of the areas they operate in. Some areas are difficult to access due to the rugged terrain, making rapid interventions tricky. If a village is attacked, forces also have to deal with pastoralists going to these zones, looking for pastures, regardless of the risks associated with the area, which could be an AOGs hideout.[81] All of these difficulties can impact the time of response by the SDF, and their inability to intervene rapidly undermines their relationship with communities, who expect them to react fast when they are attacked by AOGs.

Differentiating between combatants[82] and non-combatants, and the dilemma between securitization and preservation of civilians' livelihoods

> *In the context of the Central Sahel, it is essential to make the SDF aware that only some of those who remain in certain areas are collaborators of AOGs.*

When asked about the strategy they put in place to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants during operations, a national authority in Mauritania said: "It is difficult to answer this, as in asymmetric conflicts, on the one hand, one or more parties to the conflict seek to hide among civilians. In a conventional war, on the other hand, military signs (uniforms, logos, equipment, etc.) constitute fairly visible means of identification to distinguish between the two categories. But in our region, the Sahel, we are facing the first case, unconventional forces: AOGs, traffickers, rebels ... who are hiding among the populations."[83]

In the context of the Central Sahel, it is essential to make the SDF aware that only some of those who remain in certain areas are collaborators of AOGs. This difficulty of identification creates more mistrust between the SDF and populations.

About this, an NGO worker reported that troops sometimes obstruct the provision of humanitarian responses to populations, as communities left behind are often considered AOG accomplices, and the forces wonder why NGOs are helping them.[84] Humanitarians thus have limited access to populations.

Another restriction is the ban on cultivating crop fields, which has a major impact on food insecurity. For example, in Burkina Faso alone, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 3.4 million people faced food insecurity as of June 2023,[85] not because of climate change, but because they could not cultivate. The reason put forward by the SDF is that tall grass allows AOGs to hide and set up ambushes.[86]

These challenges show the complexity of the situation and operating environment of the Joint Force and national armies of the Sahel in general, as well as the need to mitigate civilian harm to protect them more efficiently.

Challenges linked to damage recognition and monitoring

For defense and security forces, monitoring harm caused to civilians during operations is essential in strengthening relations of trust with communities. In a context of unconventional conflict, it is crucial for the authorities on the one hand to recognize the harm caused to civilians during military and security operations, and on the other to offer compensation to the direct or indirect victims of these operations. Damage can breed resentment among communities, and provide recruitment grounds for AOGs if civilians feel the FC-G5S doesn't acknowledge the damage caused, and isn't taking steps to respond adequately. Thus, responding to all complaints of civil harm with specific, transparent and standardized actions is a strategic imperative for the success of the FC-G5S mission.



Credit : CIVIC

September 2022, Dori, Burkina Faso: *Training of Burkina-Faso Armed Forces on the Protection of Civilians*

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Battalions dedicated to the Joint Force often operate on behalf of national armies without the systematic approval of the Force Commander. Their countries of origin manage them. Certain operations are said to be conducted by the Joint Force when in fact they were national operations directed by the national general staff.[87] If damage is caused, it is often difficult to establish whether it was from a G5 Sahel Joint Force operation or by the national army general staff.

A respondent in Burkina Faso explains that: “It is difficult to distinguish the FC-G5S, however I saw troops from Mali, Togo, Burkina Faso, and also white soldiers.”[88] A former Joint Force member said: “The Joint Force requested for national general staff who contribute troops to share a list with the names of the soldiers sent to serve within the Force to establish responsibilities more easily, but this was

never done."[89] In cases where the responsibility of the Joint Force is clearly established, damage recognition and sometimes amends are made to the victims, their families and/or their communities.

The fact that the Force offers amends creates risks of exploitation of the Force's financial capacity, a Joint Force member in N'Djamena says.[90] Sometimes, when communities know they will be compensated with money in the event of an incident, they manipulate situations to their advantage. A former Joint Force member recalls an event in Niger in December 2021 when a 12-year-old boy was shot during an exchange of fire between the battalion and AOGs.

"We don't know who killed the boy, but the Joint Force took responsibility and met with the boy's family to amicably handle the incident by apologizing for the incident. Some individuals, having heard that the G5 Joint Force can compensate the victims up to 10 million CFA (around US$16 000) in cases of death, manipulated the victim's family so that it this money from the Force."[91] The FC-G5S did not offer financial compensation in this case. This example shows the importance of having a standard procedure of amends within the Force with documentation that clearly states what type of compensation the Force should give to address a type of incident. Although not mandatory, compensation must be considered systematically in case of harm done.

There is also difficulty in attributing responsibility for incidents, because initially there is a problem identifying who committed the abuse. An example given by a former Joint Force staff member involves an incident in Boulkessi, Mali, where 13 civilians were arrested by the Joint Force battalion, and one of them died during their detention. Procedure was not followed in establishing a medical certificate at capture and release, to attest to the civilian's state of health at both these times. If the health of detainees deteriorates during their detention by the battalion, then the battalion is responsible.[92] The legal adviser requested a report of the incident and found inconsistencies. As a result, as a sanction, the Force Commander requested the removal of the entire battalion.

The Joint Force did not compensate the victims because this particular operation was not commanded by the Force. It was a Malian general army staff operation that used the Joint Force battalion to conduct the operation. In this case, lack of respect for documenting procedures makes it difficult for the victims' families to seek justice, as there is no proof of what happened. National authorities should have carried out an investigation.

Secure interactions/collaboration with communities

In populated areas where AOGs operate, when communities are suspected of collaborating with the SDF, they are often violently repressed. Therefore, in some cases, civil-military activities contribute to putting the population at risk rather than strengthening ties. The SDF must find ways to help communities and interact with them through other means, such as relying on humanitarian organizations to distribute donations.[93] However, many humanitarian organizations often refuse to work too closely with the military, as it could compromise their neutrality.

To ensure the safety of communities, militaries should avoid making radio, television or social media announcements and advertisements of these activities and donations. They should liaise beforehand with the local administrative authorities, who should take measures to protect the civilian beneficiaries. They should introduce the local populations to military information sharing or intelligence methods in the event of AOGs elements being present and raise awareness among local populations of community engagement on ways to protect themselves in the event of AOGs attacks.

A soldier in Mauritania told researchers that civilians often did not cooperate with the SDF because they were not aware of the security challenges in their area, which made it difficult for them to report accurately.

The Force needs help to protect information sources, which makes collaboration with the communities more difficult. "We want people to collaborate and denounce suspected AOGs, but then the person is expected to come and testify against them in court, which puts the informant at risk. The Force must know how to exploit the information received."[94]

CONCLUSION

The Force recognizes that over the years it has learnt many lessons on issues of POC, and took necessary measures to prevent damage before and during operations, put in place mechanisms to recognize damage, and address it more effectively. However, some challenges remain.

In the case of the Joint Force, the Compliance Framework was useful, relevant and applicable. CITAC with its recommendations makes it possible to adapt feedback received from past operations and military members who participate in operations planning. The head of operations is also the head of the CITAC Committee, and this double hatting allows for the mechanisms to be at the heart of the operational process.

As the Sahel region faces several political and security changes that alter the fight against insecurity, with new regional and international alliances, redefining the place for mechanisms such as CITAC is crucial. Implementing it at the national level, through each country's national army general staff, may make it more sustainable to ensure the effective protection of civilians living in areas affected by insecurity.

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52. As an example, a Joint Force officer noted that following an attack on the village of Seytenga in Burkina Faso in June 2022 where close to 80 civilians were killed, the Force provided support to the populations.
53. Interview with military official 2, N'Djamena, August 2022.
54. Interview with military official 3, N'beiket Lahwach, May 2023.
55. "Burkina Faso: des "zones d'intérêt militaire" créées pour lutter contre les violences jihadistes," *Le Journal De L'Afrique*, June 21, 2022, www.france24.com/fr/%C3%A9missions/journal-de-l-afrique/20220621-burkina-des-zones-d-int%C3%A9r%C3%AAt-militaire-cr%C3%A9%C3%A9es-toute-pr%C3%A9sence-humaine-interdite
56. "A person employed by a town to make public announcements or proclamations, usually by shouting in the streets", *Dictionary.com*, www.dictionary.com/browse/town-crier
57. Interview with former Joint Force member 2, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
58. Interview with Joint Force civilian staff, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
59. Judicialization is based on the mechanisms of checks and balances between the powers to maintain State equilibrium and it is characterized by the positioning of the judicial above legislative and administrative spheres in order to control the action of the Legislature and protect the society against abuse of the Executive (Tate and Vallinder, 1995). From: *Social Science & Medicine*, 2014.
60. L'ONUDC forme une centaine d'officiers burkinabés à la Composante Police de la Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel, March 30, 2019, www.g5sahel.org/l-onudc-forme-une-centaine-d-officiers-burkinabes-a-la-composante-police-de-la-force-conjointe-du-g5-sahel/
61. Interview with CITAC member 1, N'Djamena, August 2022.
62. Interview with Joint Force military official 5, N'beiket Lahwach, May 2023.
63. Note that CITAC was based on the former structure of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and will be adapted to the structure since the creation of the État-major de Coordination de la Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel.
64. Interview with CITAC member 3, N'Djamena.
65. Interview with former CITAC member, N'Djamena, August 2022.
66. Interview military official 5, N'beiket Lahwach, June 2023.
67. Interview with former Joint Force member, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
68. Interview with former Joint Force member, Ouagadougou, July 2022..
69. Interview with CITAC member 1, N'Djamena, August 2022.
70. Interview with civilian/national authority, Nouakchott, June 2023.
71. Interview with Joint Force member 1, N'Djamena, August 2023.
72. Interview with Joint Force member—CITAC 3, N'Djamena, August 2023.
73. Interview with former Joint Force member—CITAC 2, N'Djamena, August 2023.
74. Interview with Joint Force—CITAC member 2, N'Djamena, August 2023.
75. Interview with civilian 12, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
76. Interview with civilian 5, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
77. Interview with former Joint Force member, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
78. Interview with civilian 7—Ouagadougou, July 2023.
79. Interview with military official 3, N'Djamena, August 2023.
80. Interview with military official 1, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
81. Interview with military official 4, N'beiket Lahwach, June 2023.
82. Interview with CSO 4, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
83. Interview with national authority 1, Nouakchott, June 2023.

84. Interview with civilian 8, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
85. Burkina Faso: Humanitarian Snapshot, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, www.unocha.org/publications/report/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-humanitarian-snapshot-30-june-2023
86. Interview with civilian 17, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
87. Interview with military official 2, N'Djamena, August 2022.
88. Interview with civilian 14, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
89. Interview with former Joint Force member, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
90. Interview with former Joint Force member 1, N'Djamena, August 2023.
91. Interview with military official 1, Joint Force member, N'Djamena, August 2023.
92. Interview with civilian 5, Joint Force member, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
93. Interview with civilian 5, Ouagadougou, July 2023.
94. Interview with CITAC member 2, N'Djamena, August 2022.

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Cover image:
February 25, 2020, Nouakchott, Mauritania:
Flintlock Medical Civil Actions Program in Nouakchott

Credit: Staff Sgt. Sidney Sale U.S. Africa Command