

REPORT — SPRING 2021

# Crossing the wilderness

Europe and the Sahel



This report is part of Friends of Europe's Peace, Security and Defence programme. Written by Paul Taylor, it brings together the views of scholars, policymakers and senior defence and security stakeholders.

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# Foreword



**João Gomes Cravinho,**  
Minister of Defence, Portugal

This report is a very welcome contribution for a better understanding in Europe of the relevance of the Sahel region and its importance for the security of Europeans. Friends of Europe, an independent think tank with a strong commitment to promote engagement between European policymakers and civil society, and the author, Paul Taylor, who has an impressive experience of reporting and analysing conflicts and European institutions, are to be congratulated for this high-quality report based on interviews with more than 40 people, from senior officials to NGOs, from military officers to local partners.

The report aims at helping us answer two vital questions. First, why should we in Europe care about the Sahel? Second, how can we better support states and communities in the Sahel to address our common security challenges?

The most immediate and obvious answer is that the EU has three CSDP missions in the Sahel, two in Mali and one in Niger. The EU is also the biggest foreign donor in the Sahel. Europe has invested strongly in military capacity building but also, more broadly, in the development of this strategically vital region, which is one of the poorest in the world. The EU has – and must maintain – a comprehensive and holistic approach to security.

Portugal has been a strong contributor to these multilateral missions in the Sahel, with more than 1,700 Portuguese military deployed in UN and EU missions since 2013, including in command functions. For us, the vital importance of security and stability of the neighbours of our neighbours is very clear, just as it is clear that the closest foreign capital to Lisbon is Rabat.

But I am aware that the importance of the Sahel might not be as obvious across the whole of Europe. I know that there is often the

impression that the Sahel region is a concern for southern European states only. I am also aware that some believe that Europe should be focusing in strategic competitors, like Russia and China. The idea that we can abandon the southern neighbourhood and focus only on the East, or even in the Far East is, however, a dangerous misconception. We should remind those primarily concerned with China and Russia that they have a growing presence in the Middle East and Africa, and geopolitical awareness requires us to bear this in mind.

A 360-degree approach to European defence priorities is not just a matter of solidarity. It is also a matter of good strategy. We need to address the growing arc of crises in our immediate neighbourhood because security crises and armed conflicts tend to be contagious, with multiple, often faraway impacts, that are difficult to predict. The growth of intensity in migration in 2015 and 2016 is a good example of this. It was largely due to security crises in parts of the Middle East and Africa, but it had a strong impact across the whole of Europe, especially in fuelling populism and racism.

As the report makes clear, the Sahel is historically a major transit area, and in recent years, it has been witness to the trafficking of people, drugs and weapons to Europe. More recently, there was a growing threat of the consolidation of safe havens for terrorist groups linked to Al Qaeda and Daesh that represent a violent threat to locals, but also to the security of Europeans, a target of choice of these groups. The security of the Sahel is vital for the security of Europe and for the stability of a vast region from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Guinea, affecting the lives of millions of people. The collapse of any of the Sahelian states would be a major risk for the security of North and West Africa, with significant knock-on effects for the security of Europe. This was a real risk in 2013, when the UN and the Malian

government appealed for external help. The rapid military response by France was decisive in avoiding this catastrophic scenario for the region and for European security. It is only right that the EU should contribute to the very demanding effort of promoting peace and prosperity in the Sahel. The European Council conclusions of April 2021 on the new EU Strategy for the Sahel rightly point to the need for a “civilian and political leap forward” focused on “sustainable social, environmental and economic development”, alongside the “continued support for Sahel partners in fighting terrorist armed groups”.

Let me conclude by briefly highlighting three specific problems addressed in this report, which I believe are crucial for our successful engagement in the Sahel.

First, as the report points out, we need to do better in engaging in dialogue with our African partners at different levels: national, regional and local. This dialogue can sometimes be demanding for both sides, but it is indispensable. The problems in the Sahel can ultimately only be solved by local actors. In this respect, Europe should more effectively promote better governance, more equitable development and greater respect for human rights, but a strong degree of local ownership and commitment is essential. One of the priorities of the Portuguese presidency of the Council of the EU has been greater political engagement with our African partners. This is especially important in this case because in dealing with fluid transnational armed groups, an effective response must be regional. The role of G5 Sahel as a proactive regional hub seems vital, but so is the role of other neighbours, as well as of regional organisations, such as ECOWAS.

A second major point relates to the role of the military in the conflict in the Sahel. The crisis in the Sahel is about more than just effectively combating armed groups. Without the security provided by an effective military response that is able to counter armed groups, which are devoted to a violent exclusionary vision of Islam, nothing else will be possible. The EU toolkit is uniquely diverse, and this is an added value, but we need to remember that the military dimension is an

indispensable part of it. More robust and flexible mandates for CSDP missions, including more active capacity building, potentially involving operational mentoring and close cooperation with existing military schools, could contribute towards greater military effectiveness in the Sahel.

Third, the civilian and development dimensions are vital. We need to make sure that the local population sees these insurgents as the main obstacle to greater development and prosperity. Therefore, as the report points out, we need to be much more effective in the use of the full toolkit of the EU, and this requires better coordination of EU efforts at the various relevant levels and a more strategic deployment of all its tools. In more specific terms, the report is right in pointing to the vital importance of providing basic public services alongside basic security in the remote and poor areas most affected by the conflict. In particular, basic education for all – boys and girls – and better economic prospects will be the key for an enduring peace.

This is, therefore, a very useful report in raising awareness in Europe about the importance of the Sahel. It does not shy away from pointing problems and limitations in the current engagement of the EU in the region. The job of think tanks, such as Friends of Europe, is precisely to provoke discussion about major challenges to European security and external action. These exercises in thinking outside of the box are indispensable for the decision-maker. Very often missing from academic papers is a focus not just on the problems, but also on the solutions, and I believe that this report deserves praise precisely because of its effort to offer concrete suggestion on how the EU can better engage with the Sahel. This report helps us enrich our understanding of the reality in the Sahel, and this in turn is a major contribution towards properly designed policies and responses. Thank you, Friends of Europe!

**João Gomes Cravinho,**

Minister of Defence, Portugal

Lisboa, 25.4.2021.

# Methodology and Acknowledgments



**Paul Taylor**  
Senior Fellow,  
Friends of Europe

This is the eighth in a series of reports I have written for Friends of Europe on European defence issues. It follows country studies on France and Germany in 2017, the United Kingdom and Poland in 2018, Italy and Mediterranean Security in 2019, and reports on Transatlantic Defence Cooperation in the Trump Era and on the Arctic and European Security in 2020.

Sadly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to visit the Sahel countries or travel within Europe for my research - a severe handicap for a shoe-leather reporter. I had to do my fact-finding and interviews entirely from my home in France by videoconference, telephone, email and a lot of reading. Fortunately, the miracle of Zoom and Skype makes it possible to reach Niamey, Bamako, Ouagadougou, Nouakchott or Dakar in the morning, Brussels, Paris, Berlin or Stockholm in the afternoon and Washington, DC in the evening.

The report is based on nearly 40 in-depth interviews and roundtables with senior officials of governments and international organisations, including the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the G5 Sahel, diplomats, members of parliament, military officers, past and present, strategists, development experts, relief workers, civil society representatives and leaders of non-government organisations across the Sahel, around Europe and in the United States. The interviews were conducted between December 2020 and March 2021.

Most of the serving officials, soldiers and diplomats whom I interviewed were able to talk only on condition they were not

identified, due to the nature of their positions. Others, such as the Executive Secretary of the G5 Sahel, Maman Sidikou, Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha González, and Ramtane Lamamra, the African Union's High Representative for Silencing the Guns and former Algerian foreign minister, agreed to on-the-record interviews, for which I am most grateful.

Many other people in the policy and think tank community, NGOs and media helped with information, analysis, questions and perspectives.

In addition to those quoted or footnoted in the report, I would like to thank Anna Terron, Belen Calvo, Javier Nart MEP, Alviina Alametsä MEP, Peter Neumann, Andrew Chie, J. Peter Pham, Cyril Carcy, Giuseppe Famà, Jean-Paul Deconinck, Vianney Bisimwa, Omer Kabore, Grégoire Devaux, Daniel Eizenga, Jonathan Lynn, Michel Marciano, Wassim Nasr and Katherine Pye for their kind help.

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I am grateful to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) for their help with statistics and graphics on violence in the Sahel region.

At Friends of Europe, I am grateful to Geert Cami and Dharmendra Kanani for their support and encouragement, to Alex O'Mahony,

Elena Saenz Feehan and Krystal Gaillard in the Peace, Security and Defence Programme for their tireless, cheerful assistance and constructive ideas, and to my fellow senior fellows Jamie Shea, Camilla Toulmin and Chris Kremidas-Courtney, and to Paul Walton, Director for Africa, for stimulating brainstorming. Krystal Gaillard also created the Sahel timeline annexed to this report.

I am especially grateful to Jamie Shea, Camilla Toulmin - an oracle on Malian rural development and history - and to Guillaume Lacaille, an expert on security sector reform at the NGO Democratic Control of Armed Forces, and to Boukary Sangaré, a Malian anthropologist, for agreeing to read the first draft of my study and offering incisive comments, suggestions and challenges.

Needless to say, the views expressed here, and any errors, are mine and not theirs.

As always, I'm deeply thankful to my wife Catherine for her companionship and support while I worked on this project through anxious periods of semi-confinement.



**Paul Taylor**  
Senior Fellow, Friends of Europe





Presidents of the G5 Sahel and France at the Press Conference of the Pau Summit

## Executive summary

### No promised land

France and its European partners are locked in a long-term struggle to try to stabilise the vast Sahel region, spanning from Mauritania to Chad, in which there will be no outright victory over jihadist-backed insurgents and tangible progress is hard to measure.

Often described as France's Afghanistan, the conflict risks becoming Europe's Afghanistan.

There is no promised land at the end of the wilderness. But the European Union and its member states can achieve a better outcome than the present deadly instability if they make more targeted, integrated and conditional use of

the substantial financial and military resources they are ploughing into the region.

The Sahel needs tough love from Europe - a strategy to encourage political dialogue, governance reforms, decentralisation, protecting civilians, better public services and the empowerment of women and young people, alongside security assistance, rather than an obsessive focus on counter-terrorism with a blind eye to corruption and rights abuses. It also needs international partners to deliver on the pledges they make at high-profile conferences.

Eight years after France's military intervention at the request of the Malian government to repel Islamist-dominated armed groups

advancing rapidly through central Mali and possibly towards the capital, Bamako, the security situation has deteriorated across the central Sahel region, especially in the so-called tri-border area where Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger meet.

The numbers of civilian casualties and displaced persons continues to rise, food insecurity has worsened and the footprint of jihadist groups has expanded southwards and westwards. That has spurred the growth of 'self-defence' militias, often linked to the official security forces, that have been responsible for the largest number of civilian deaths every year since 2017.

There are three reasons why the arid region with limited natural resources holds strategic importance for the European Union, and not just for France, the former colonial power:

- the proliferation of jihadist insurgents, with connections to ISIS and Al Qaeda networks in Libya and the Middle East, threatens to create a safe haven from which to destabilise fragile Sahel states and their neighbours and potentially incite radicalised young Muslims in Europe to violence;
- destabilisation in the Sahel risks spreading to key south Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and is already threatening West African partners from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Guinea (notably Senegal, Ghana, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria) where

Europe has major economic, political and demographic interests; and

- the central position of the Sahel makes it a historic crossroads for migration and trafficking of goods, narcotics, weapons and people. Deeper instability and humanitarian crisis would be bound to trigger increased irregular migration to Europe from and through the region.

When trying to explain why the situation in the region continues to deteriorate after eight years of growing international engagement, French and EU officials repeat the same counterfactual: it would have been much worse if we hadn't intervened. States would have collapsed, populations would have been uprooted in greater numbers, and the Sahel would be a safe haven for jihadist groups extending their tentacles from Senegal to Nigeria.

## Crisis of legitimacy

The Group of Five Sahel (G5S) states - Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad - are among the world's poorest countries, despite gold, uranium and oil deposits. They cover an area larger than that of the EU with a population of 84mn. Some 5mn people have been uprooted by conflict and hunger. Agriculture and pastoralism are the main economic activities but also frequent sources of tension exploited by jihadist groups.

Numerous factors have caused a deterioration of the situation - the disruptive impact of climate change, fuelling historic disputes over water and land between herders and farmers, rapid population growth, widespread poverty and unemployment, weak governance, corruption, lawlessness, human rights violations and multiple ethnic and community conflicts.

Central governments that lack broad popular legitimacy are unable to impose their authority or provide public services over large areas of their territory. State security forces and allied militias, when they are present in peripheral areas, are often feared as much or more than the insurgents due to human rights abuses, torture and extrajudicial killings.

Since 2020, the humanitarian crisis has been worsened by COVID-19, which has set back trade and economic activity, even though Sahel countries, where more than half the population is under the age of 15, have suffered fewer deaths proportionally than older Western societies.

Women and children are among the hardest hit by the conflict, which has forced the closure of some 3,000 schools and often shut traditional markets, depriving many women of the means to sell goods and feed their families, and raising pressure on extended family networks.

A peace agreement brokered by Algeria with United States and European support in 2015 with Tuareg rebel movements in Mali - though not with the main jihadist groups - has gone largely unimplemented. The political elite in Bamako showed little inclination to share power or accept regional autonomy, while the rebels were reluctant to disarm and the jihadists had no interest in cooperating.

The holding of presidential elections in Burkina Faso and Niger in late 2020 and early 2021 respectively - despite the security situation - and the installation of a more inclusive civil-military transitional authority in Mali, following the coup that ousted former elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in 2020, may have created momentum towards a long overdue revival of peace efforts and governance reforms. But it is very fragile.

Just how brittle the region's governments are was highlighted in mid-April 2021 when France's strongest ally in the Sahel, Chad President Idriss Deby, was killed fighting off an armed rebellion hours after being proclaimed winner of a deeply flawed presidential election that would have given him a sixth term after more than 30 years in power. The sudden death of the veteran autocrat removed a key military partner of the West in central Africa, whose

country hosts the headquarters of French-led Operation Barkhane, fighting jihadist insurgents across the Sahel.

Leaders of the G5S states made impressive-sounding commitments at a summit in N'Djamena, Chad in February 2021 to implement the Algiers agreement, improve security, reform the military, return basic state services to areas reclaimed from insurgents, end impunity for atrocities and crack down on corruption. European partners should hold them to those commitments.

### **Instability and intervention**

While Mali had experienced periodic revolts by northern Tuareg separatists for decades, instability spiked after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings that toppled some authoritarian rulers in north Africa.

Algeria had driven the remnants of Islamist fighters defeated in its 1990s civil war southwards into the desert borderlands, where they formed the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) that became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007, pledging allegiance to the jihadist franchise founded by Osama bin Laden. That movement has formed a broader coalition incorporating other Islamist groups known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM).

Since 2015, a breakaway jihadist group declaring direct allegiance to the Islamic State movement based in Syria and Iraq - Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) - has been responsible

for a growing wave of violence in eastern Mali, western Niger and northern Burkina Faso. The two groups initially cooperated but have clashed, with ISGS seeking to impose its more absolutist, centralised and ultra-violent ideology.

The Franco-British-led NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 sparked an uncontrolled proliferation of looted Libyan weapons and the return of Tuareg fighters, who had worked as mercenaries for Muammar Gaddafi, across unguarded borders. France intervened militarily in Mali in 2013 with US support to prevent jihadist fighters allied with Tuareg insurgents from advancing towards Bamako. Paris saw a threat not only to its West African *pré carré* (backyard), but also of a terrorist safe haven from which to mount potential attacks in France and Europe.

Since 2014, the French counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane has extended to the whole region with some 5,100 soldiers now engaged in combat operations and in training and supporting the armed forces of the Sahel states and a nascent G5 Sahel Joint Force. In addition to crucial US intelligence and logistical assistance, Germany, Spain, Denmark and the United Kingdom have provided airlift and helicopter support for Barkhane. France has lost 55 soldiers in Mali since 2013.

Despite intense French pressure on EU partners to share the security burden, only Estonia contributed ground forces to Barkhane. Other European governments and parliaments have been unwilling to risk casualties in combat operations in the Sahel.

A French-led European special forces group, Task Force Takuba, became operational in 2020 to advise, support and accompany Malian armed forces in the tri-border area. Estonian special forces joined from the outset. Swedish and Czech units have since arrived, and Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal and Belgium have expressed interest in contributing.

The United States has 800 soldiers in Niger and contributes crucial intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, strategic airlift and air-to-air refuelling for Barkhane. US officers participated in the planning and conduct of French-led joint operations Bourrasque and Eclipse with troops from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2020 and 2021. The US has also carried out officer training for the armed forces of Sahel countries. For example, the leader of the Malian military coup, Colonel Assimi Goïta, trained with US special forces.

The Trump administration signalled in early 2020 its intention to draw down US forces in Africa but did not touch the Sahel deployment. The Biden administration has ordered a global posture review. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a G5 Sahel summit in February 2021 that Washington would “build on existing efforts in West Africa and share lessons in the global fight against violent extremism”, but stopped short of a commitment, eagerly sought by France, to maintain its military presence.

A mostly African 12,000-soldier United Nations peacekeeping force known as MINUSMA - the largest and most dangerous UN operation worldwide - and an EU military training mission

are also deployed in Mali, as well as EU civilian capacity-building missions in Mali and Niger. MINUSMA's ability to protect the civilian population is constrained by limited equipment and training of many of its national components and the constraints of a UN mandate, which critics say make it a sitting target. The force has lost more than 230 lives since 2013, of which 135 were due to hostile action.

The conflict has caused a rising number of casualties, including at least 2,438 civilians out of a total estimated death toll of 6,257 in 2020 - the deadliest year so far. These macabre statistics, compiled by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), show more civilians were killed by security forces and allied militias than by jihadist rebels or criminal groups.

### **Containment, not victory**

French-led intervention removed the most immediate threat to the survival of states. Yet despite tactical successes including the elimination of key insurgent leaders and hundreds of fighters of the two main jihadist groups, French commanders acknowledge that Barkhane can at most contain and degrade the insurgents. “We will never achieve a definitive victory”, the French armed forces chief-of-staff, General François Lecointre, told the public in November 2019.

French President Emmanuel Macron inherited the Sahel war in 2017 from his predecessor, François Hollande, and has prosecuted it with broad backing from the political establishment



Touareg capture Timbuktu as Mali junta restores constitution

but dwindling public support. Macron pressed G5S leaders to reaffirm publicly their request for continued French military presence, summoning them to a summit in Pau, France in 2020 to renew their vows and approve a 'military surge' to roll back jihadist gains.

A year later, after participating by video in the N'Djamena summit, he declared that the surge had "saved the Sahel for the second time" and called for a "civilian surge" to return state services to areas cleared of rebel fighters.

Macron rejected calls by Malian politicians to try to bring leaders of the Al Qaeda-linked coalition known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) into a political dialogue. The French president said G5S leaders had agreed that veteran northern Tuareg rebel lyad

Ag Ghaly, leader of GSIM, and Amadou Koufa, his deputy who leads the Katiba Macina armed group active in central Mali, were "terrorist chiefs ... enemies and under no circumstances interlocutors". He called for "reinforced action to decapitate these organisations".

That was in marked contrast with efforts by Mali's ex-president Keïta, the transitional authorities that replaced him and Burkina Faso's re-elected president to reach out to radical movements in an attempt to reduce violence and end the conflicts through dialogue.

On the face of things, France would appear to be going all out to kill the very insurgent leaders with whom some of its African partners wish at least to explore the possibility of a political solution. The reality is more complex. French

officials said Macron needed to put a name and face on the “invisible enemy” in the Sahel to justify the military action and the casualties to voters at home. But it was up to governments in the region to decide with whom to talk.

General Lecointre was artfully ambiguous in a radio interview in late 2020, saying that selecting interlocutors was “a choice for politicians, and in the first place for Malian politicians”. While France took a principled position of not negotiating with terrorists, he said, “that does not mean that one doesn’t negotiate with an enemy”.

“Reaching an understanding with someone you have fought against requires the ability to choose the right negotiating partner - someone who is representative and legitimate. That will one day raise the question of a political agreement with people who at one stage or another were the enemies of Barkhane and the enemies of the Malian armed forces,” he added.

### **No proxy war, French lead**

While the Sahel conflict bears similarities to the long-running Afghanistan wars, French officials are at pains to point out that it is not a proxy war. There is some evidence of Russian and Turkish (dis)information activities aimed at undermining the French presence, but geopolitical rivals are not arming or funding the jihadists. Nor are they intervening with drones or mercenaries as in Libya. Key neighbours including Algeria, Morocco, Ghana and Nigeria are actively trying to promote peace and stability.

Morocco and Gulf Arab states have invested in building mosques and training imams in Mali, and diplomats see a Saudi hand in promoting its rigorist Wahhabi brand of Islam over the historically tolerant and eclectic Maliki and Sufi strains long prevalent in the region. Some see a Saudi influence through high-profile Malian politico-religious leader Imam Mahmoud Dikho, who has acted as an intermediary between the Bamako government and jihadist groups, and who led mass protest rallies against President Keita in 2019 and 2020 before the military coup.

Russia has sold arms to Sahel governments, some of whose military commanders underwent officer training in Moscow. State-backed Russian mercenaries of the Wagner Group military company are present in Libya and the Central African Republic but not in the Sahel. China and Turkey are less present in the Sahel, where economic pickings are slim, than in other parts of Africa, where they are voraciously expanding their presence.

Some relief workers and NGOs operating in the Sahel say French-led security operations have contributed to displacement and at times hampered mediation and development efforts on the ground, undermining trust between humanitarian workers and local populations. However, the French military generally gets high marks for the targeted nature of their operations. There is greater concern about the behaviour of irregularly paid and ill-disciplined national defence and security forces, and officially sanctioned ‘self-defence’ militias.

Critics among humanitarian workers contend that French and EU policies buttress flawed governments, turning a blind eye to corruption, human rights abuses and ethnic favouritism in the name of fighting terrorism and upholding ‘stability’. Without addressing governance shortcomings through ethnic inclusion, power sharing and transparency, they argue, development and sustainable stability are impossible.

In response, French and EU officials interviewed for this report highlighted the fragility and slender human and financial resources of the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the low ratio of civil servants to the population, and the political sensitivity of European former colonial powers being seen to pressure African governments.

In practice, European governments and the European Commission tend to take their lead in the Sahel from France, whatever their private misgivings. Despite differences of approach between Berlin and Paris, Germany is politically locked into supporting French policy, not least in order to keep the low military risk exposure demanded by parliament and German public opinion.

### **Widening coalitions, endless coordination**

In response to casualties and setbacks in the field, France has mobilised growing coalitions of European and international actors to widen the panoply of development and humanitarian action and share the military burden, while retaining operational command and control.

Successive initiatives including the Sahel Alliance established in 2017 bringing together donors and development partners, the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) launched in 2019 to work on strengthening security forces, and the overarching Coalition for the Sahel created in 2020 have been layered on top of each other, sometimes ruffling political feathers and multiplying coordination meetings.

“Trying to coordinate their interventions has an expensive transactional cost”, said Maman Sambo Sidikou, the Executive Secretary of the G5 Sahel. “We simply can’t afford it if we want to make a difference in Sahelians’ livelihoods.”

Mali is home to the largest number of EU peace, security and development tools and is seen by some in Brussels as a test bed for the implementation of the EU’s Global Strategy for an integrated foreign, security and development policy. Since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, this has been rebranded a “Team Europe” approach, aiming to combine the resources of the Union, its member states and financial institutions.

Critics say EU effectiveness has been hampered by the mixed quality, short tours of duty and limited mandate of its security trainers and the relatively thin staffing of its diplomatic delegations in the Sahel countries. Priorities have been skewed by a short-term focus on stemming migration, although that has generated additional resources for the Sahel. And EU policy suffers from the familiar ‘too many cooks’ syndrome inherent in the Union’s complex institutional structure and in coordination between Brussels and member states.



French and Malian soldiers together in the Liptako-Gourma region

Responsibility for the Sahel is divided among three separate departments - the European External Action Service, the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (previously Development and Cooperation), and the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations - each with its own decision-making procedures. They coordinate endlessly but no one is in ultimate charge.

The EU has had a Sahel policy since 2011. Brussels has sought to combine development assistance, humanitarian aid and capacity-building in a comprehensive approach but has so far fought shy of using conditionality to insist on politically sensitive governance reforms in the host countries. It adopted a five-year Sahel action plan

in 2015, adding resources from the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa created that year. Altogether the EU and member states have spent €8.5bn on the Sahel since 2014, not including the cost of France's Operation Barkhane, estimated at close to €1bn a year in 2020.

EU policy was set to be overhauled in spring 2021 with a new strategy promising a more hard-nosed, transactional and prioritised approach. The new policy, due to be signed off by EU foreign ministers, introduces concepts such as 'shared responsibility' and 'mutual accountability' to signal that Europe is prepared to withhold budget assistance to governments that do not meet their own commitments to reform governance, fight corruption and end impunity for human rights abuses. Those

funds might be redirected through international agencies and NGOs to ensure the civilian population does not suffer.

It remains to be seen how far the Commission and the External Action Service will be willing or permitted by member states to turn the taps off. Some capitals and Commission departments have long opposed the principle of conditionality. Direct budget support to Mali was suspended temporarily after the August 2020 military coup but restored after the transitional government was installed three months later and pledged elections in March 2022.

Without political change and more inclusive governance in the region, the EU risks pouring increasing amounts of money into the sands of the Sahel to achieve little improvement while the French and their military partners are doomed to a costly and open-ended containment exercise.

### Exit strategies?

Stuck in a war it cannot win but dare not lose, France has sought burden-sharing solutions through ‘Sahelisation’, ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘Africanisation’ of the security, stabilisation, financial and development challenges.

Yet despite Operation Barkhane’s declared aim of giving “partner states the capacity to ensure their own security autonomously”, it is not clear that better trained and armed G5S forces would be able to defeat the insurgents or even hold

them at bay if French forces were to withdraw. So far they have no aviation capability, vital in such a vast theatre.

Paris officials studiously avoid even vague timelines for that goal, although Macron clearly aims to reduce the French deployment before the 2022 presidential election.

Notwithstanding the creation of the G5 Sahel structures, governments and armed forces in those countries remain overwhelmingly national. Habits of cooperation will be slow to form. While the 5,100-strong G5S Joint Force, created to address cross-border security threats, has an integrated theatre command in Bamako and a joint intelligence fusion centre in Niamey, field units remain under national tactical command and soldiers are recruited and paid nationally. The Joint Force played a role in joint counter-terrorism operations with Barkhane in 2020 and 2021 but remains very much a work in progress.

Paris has pressed for the UN to provide permanent funding for the G5 Sahel Joint Force and place it under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, but the Security Council has failed to agree on such an approach so far. The United States, under the Trump administration, and Britain both opposed it. Meanwhile, the EU is providing most of the funding.

A promised African Union (AU) peacekeeping force for the region has yet to materialise. The AU appointed a special envoy for the region,

former Burundi president Pierre Buyoya, in 2012 but his small civilian AU Mission for Mali and the Sahel gained little traction and he resigned in 2020 and died after being convicted of the assassination of his predecessor.

A greater AU political and military role in stabilising the Sahel, with EU financial and technical support, would fit with the idealistic vision in Brussels and Addis Ababa of an equal Africa-Europe partnership. But it seems a distant prospect.

Efforts by Algeria to create an intelligence fusion unit for the Maghreb-Sahel region and mediate diplomatically have yielded uneven results, as the very limited implementation of the 2015 Algiers agreement illustrates. Diplomatic action by other neighbours both bilaterally in the case of Ghana and Senegal and through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has the potential to increase security, political and economic support for the central Sahel countries, driven not least by those neighbours' fears of jihadist threats seeping across their borders.

Based on more than 45 interviews with African, European, US and UN policymakers, military commanders, diplomats, aid officials, experts, civil society activists and relief workers, this study considers alternatives for European policy in the Sahel and explores potential long-term 'exit strategies'. The term is a misnomer in that the EU effort to stabilise the Sahel is and must remain open-ended, but it reflects the fact that resources and public support are not unlimited.

### Among the key recommendations are:

- a more conditional approach to EU budget assistance for Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, linking payments to an agreed set of benchmarks for key governance reforms, with a credible resolve to withhold direct financial support if governments do not fulfil their own commitments; all external partners should make military equipment support conditional on much more effective measures to stem endemic corruption in national defence budgets;
- more robust mandates and organisation of the EU military and civilian missions in Mali and Niger, with longer tours of duty for seconded trainers, continued mentoring in the field for graduates of EU training, and the provision of more tailored and appropriate equipment for Sahel forces to increase their mobility and flexibility; a beefed-up EU diplomatic presence with more delegated authority to adapt EU programmes to needs on the ground;
- EU and international support for both local inter-community mediation and Sahel governments' efforts to promote an inclusive national dialogue including all those forces willing to pursue peaceful solutions and participate in decentralised institutions; this may include elements of the GSIM, which has expressed willingness to enter talks, but is unlikely to include ISGS, which shows no interest in peace or negotiations;

- a more streamlined approach to key priorities for development assistance to Sahel countries centred on education and training, especially for girls, locally managed irrigation and agriculture projects, micro-credit and small business support, particularly for women, and institution-building in justice, human rights and public services;
- a phased reduction of the French military presence over five years, refocused primarily on intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance, training and air support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force and national armed forces; and
- in the short-term, MINUSMA should be given a more robust mandate and equipment, notably in helicopters, to improve the protection of civilians; in the long run, its role should be made redundant by a combination of the training and deployment of national security forces, the ramp-up of the G5 Sahel Joint Force in border regions, and a possible African Union peacekeeping presence.



UN feeding centre for internally displaced people in Burkina Faso

## CHAPTER 1

# ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT IN MALI

# Empires in the sand

For centuries from the early 13th century to the turn of the 17th century, the central Sahel was the core of empires that stretched from the Atlantic to the Sahara. At its peak, the Mali Empire, wealthy from gold, salt and trade, encompassed an estimated 1.24mn sq km including all of present-day Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and parts of what are now Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

The Moroccan-Berber scholar Ibn Battuta, who travelled the region in 1353, extolled a country with safe roads whose people had a strong sense of justice. "Neither traveller nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence," he wrote. <sup>(1)</sup> The rule of law and public security were arguably more widespread then than in the early 21st century.

The borders of present-day Mali were drawn by the French, who colonised the country as French Sudan in 1893 and, after suppressing resistance from Tuareg fighters in the north, administered it as part of the federation of French West Africa. Tens of thousands of Malian soldiers fought for France as enlisted or conscripted infantrymen (*tirailleurs sénégalais*) in two world wars and in its colonial wars in

Indochina and Algeria. This left a legacy of resentment among Malians, who struggled for decades for recognition of their sacrifice and for equal pensions, but also a common historic bond, perpetuated by migration to France and membership of the community of French-speaking countries (*la Francophonie*) and of the common CFA franc currency.

The country gained independence peacefully in 1960 as part of the Federation of Mali with Senegal, which broke away the same year. The Republic of Mali soon became a one-party state declaring socialist goals, withdrawing from the Franc Zone in 1962 and aligning itself with the Soviet Union before returning to the Franc Zone in 1984 after economic reforms turned sour.

Following a coup in 1968, Mali became a military dictatorship until 1991, when student protests in which some 200 people died led to the ouster of former president Moussa and the following year and multi-party civilian rule. The new president, Alpha Oumar Konaré, made some effort at decentralisation and greater ethnic and political inclusion in the Bambara-dominated governments in Bamako.

(1) Ibn Battuta: *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, Translated by Sir Hamilton Gibb. Routledge, ISBN 0-7100-9568-6.

# Tuareg revolts

The mostly nomadic Tuareg people who live in a vast area of the sparsely populated, arid central Sahara and Sahel enjoyed a substantial degree of autonomy in the colonial period. In contrast with their centralised, uniform governance elsewhere in Africa, the French saw the expediency of administering northern Mali through Tuareg chieftains and leaving the traditional social hierarchy intact, although they confiscated camels and vital grazing land, prompting a revolt in 1917.

With the end of French rule, the Tuareg found themselves divided among several sovereign states, principally Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, but also Algeria and Libya. In Mali, they make up only 1.7% of the 20mn population, but are the traditional dominant power in a large swathe of the north of the country, including the city of Kidal.

Aspirations to self-rule as well as economic grievances and drought fuelled a series of Tuareg revolts against the central Malian state in the 1960s, 1990s, 2000s and again from 2012, when the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) unilaterally declared the independence of northern Mali.

The region had been destabilised by the arrival of Algerian Islamist militants forced southwards into the unguarded desert borderlands after their defeat in the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. They formed the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria in 1998 that became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007, pledging allegiance to the jihadist franchise founded by Osama bin Laden.

A second, larger influx of fighters occurred after the Franco-British-led NATO air campaign that helped topple Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Hundreds of Tuaregs who had trained and served in Gaddafi's security forces returned to Mali with weapons looted from Libya's armouries in the anarchy after his fall.

The MNLA, allied with jihadist groups including Ansar al-Din and AQIM, launched their insurgency against an enfeebled Malian army in 2012, triggering a coup in Bamako that overthrew former president, Amadou Toumani Touré. The new military authorities, weakened by economic sanctions against the army takeover, controlled only the southern third of the country.



Tuareg fighters of the Azawad national movement

As the rebels took control of the northern towns of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, jihadist groups swiftly gained the upper hand over the MNLA and imposed severe Islamist rule in the areas they controlled. In January 2013, they launched a southward offensive, capturing the strategic town of Konna, 600km north of Bamako, and opening the route to the capital. The French military intervened the following day with US logistical support at the request of the Malian authorities to prevent a feared ‘first terrorist takeover of an African state’.

Before examining the course and consequences of the internationalisation of the Mali conflict,

it is essential to examine the economic and social root causes of conflict in three of the world’s poorest countries with the lowest levels of human development.

As J. Peter Pham, the US special envoy for the Sahel under the Trump administration, eloquently put it shortly before he left office: “Insecurity isn’t the cause but the symptom of an underlying malady. It is that of state legitimacy, of the contract between the governing and the governed, of the goods and services and inclusion that states provide for ordinary citizens and groups, especially those at the periphery of these countries.”<sup>(2)</sup>

(2) Pham speech to Center for Strategic and International Studies Sahel Summit, Washington DC, Oct 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-2nd-annual-sahel-summit>

# More mouths, less food

The geographical definition of the Sahel is the belt of semi-arid land south of the Sahara Desert and north of the Sudanian savanna that stretches right across Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. It incorporates parts of Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan and South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and a corner of Mauritania.

This study focuses on the western Sahel, defined for these purposes as the states that came together to create the G5 Sahel in 2017 - Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. The regional crisis is centred on Mali, which became a hub of jihadist violence in the region in 2012 and 2013 and remains the most fragile state and the main focus of European and international intervention.

The conflict has morphed from a Tuareg revolt in northern Mali into what sometimes seems like a Hobbesian war of all against all. It has swept southwards and westwards into central Mali and spilled across porous borders into Niger and Burkina Faso, and it continues to seep further south. States such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Benin have all experienced attacks or kidnappings connected to the Sahel violence. The jihadists have said they aim to expand into coastal areas.

Jihadist armed groups have exploited historic community and ethnic disputes between herders and farmers, nomads and sedentary peoples, over land, water and livestock, to extend their grip in overwhelmingly rural societies facing grinding poverty.

Those tensions are exacerbated by the impact of climate change, with hotter temperatures and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events including both droughts and flooding, and by some of the world's most rapid population growth.

The populations of Mali and Burkina Faso have tripled in the 60 years since independence in 1960 and are projected to double again from around 20mn to 40mn by 2040. Niger has the world's highest fertility rate at 6.9 children per woman. Its population has increased more than sixfold since 1960. It ranks bottom of the UN Human Development Index. <sup>(3)</sup>

Feeding all those extra mouths has become ever more precarious since food production has not kept pace with population growth, and now insecurity disrupts commodity markets. It is no coincidence that the areas of worst food insecurity are precisely those where attacks have been concentrated in the last few years

(3) In the 2020 UN Human Development Index, Niger was ranked 189th and last worldwide with gross national income per capita of \$1,201 and 2.1 mean years of schooling per child. Chad was 187th with GNI per capita of \$1,555 and 2.5 mean years of schooling, Mali ranked 184th with GNI per capita of \$2,269 and 2.4 mean years of schooling, and Burkina Faso 182nd with GNI per capita of \$2,133 but just 1.6 years of mean schooling.



Women selling wares in Mali market

- the regions of Mopti and Menaka, along the borders with Burkina Faso and Niger, and the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area.

COVID-19 has aggravated the situation, although Sahel countries have suffered lower rates of infection and death than developed countries in Europe and North America due partly to the very young average age of the population. Many Malian farmers rely on cotton production to finance the purchase of fertilisers, which help raise yields of cereal crops as well. Cotton is the country's number two export after gold. But the cotton crop is forecast to shrink significantly in 2020 and 2021 because of falling world prices which reduced planting. <sup>(4)</sup>

The area under agricultural cultivation has expanded considerably since the great drought of the 1970s and 1980s, putting pressure on pastoral land. Livestock keeping people have suffered a major erosion of once abundant grazing resources, which are now scarce. Furthermore, the informal web of traditional local governance systems that mediate the complex rights and obligations among tenant farmers, owner farmers, communities and nomadic pastoralists has been torn by resource conflicts and ethnic violence.

Although nearly 80% of Malians are involved in agricultural activity, nearly one-third are

malnourished. Moreover, according to the USAID relief agency, only 14% of 2.2mn potential irrigable hectares are currently irrigated. <sup>(5) (6)</sup>

The World Food Programme estimates that 4.3mn people in Mali, almost one-fifth of the population, required humanitarian assistance in 2020, and 30% of children under the age of five are stunted by malnutrition. <sup>(7)</sup>

African governments have made collective commitments to sustainable agriculture and renewable energy for their populations by adopting a series of goals. Sahel states could increase vital access to food and off-grid electricity by fulfilling their commitment under the African Union's 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth <sup>(8)</sup>, devoting at least 10% of government expenditure to agriculture, and contributing to the political and financial aspirations of the Desert to Power Initiative of the African Development Bank (AfDB). <sup>(9)</sup>

The international community has pledged some \$14bn over the next four years to plant an 8,000-km-long Great Green Wall of trees and grassland to combat climate change in the Sahel, but there are questions about whether the glamorous AfDB-backed project is the most appropriate response to the needs of farmers and pastoralists on the ground. <sup>(10)</sup>

(4) <https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/why-could-the-covid-19-cotton-crisis-lead-to-an-economic-and-social-crisis-in-mali>

(5) [https://wcaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/en\\_-\\_monographic\\_study\\_on\\_demography\\_peace\\_and\\_security\\_in\\_the\\_sahel\\_-\\_case\\_of\\_mali\\_1.pdf](https://wcaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/en_-_monographic_study_on_demography_peace_and_security_in_the_sahel_-_case_of_mali_1.pdf)

(6) <https://www.usaid.gov/mali/agriculture-and-food-security>

(7) [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/da49f11d63314f779cb926f50a633dc6/download/?\\_ga=2.65150186.591586637.1615653565-1053138839.1615653565](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/da49f11d63314f779cb926f50a633dc6/download/?_ga=2.65150186.591586637.1615653565-1053138839.1615653565), <https://www.wfp.org/countries/mali>

(8) <https://www.nepad.org/file-download/download/public/120006>

(9) <https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/initiatives-partnerships/desert-power-initiative>

(10) <https://www.iied.org/sahelian-great-green-wall-start-local-solutions>



Senegalese soldiers in the Flintlock 2018 US training exercise, Niger

## Governance vacuum

While poverty, hunger and climate change form the backdrop to the conflict, the retreat of the state, the absence of public services and the disruption of traditional patterns of mediation and local justice created a governance vacuum that radical forces have filled in their own way.

In some areas of northern and central Mali, jihadist groups have provided a form of protection against what villagers perceived as predatory security forces, madrassas for boys in place of public schools and a brutal but deterrent form of kangaroo justice against robbery, extortion and corruption. The price is adherence to severe Islamic rules - no music, no dancing, no mobile phones, no fun - enforced with harsh punishments, and forced recruitment for young men.

“The jihadists listen to people’s anger and provide services that the government is not doing, addressing banditry and lawlessness, addressing the need for justice with sharia courts that are fast and efficient, even if they don’t provide due process,” said Corinne Dufka, West Africa Director for Human Rights Watch, a global advocacy group, and a regular visitor to areas under rebel control. <sup>(11)</sup>

She noted that the jihadist groups were often present in areas populated by nomadic Fulani, also known as Peul, offering them protection from ethnic militias established by Dogon and Bambara farming communities and hunters in the absence of government forces. This has led to a cycle of atrocities against civilians and revenge attacks.

(11) Interview with the author, February 2021

Community and religious elders who traditionally mediated in such disputes, providing an informal local justice system, have been increasingly sidelined or killed by either jihadist gunmen and organised crime networks that live from smuggling drugs, arms and people.

"We used to have functioning mechanisms to settle those sorts of disputes through moral authorities, elders and families who had learned to live together for decades, for centuries. All that has been upended. It needs to be strengthened again," said Maman Sambo Sidikou, the Executive Secretary of the G5 Sahel. <sup>(12)</sup>

While most of the civilian casualties are men, women and children are among the main victims of this polycrisis. An estimated 3,000 schools have been forced to close due to fighting and population flight. People displaced by insecurity and drought from rural areas have flooded into the towns, raising pressures on extended families with fewer resources to feed more relatives. Attacks on markets have prevented women from selling their produce and handicrafts to feed their families. A fragile subsistence economy has been pushed to the brink and beyond. Many young people have left rural areas, seeking a new life in the cities and in the more dynamic coastal states.

According to the World Bank, just 16% of girls are in school in Niger, 26% in Mali and 29% in

Burkina Faso. More than 75% of young women in Niger were married before they turned 18 years old.

Fatoumata Haidara, Director for the Sahel Region at education NGO Plan International, whose family lives in central Mali, has personal experience of the impact of the conflict on education, health care and economic subsistence.

"I am from Timbuktu and my parents live in Mopti (a town of 110,000 in the inner Niger delta). I was a lucky girl who managed to go to school. Instability is creating lots of problems for women and girls. They are no longer protected by basic social services," she said. "The risks of rape or kidnapping are so great. Parents want to keep girls at home for their own safety, but they also face domestic or sexual violence, forced marriage and an increase in genital mutilation." <sup>(13)</sup>

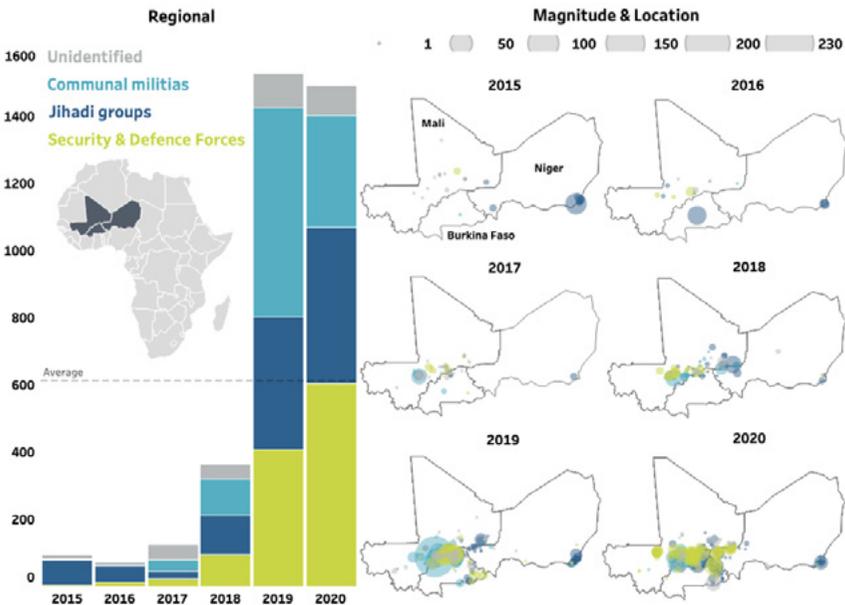
"The crisis has worsened poverty for women and girls. They had hope and opportunity of going to school. They had hopes with education and literacy campaigns for adults. We were raising the level of education. Unfortunately, with the conflict we are going backwards," Haidara said.

"My parents can't sell their animals. The women can't sell at markets. Part of my family say they have to share minimum subsistence with the

(12) Interview with the author, March 2021

(13) Interview with the author, February 2021

Figure 7 – Reported civilian fatalities in western Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), from direct targeting by type of attributed perpetrator, first half of each year, 2015-2020



Source: Prepared by José Luengo-Cabrera with data from [ACLED](#) (27 June 2020).  
N.B. data should be viewed as indicative, not definitive. See ACLED codebook for data caveats.

extended family. The countryside is becoming more and more deserted. Those who can afford to leave have left, people have to go to the cities, to Bamako, overstretching the extended family. That has all been aggravated by COVID. People can't even do small-scale trade."

In a vicious circle, the blow to girls' schooling and literacy is also a setback for access to sexual and reproductive health services and hence to efforts to curb population growth through education and economic opportunities for young women.

# Complacency, corruption, militias

For centuries, conservative, patriarchal Sahel societies have practised a relatively tolerant, inclusive brand of Islam dominated by the Sunni Maliki tradition, influenced with Sufism. The austere, punitive Salifist type of Islam enforced by the jihadists was culturally alien to the region, just as the totalitarian ideologies of Al Qaeda and Islamic State were foreign to the Sahel.

The fact that they were able to take root, initially in the peripheral regions of Mali, was largely due to the perceived illegitimacy of complacent central authorities dominated by the Bambara ethnic group that live in the most densely populated and economically developed southern region around Bamako.

Even after the 2015 Algiers agreement negotiated between the government of Mali and two coalitions of (non-jihadist) northern rebel movements through international mediation, former president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and the political class comfortably ensconced in Bamako with international protection thanks to Barkhane and MINUSMA showed little inclination to implement its provisions. There was no serious decentralisation of power, scant security sector reform and the integration of demobilised rebels into local and national security forces moved slowly.

Accusations of nepotism and corruption, notably surrounding the prominent role of Keïta's son, as well as economic grievances and anger over massacres of civilians in central Mali, led to anti-government demonstrations in 2019 and 2020 that triggered the military coup which toppled the veteran French-trained president.

Diplomats, military advisers and civil society activists in Bamako say defence spending is opaque and riddled with corruption. Funds intended to buy aircraft, helicopters and weapons or to pay the troops were siphoned into private pockets. Malian officials have long obstructed EU-led efforts to introduce transparent digital management of inventory, acquisition, recruitment and payrolls.<sup>(14)</sup>

Ethnic and inter-community tensions and the weakness or absence of state security forces in peripheral regions also led to a de facto privatisation of security with the establishment of so-called 'self-defence' militias in Mali and Burkina Faso to provide protection against lawlessness and jihadist attacks. This has often occurred with the tacit or overt complicity of overstretched national security forces.

In Mali, the Dan Na Ambassagou (hunters who trust in God) armed group of Dozo hunters

(14) Multiple interviews with the author, January-March 2021

created by Youssouf Toloba ostensibly to protect Dogon farmers against jihadist fighters has been blamed for repeated atrocities against Fulani civilians. At its peak, it was estimated to have up to 8,000 members. Officially dissolved by the government and ordered to disarm in 2019 after the massacre of 157 people in the village of Ogossagou, which an official MINUSMA report said was “planned, organised and coordinated” by Dozo hunters, the group continues to exist. Dozo hunters were blamed for a repeat massacre a year later in the same village, a day after the state force deployed to protect the population was withdrawn. <sup>(15)</sup>

As part of efforts by Mali’s transitional government to pacify community conflicts, the minister for national reconciliation, Colonel Ismaël Wagué, one of the coup leaders, met with Dozo leader Toloba in March 2021 to discuss ways to promote co-existence and protect civilians. <sup>(16)</sup>

In Burkina Faso, local armed vigilante groups known as Koglweogo (bush guardians), largely composed of the ethnic majority Mossi, were formed in 2015 to protect communities against banditry, cattle rustling and armed rebels during the instability that followed the overthrow of president Blaise Compaoré. The official security forces were happy to let them take charge in areas where thin police and gendarmerie resources did not reach and where access was dangerous, and to use them as providers of intelligence.

In the absence of local police, the Koglweogo rapidly became the largest citizen militia in the country, with strong public support, according to a survey by the Ouagadougou-based NGO Action pour la Sécurité Humaine en Afrique (ASHA). <sup>(17)</sup> There are estimated to be some 40,000 members of these local security groups, which patrol rural and peri-urban areas, make arrests, hold prisoners and conduct kangaroo trials for petty offenders. They became a genuine popular security movement in much of central and western Burkina Faso. But their popularity has declined since the expansion of GSIM and ISGS operations in 2017 and 2018 resulted in a surge in mass violence from all sides. <sup>(18)</sup>

Human rights organisations say the vigilantes exacerbate ethnic tensions and are also responsible for killings, disappearances, torture and human rights abuses, mostly targeting ethnic Fulani, accused of being in league with jihadist terrorists. In 2019, Koglweogo were involved in the massacre of at least 49 Fulani in the village of Yirgou in reprisal for an attack by motorbike-riding jihadist raiders. There have also been incidents involving Dozo self-defence hunters in mostly ethnic Dogon north-western region bordering on Mali. <sup>(19)</sup>

President Roch Marc Kaboré, who rebuked the Koglweogo after the Yirgou massacre, signed a law in 2020 providing support to local vigilantes, called Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland, including two weeks of military

(15) <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2019/05/1042561>

(16) [http://iss-h.edu.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Rapport-de-synth%C3%A8se\\_ENQUETE-SUR-LA-SECURITE-PILOTEE-PAR-LES-COIMMUNAUTES-Asha.pdf](http://iss-h.edu.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Rapport-de-synth%C3%A8se_ENQUETE-SUR-LA-SECURITE-PILOTEE-PAR-LES-COIMMUNAUTES-Asha.pdf)

(17) <https://www.voaafrrique.com/a/un-haut-responsable-malien-rencontre-une-milice-accus%C3%A9e-d-exactions/5809360.html>

(18) <https://norria-research.com/self-defence-movements-in-burkina-faso-diffusion-and-structuration-of-koglweogo-groups/>

(19) <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/burkina-faso#4281e1>

training, equipment, healthcare and bonus payments. Some members of the Koglweogo have joined the new force.

Niger long sought to maintain the state's monopoly of force and avoid the creation of local militias. However incursions by Malian Tuareg-led GATIA and Dawsahak MSA militias in conjunction with French operations against

ISGS in the Mali-Niger border corridor in 2018 had deadly consequences for Fulani civilians in Niger's Tillabéri region. As violence spilled across the border, Nigerien armed forces were also accused of an increasing number of extrajudicial killings and abductions, including the disappearance of 102 mostly Tuareg and Fulani men in the Tillabéri region in April 2020. <sup>(20)</sup>

(20) <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-SANA-Report-Niger-FR.pdf>, <https://www.dw.com/en/niger-probe-soldiers-executed-dozens-of-civilians/a-54828003>



Niger faces armed jihadist groups on two fronts, with ISGS most active in the northwest of the country, bordering Mali and Burkina Faso, and fighters linked to Boko Haram active in the southeastern corner bordering on Nigeria and Chad, where self-defence groups have also been created.

While the fight against armed jihadist groups remains the top priority of the G5 Sahel

countries and their international allies, any lasting stabilisation of the region will require much more determined action to address the root causes of the conflict, especially the absence of public services and security in peripheral regions, the predatory behaviour of official defence and security forces and allied militias, corruption and the lack of economic and educational opportunity.



Islamists destroyed the El Farouk martyrs monument in Timbuktu, Mali



The Barkhane Force welcomes a delegation of authorities from the Sahelian armed forces to the Gao base

## CHAPTER 2

# MILITARY INTERVENTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

# “As long as it takes”

“It was a turkey shoot (C’était comme si on tirait des lapins),” said a French officer involved in the early weeks of Operation Serval, Paris’ intervention in Mali in 2013. Like the US interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the entry phase was deceptively straightforward, even though the French lost ten soldiers in the first six months. <sup>(1)</sup>

Jihadist fighters and Tuareg rebels in pickup trucks and motorbikes were exposed to French air power in lightly wooded terrain around the roads and tracks of central Mali with no cover.

For months, former French president François Hollande had resisted pressure from his own defence establishment to intervene in Mali as the rebels captured the cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, and the jihadists imposed their brand of harsh Islamist rule. He changed his mind after the fall of Konna on 10 January 2013 and the imminent threat to Sévaré air base, the last major runway in central Mali, potentially opening the road to Bamako, where an unpopular and demoralised government was hanging by a thread at the mercy of mutinous soldiers.

As the rebels were fêting the capture of Konna, the UN Security Council issued a statement at France’s bidding urging all states “to provide assistance to the Malian Defence and Security Forces in order to reduce the threat posed by terrorist organizations and associated groups”.

The following day, the habitually cautious Hollande issued clear orders to his inner defence cabinet: “Stop the enemy, help the Malian government to reconquer the country, destroy the terrorists,” according to Admiral Édouard Guillaud, armed forces chief of staff at the time. He also ordered his forces to search for French hostages held by the rebels and ensure their protection. <sup>(2)</sup>

Within a month, Operation Serval had driven the insurgents out of most of central Mali and pinned them down in pockets in the north and in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains. They fled Timbuktu, Gao and Menaka, avoiding urban combat. To the dismay of the Bamako government, the French left the northern town of Kidal in the hands of the Tuareg separatist MNLA, possibly with a view to future

(1) Interview with the author, December 2020

(2) Quoted in Jean-Christophe Notin, *La Guerre de la France au Mali*, Paris, 2014, Editions Taillandier

negotiations. Many southern Malians accused the French of favouritism towards the MNLA.

Hollande was cheered as a saviour by crowds in Timbuktu and Bamako and promised: “France will stay with you as long as it takes, that is to say until Africans themselves, through AFISMA [the African-led International Support Mission to Mali], are ready to take over from us and we can withdraw... But I must tell you that it is not France’s role to stay here in Mali, because it will be Malians and Africans who will ensure security, sovereignty and independence.”<sup>(3)</sup>

That ‘mission accomplished’ moment was short-lived, given the inherent weakness and ingrained corruption of the Malian state. The professionally executed intervention turned from blitzkrieg into sitzkrieg - from high-paced manoeuvre warfare to an open-ended, asymmetric counter-insurgency campaign. Malian and African forces were in no position to take over, and a complacent political class in Bamako, having been rescued by the French and no longer feeling in imminent danger, showed little inclination to make the major governance and decentralisation reforms shown to be necessary.

Eight years later, France’s follow-up Operation Barkhane, launched in 2014, remains the indispensable backbone of the fight against armed insurgents in Mali. AFISMA has morphed into a larger UN peacekeeping, police and civilian presence, known as the

UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mechanism (MINUSMA), a largely static force with a circumscribed mandate that makes it hard to fulfil its key objective to protect civilians.

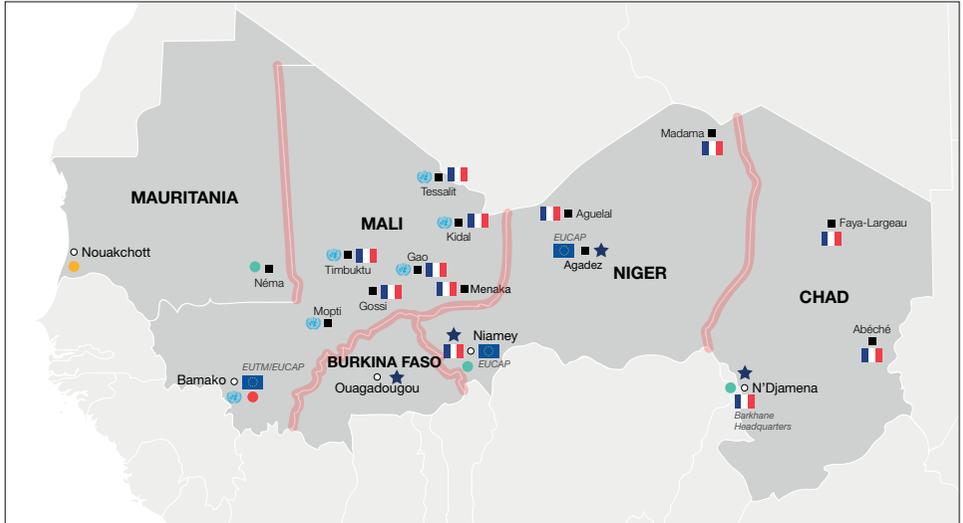
Despite years of French and EU training of the Malian armed forces, gendarmerie and police, and despite the creation of a joint cross-border military force by the G5 Sahel, local forces are not yet able to defeat relatively small units of highly mobile, hardened jihadists without French air and ground support.

Another French president, Emmanuel Macron, and his armed forces minister are still saying that France won’t be in Mali forever, but the insurgency has spread and become enmeshed in inter-community and inter-ethnic conflicts, as predicted in a 2017 study by Malian analyst Adam Thiam of the Institut du Macina.<sup>(4)</sup>

(3) Hollande speech in Bamako, Feb 2, 2013; [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/mali/mali-merci-papa-hollande-tombouctou-en-liesse-accueil-le-president-francais\\_216897.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/mali/mali-merci-papa-hollande-tombouctou-en-liesse-accueil-le-president-francais_216897.html)

(4) Adam Thiam, a journalist and political analyst, was a senior aide to former Malian President Alpha Oumar Konaré, when he served as president of the African Union Commission. Director of communications for the Malian presidency since 2019, he died of COVID-19 in March 2021. <https://www.hccentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Centre-du-Mali-Enjeux-et-dangers-dune-crise-n%C3%A9glig%C3%A9e.pdf>

## Security responses in the Sahel



Data Source: ACLED, the Pentagon and the French Military Forces

# Asymmetric warfare

After their strategic error of trying to mount a ground offensive by road and hold towns and cities, which made the lightly armed rebels relatively easy targets for a sophisticated expeditionary force like the French, the jihadists switched to asymmetric warfare.

They hid in the mountains and the bush. They staged hit-and-run attacks on government security forces, UN, French and national army bases, roadside bombings against military patrols and logistics convoys, and waged 'war among the people'. They employed a mixture of terror, coercion and rough governance in place of the absent state. And they 'piggy-backed' on inter-community conflicts to extend their footprint throughout central Mali and into Burkina Faso and Niger.

By definition, there is no reliable figure for the size of jihadist forces, but the best estimates are small, probably fewer than the number of French troops in Operation Barkhane, which was increased to 5,100 in 2020.

Senior French defence officials estimated in early 2021 there were perhaps 3,000 full-time fighters altogether between the various factions of the Al Qaeda-affiliated Support Group for

Muslims and Islam (GSIM) and the rival Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), mostly in Mali but with a few hundred in Burkina Faso and Niger. Part-time or temporary recruits swell jihadist ranks at most to about 5,000.

Within those overall numbers, French intelligence distinguishes a hard core of a few dozen, mostly foreign jihadist commanders with long experience, many of them Algerian, who maintain contact with the groups' respective global leaderships in Afghanistan and Pakistan for Al Qaeda and Syria and Iraq for ISIS, and a far larger number of local 'foot soldiers' with less training. Deployed episodically rather than permanently, these 'foot soldiers' have the highest casualty rate. <sup>(5)</sup>

Intercepted communications suggest that GSIM leaders take broad ideological guidelines from Al Qaeda's senior leadership around Ayman al-Zawahiri but have substantial autonomy in their local political strategy and conduct of operations. Alongside guerrilla actions, they pursue a 'hearts and minds' approach designed to win the acceptance of the civilian population by maintaining a form of order, a rudimentary justice system and basic public services. Their priority targets are the Malian and French armed

(5) Interviews with the author, January and March 2021

forces and MINUSMA, although many attacks also hit civilians.

By contrast, ISGS is a much more vertical, authoritarian organisation which has repeatedly massacred civilians to impose a rule of terror, Western intelligence and non-government experts say. <sup>(6)</sup> Both groups levy zakat (charity) taxes on the population in areas they control and are believed to charge criminal gangs trafficking in drugs, goods, arms and people for safe passage.

GSIM also has a war chest from the proceeds of hostage-taking. Algerian authorities say they recovered part of a ransom payment from a deal in October 2020 under which GSIM freed Malian opposition politician Soumaïla Cissé, French relief worker Sophie Pétronin and two Italians in exchange of the release, by Malian authorities, of up to 200 jailed jihadist fighters. <sup>(7)</sup> ISGS was reported in 2019 to control gold mines in Burkina Faso and fund arms purchases by selling gold. <sup>(8)</sup>

France sometimes publishes estimated jihadist casualty tolls for individual operations but avoids an overall rolling ‘body count’. In the most comprehensive figures, Christian Cambon, Chair of the French Senate’s foreign affairs and defence committee, said his panel had been briefed by the military that between 1,200 and 1,500 enemy fighters had been ‘neutralised’ since 2014 for the loss of 55 French soldiers. It was not clear whether the figure covered only those killed in French strikes or also by action by Malian and G5 Sahel forces. <sup>(9)</sup>

French and African intelligence experts say that while both militant groups have ambitions to extend their action southwards into Ghana, Togo, Benin and Ivory Coast, there is no evidence that either has operational links with Boko Haram, the Nigerian-based jihadist movement.

When jihadist fighters are killed, they are quickly replaced, and there is little sign that French military successes deter recruitment, French and Malian officials acknowledge. “What

(6) Interviews with the author, January, February, March 2021

(7) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algeria-mali-ransom-hostages-militants>

(8) <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/282-reprendre-en-main-la-rupee-vers-lor-au-sahel-central>, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gold-africa-islamists-special-report/special-report-how-jihadists-struck-gold-in-africas-sahel-idUSKBN1XW11F>

(9) Press videoconference with Senator Cambon, February 9, 2021

matters for us is neutralising the chiefs and the explosives engineers. They have added value and are harder to replace,” one French official said. Helicopter-borne French special forces killed Abdelmalek Droukdel, the historic Algerian founder of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in an operation in northern Mali in June 2020 based on Franco-American intelligence collaboration. GSIM's military commander, Bah Ag Moussa, a former Malian army colonel, was gunned down in a strike on his pickup truck by French helicopters and special forces in November 2020.

A recent former US official who worked closely with the French military on counter-terrorism disputed the assumption that the jihadist movement was like a hydra - the mythological serpent that grew new heads each time one was chopped off. “I hate the hydra analogy. These are not structured, disciplined hierarchical organisations in which everyone adheres to the same ideology. What happens when you cut off a head is it can lead to factionalism or increased rivalry within the group, or to an inferior replacement with less experience,” he said. “It can open space for negotiations between non-combatants and local governments, and for aid agencies to look after their people.” “Imagine the French empire if you had taken out Napoleon or Germany if we had taken out Hitler.”<sup>(10)</sup>

The Sahel was for several years an exception to the pattern of internecine warfare between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Middle East

and South Asia. But though they cooperated at times against common enemies, the two jihadist movements have also fought each other over turf and deep ideological differences. The most intense fighting occurred in early 2020 in northeastern Mali, with several hundred casualties reported.<sup>(11)</sup>

French and other Western intelligence officials long said there was no evidence of links between jihadist groups in the Sahel and acts of terrorism by radicalised Muslims in France or elsewhere in Europe. Former Barkhane officers interviewed for this report said they were not aware of any such connection. However, the head of France's external intelligence agency DGSE, Bernard Emié, said in a rare public speech in February 2021 that Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of GSIM, was pursuing plans to expand into the Gulf of Guinea as well as the objective of carrying out attacks in the West and especially in Europe.<sup>(12)</sup>

Two weeks later, President Macron, seeking to shore up flagging public support in France for Barkhane, publicly designated Ag Ghaly and Amadou Koufa, the leader of the Katiba Macina group most active in central Mali, as terrorist chiefs to be “decapitated”, and talked up the threat to the rest of West Africa.

(10) Interview with the author, November 2020

(11) Interview with the author, March 2021

(12) [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/605407/10176821/file/20210201\\_COMEX%20CT\\_DISCOURS%20DGSE.pdf](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/605407/10176821/file/20210201_COMEX%20CT_DISCOURS%20DGSE.pdf)

# Rescued governments

Dissenting views in France about the origins of the conflict and what critics saw as the predatory nature of the Malian state were discouraged or suppressed. Laurent Bigot, a foreign ministry Africa specialist who had raised the alarm about state corruption in Mali in 2011, was fired. “The tragedy is that France remains to this day in denial about reality in the Sahel,” Bigot wrote in an article for *Le Monde* after the 2020 military coup in Mali. <sup>(13)</sup> Évelyne Decorps, the French ambassador in Bamako, was recalled prematurely in 2018 after reportedly criticising President Keïta and clashing with Barkhane commanders. <sup>(14)</sup>

From the start of military action, the French approach was to give absolute priority to counter-terrorism and to buttress the Malian government while avoiding having to take on responsibility for its failures and abuses. The official discourse remains that France is supporting the Malian state at its request against jihadist terrorism and has no power or wish to micro-manage governance in the Sahel, which would open it to accusations of neo-colonialism, already rife among opposition activists in Mali and Burkina Faso.

“We’re there to do counter-terrorism. We’re hands-off on governance,” a former Barkhane officer said. <sup>(15)</sup>

A senior French diplomat with long Sahel experience said there were limits to what outsiders could achieve while respecting those countries’ sovereignty and culture. “We keep bumping up against the logic of sovereignty and non-interference,” he said. “You cannot on the one hand argue for independence and non-interference and at the same time intervene in the judicial system and on appointments.” <sup>(16)</sup>

When asked about alleged atrocities by the armed forces or self-defence militias, French officials say they discuss such issues discreetly with Sahel governments. But they also point to the role of MINUSMA in reporting regularly on human rights abuses, the EU Training Mission and the EU Capacity Building Mission in training soldiers, gendarmes and police in international humanitarian law, and the responsibility of the Malian authorities to investigate and prosecute violations.

“We put pressure on the local authorities and tell them how bad we think these [self-defence forces] are, as do the UN and some other partners. But we don’t deal with the militias ourselves. We are not in the same zone. We are very aware of the risk to human rights and the possibility of atrocities. These creatures always escape the control of their creators,” a

(13) [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/08/27/au-mali-la-france-est-encore-et-toujours-dans-le-deni-face-aux-realites-saheliennes\\_6050093\\_3212.html#xtor=AL-32280270](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/08/27/au-mali-la-france-est-encore-et-toujours-dans-le-deni-face-aux-realites-saheliennes_6050093_3212.html#xtor=AL-32280270)

(14) [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/09/06/l-ambassadeur-de-france-au-mali-rappelee-prematurement\\_5351257\\_3212.html#xtor=AL-32280270](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/09/06/l-ambassadeur-de-france-au-mali-rappelee-prematurement_5351257_3212.html#xtor=AL-32280270), see also Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, *Une Guerre Perdue, La France au Sahel*, Paris 2020

(15) Interview with the author, December 2020

(16) Interview with the author, January 2021

French official said, noting the danger of cycles of revenge attacks and atrocities.

Likewise, when asked about opacity and corruption in the Malian defence ministry, the official said Paris was well aware of the problem of “unscrupulous people who feed off the beast”, and of serious problems with soldiers’ pay. He pointed to EU and UN efforts to help introduce modern digital stock-keeping, procurement and payroll systems. “It’s a major concern. Our action as the French army is concentrated at the operational level, but we see that there are crucial questions of payment of soldiers’ wages, of logistical organisation and of confidence in the command which go back to structural, organisational problems,” the official said. <sup>(17)</sup>

Until recently, French officials were on balance more relieved by the resilience of weak states in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, than concerned by their manifest shortcomings. The administrative capacity and ability to provide public services in these countries is inevitably limited since they have no more than 5 public servants per 1,000 citizens compared to 89 in France and 138 in Sweden.

Paris has come to realise that reforming governance and extending the reach of the state and of public services are crucial to consolidating military gains against the jihadists. Hence it has pushed a series of overlapping initiatives to engage European and international partners not only in stabilisation, training military and internal security forces and building

administrative capacity, but also in assisting ‘the return of the state’ to areas cleared of armed rebels, and in economic development.

“French strategy suffers from the same internal contradictions that have applied to many post-colonial military interventions,” Michael Shurkin, Senior Political Scientist at the Rand Corporation, wrote in a brilliant historical analysis of French counter-insurgency doctrine in Mali. “The success of France’s operations depends on political changes that it refuses to impose itself, and frequently, its actions serve to perpetuate a political dispensation that is a principle driver of conflict.” <sup>(18)</sup>

A year after announcing a ‘military surge’ in January 2020 to fight back against jihadist advances with a reinforced Operation Barkhane and the creation of the special forces’ Task Force Takuba, Macron called in February 2021 for a ‘civilian surge’ to apply new political and financial energy to restoring the rule of law, local policing, health, education and employment services to the peripheral regions. <sup>(19)</sup>

As we shall see, that will require a major effort by the European Union and other international partners and development agencies to help rebuild shattered institutions and communities. It will also require political will that has been sorely lacking in Mali and only flickering in Niger and Burkina Faso. That in turn may hinge on a credible threat to withdraw support if promised reforms are not forthcoming.

(17) Interview with the author, March 2021

(18) <https://tnsr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/TNSR-Vol-4-Issue-1-Shurkin.pdf>

(19) Macron speech after N’Djamena summit <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/278631-emmanuel-macron-16022021-terrorisme>

# Wider stakes for France

French strategists say wider strategic issues are in play for France in the Sahel intervention. As a nuclear power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a G7 state and the cheerleader for European strategic autonomy, Paris cannot afford to fail in its ‘backyard’ of Francophone Africa. The country’s credibility is at stake amid intensifying great power competition, notably with China, Russia and Turkey.

Its economic interests in the three central Sahel countries are relatively slight - little trade and few big investments except for uranium mining in Niger, which provides about a third of the fuel for the nuclear power plants that generate 70% of French electricity. However, France has much bigger economic and political interests in the coastal states of West Africa, and a strategic interest in Chad, the location of Operation Barkhane’s headquarters and a vital hub for all French military operations in Africa.

Nor, arguably, can a country hit by a wave of Islamist terror attacks in the streets of Paris and Nice in 2015 and 2016, and where political Islamism remains an ultra-sensitive domestic issue, afford to see eight years of intervention in the Sahel end in an accommodation between local governments and jihadist rebels. That may explain why Macron is so determined to dissociate France from any attempt by its Sahel allies to negotiate with their leaders.

Yet that argument works both ways. When French politicians engage in a bidding war with calls to shut down radical mosques and Muslim associations, expel foreign imams, strip convicted dual nationals of their French citizenship, close unregulated private Muslim schools, outlaw home schooling and ban headscarves in universities and public spaces, it affects France’s image in the Sahel. As Operation Barkhane’s commanding General Marc Conruyt observed with military understatement, “the debate about Islamism in France, with its repercussions abroad, is not neutral for a French operation taking place in a country with a Muslim religion and culture.”<sup>(20)</sup>

The Sahel conflict is thus a war that France cannot win militarily, but cannot afford to lose. “The reality is that we want to get out but we don’t know how,” said Michel Foucher, a



Aerial photo of Fort Madama in Niger

(20) <http://www.senat.fr/compte-rendu-commissions/20201207/affetra.html>

veteran expert on geopolitics who has advised past French foreign ministers. “The challenge is how to get out of the frontline and pass the baton to others, while staying there in the background.”<sup>(21)</sup>

The French parliament generally has little say over overseas military action. The President can send troops into action without consulting the legislature, which only gains control over funding external operations after four months. When the Senate finally debated Barkhane in February 2021 without holding a vote, there was broad cross-party support for the operation and the most critical questions were about the inadequacy of protective armour for military vehicles and the shortage of modern helicopters.

Senator Cambon, who initiated the debate, is concerned that a political settlement to the conflict could take many years or decades. “Are we going to have to stay there all that time with thousands of troops and in present conditions?” he asked Armed Forces Minister Parly pointedly. Noting that a majority of public opinion was now opposed to staying in Mali, he said senators faced mounting questions from their constituents about why the French were still there. “Should we not review our political strategy and set our objectives in a more realistic way and adapt our deployment as a consequence?”<sup>(22)</sup>

French officials think they spy a partial exit strategy through a gradual handover of most ground operations to the G5 Sahel Joint Force

created in 2017, and to retrained and better armed national armies. France would continue to provide air support, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, special forces assistance and accompaniment on the ground. The EU would step up training and mentoring, as well as support for building civilian security forces and state-building, and MINUSMA would expand its capacity to protect civilians and support local conflict resolution and state-building.

To avoid raising false expectations at home or among the jihadists, the government refuses to set any timeline for the transformation or end of Operation Barkhane. However, Macron is keen to signal a turning point before the 2022 French presidential election.

General Conruyt pointed to a similar timeline in parliamentary testimony in December 2020, telling senators: “While the exit route is above all political, it must be linked to the prospect of the end of the transition [to democratic civilian rule] in Mali in early 2022, which is the potential horizon for a positive outcome. However, I remain convinced that without Barkhane, regional stability would be very rapidly called into question.”

A former senior Barkhane officer said he expected the French presence to be roughly halved from the current 5,100 in 2022. Defence officials say privately they are aiming for a new military division of labour in the Sahel after a three-to-five-year transition.

(21) Interview with the author, January 2021

(22) [http://videos.senat.fr/video.2058482\\_60081be13b1d5.audition-de-mme-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees-sur-l-operation-barkhane](http://videos.senat.fr/video.2058482_60081be13b1d5.audition-de-mme-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees-sur-l-operation-barkhane)

# Joint force

General Oumarou Namata of Niger, the Joint Force commander, has made progress in turning mixed-ability national units into a fighting force of up to 6,000 soldiers, which has conducted joint operations (Bourrasque, Eclipse and Sama 1 and 2) in border areas under an integrated command alongside French troops and with French, British and Danish air support and real-time US intelligence support in 2020 and 2021. At the central zone joint headquarters in Niamey, US officers sit alongside their French counterparts with officers from Niger, Mali and the G5 Sahel command.

More than 1,000 Nigerien troops performed well in Operation Bourrasque against ISGS fighters in the Liptako border region in late 2020. Some 900 Burkinabe and 850 Malian soldiers took part with a roughly equal number of French soldiers in operation Eclipse in the Mopti region of Mali in January 2021. The arrival of 1,200 hardened Chadian troops stationed in Téra, Niger, adjoining the three-border zone, in early 2021 may raise the capability of the Joint Force, if they are not recalled to bolster domestic security following the killing of President Idriss Deby. But they made a poor start with the local population after Chadian soldiers were arrested over several incidents of rape, confirmed by authorities in both countries.

After years of struggling with vulnerable heavy vehicles prone to break down, the Malian

army now has a French-trained light infantry reconnaissance and investigation unit equipped with the sort of pick-up trucks and motorbikes used by the jihadists, making them more mobile, nimbler and less vulnerable to ambushes and roadside bombs. That enables them to operate in the field alongside French and Estonian special forces from Task Force Takuba.

French and UN officials are encouraged by the fact that Malian troops now fight back and repel rebel attacks on their bases, whereas they previously cowered or ran away. But the Malian defence forces remain the smallest and weakest link, along with the Burkina Faso army, mostly made up of ethnic Mossi not keen to operate in northern areas mostly populated by Fulani, according to a senior French officer who served recently in Barkhane.

The G5 force is still very much a work in progress. It lacks its own logistics, fuel and equipment. Its budget has so far been funded largely by the EU's African Peace Facility with €250m earmarked for the period from 2017 to 2023, mostly disbursed via the Expertise France implementing agency, which has provided equipment, infrastructure and payment of mission subsistence allowances to staff officers. It also receives a smaller contribution from the United States. A Saudi Arabian promise in 2018 to fund €100mn in equipment purchases for the Joint Force has yet to materialise. Of the

€30mn promised by the United Arab Emirates, only €10mn has been disbursed.

France and G5 leaders are lobbying for the force to be granted a United Nations mandate under Chapter VII, which authorises the use of force to restore peace and security, and puts on a permanent financing basis with a UN contribution. Burkina Faso President Kaboré told the UN General Assembly in September 2020: “It is regrettable that the force has still not reached the desired operational level. I would therefore like to reiterate our appeal to the Security Council for this Force to be placed under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter and benefit from sustainable funding.” But Washington has so far opposed such a commitment as a matter of precedent and prefers ad hoc bilateral financial assistance. <sup>(23)</sup>

While Malian soldiers now carry cards issued by EUTM setting out the international rules of war and human rights, it is too early to say whether their record has improved. A former Barkhane commander said that the new generals in charge of the G5 Sahel joint force and the Malian army had punished and removed officers involved in abuses. <sup>(24)</sup>

However, the most recent quarterly human rights report from MINUSMA, covering the last three months of 2020, paints a depressing picture of widespread abuses both by armed extremist groups and national security forces, and voices concern at continued impunity and official obfuscation, despite recent meetings of a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission.

“The period under review was marked by impunity and persistent denial of human rights violations, particularly those involving members of the Malian security and defence forces. It should be underlined in this respect that several violations attributed to the Malian security and defence forces remain unpunished at the date of publication of this note,” it said. “Moreover, no significant progress has been observed concerning judicial prosecution of the suspected perpetrators of serious breaches and grave abuses of human rights committed in recent months.” <sup>(25)</sup>

To be sure, interim President Bah N'Daw did declare in a New Year message his intention to fight against impunity and build a disciplined republican army respectful of human life and rights, vowing zero tolerance for abuses by soldiers. But at the time of writing, no Malian soldier had been convicted or sentenced for human rights violations.

Troops operating under the G5 Sahel Joint Force have a better record, operating within a conformity framework on human rights and international humanitarian law designed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights with EU support. The Joint Force established a mechanism based in Bamako in February 2021 to identify and follow up damage to civilians, MISAD, created and operated by the US organization CIVIC under an EU-funded action.

(23) Interview with G5 Sahel executive secretary Maman Sidikou, March 2021

(24) Interview with the author, December 2020

(25) [https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/quarterly\\_note\\_oct-dec\\_2020\\_final.pdf](https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/quarterly_note_oct-dec_2020_final.pdf)

# Minimal MINUSMA?

The other international military and civilian player is the 16,400-strong UN Multidimensional Stabilisation Mission in Mali, currently the largest United Nations operation worldwide and the one with the highest number of casualties - 237 deaths as of late March 2021.

MINUSMA has a peacekeeping function as part of its mandate, but it is not a counter-terrorism

force and fewer than 3,000 of its 15,000 military personnel serve in operational Blue Helmet units engaged in protecting civilians in the field. The roughly 1,000 Western military personnel including troops from Germany and the UK provide most of the high-end, but lower-risk capabilities. Troop contributing countries keep a close eye on the mandate, attaching national caveats to the missions their soldiers



MINUSMA Camp Attacked in Kidal, Mali

can perform, and rules of engagement are so restrictive that critics say MINUSMA cannot do much.

The bulk of the UN force composed of African and Asian soldiers from Chad, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Senegal, Togo, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea is employed in support roles - force protection, logistics and maintenance. While they are paid \$100 a day by the United Nations, they bring their national equipment and training. They have borne the brunt of the casualties. <sup>(26)</sup>

The fact that troops from the main Western contributor nations tend to keep to themselves and have their own secure facility in the MINUSMA base in Gao, Camp Castor, which is off limits to other contingents, including the Chinese, is a source of some resentment. <sup>(27)</sup>

As with all UN missions, the gulf in training, equipment and military culture among national contingents is wide. As a whole, MINUSMA has limited assets such as helicopters, drones and light armoured vehicles to conduct reconnaissance and move forces rapidly, insiders who have served with the force say. That constrains its ability to protect civilians over a vast area four times the size of France. It desperately needs more air assets and maintenance crews for surveillance and to transport troops over long distances, avoiding roadside bombs, poor roads and flood damage. <sup>(28)</sup>

A helpline installed in 2020 makes it easier for civilians to report attacks to MINUSMA, but the force is not always able to mount a timely response. MINUSMA's bases and supply convoys have come under repeated attack from the jihadists, inflicting high casualties.

Malian anthropologist Boukary Sangaré, who has worked as an adviser to EU countries in Mali, said MINUSMA's main contribution was in keeping a spotlight on human rights abuses, promoting inter-community dialogue and supporting local projects such as building roads and digging wells. "I don't see much use in their peacekeeping except for protecting their own convoys, but the Human Rights division is very important," he said. <sup>(29)</sup>

A European official who served recently with the UN in Mali said MINUSMA's civilian roles - monitoring human rights, engaging in local peace building, civil affairs and capacity building - were often hampered by poor, change-resistant management and a personnel policy favouring criteria other than merit. The human rights unit publishes quarterly reports that highlight abuses, but faced internal resistance from some senior UN officials who preferred 'discreet diplomacy', at the risk of appearing complicit with governments that covered up abuses. <sup>(30)</sup>

(26) <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>

(27) [https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/European-Canadian\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/European-Canadian_Final.pdf)

(28) Interviews with the author, February-March 2021

(29) Interview with the author, January 2021

(30) Interview with the author, March 2021

MINUSMA's veteran Chadian head, Mahamat Saleh Annadif, who had been the UN Secretary-General's special representative for the Sahel since 2015, was succeeded in March 2021 by El-Ghassim Wane of Mauritania, raising the prospect of a shake-up in the way the mission operates.

The UN mission tries to keep political distance from Operation Barkhane to avoid being perceived by the population as a party to the conflict. However, that is not always easy when UN and Barkhane bases are located next door to each other around a shared airstrip, as in Gao.

Even if the various military operations in the Sahel were optimally integrated and effective, they would not address the underlying political, economic, human and environmental root causes of the conflict. That can only be done through a sustained, integrated engagement by the international community in which the European Union has a crucial, but complex role.



French Minister of Defence Florence Parly with Estonia military in Bamako

## CHAPTER 3

# THE HOUR OF EUROPE?

# The elusive nexus

The European Union is by far the largest financial partner for development and training in the Sahel with the longest experience, dating back more than a decade. It published its first strategy for the Sahel in 2011 and has the largest array of well-funded programmes, spanning the gamut from basic training and advice for the military in Mali, to missions building the capacity of civilian police and gendarmes in Mali and Niger, justice and state building, to classic development projects and massive humanitarian assistance.

The Sahel is seen by many as a test-bed for the so-called comprehensive approach set out in the EU's 2016 Global Strategy, integrating humanitarian aid, security and economic development. <sup>(1)</sup> “This triple nexus is the buzzword in Brussels, but it's often more theory than practice,” says an EU official involved in policy in the region. “The whole effort is driven by crisis management.” <sup>(2)</sup>

In practice, the EU has struggled to coordinate these multiple strands holistically, partly because of the inherent complexity of the situation on the ground, working with weak and sometimes problematic partner governments, but also partly due to the fragmentation of power in

Brussels, and between EU institutions and member states.

EU foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, says the Union and its member states spent altogether €8.5bn in the Sahel in the period from 2014 to 2020. That includes the cost of EU military and civilian training missions but not of Operation Barkhane. Some €4.6bn in EU funds were originally programmed for the period, half in direct budget support to governments. That sum was almost doubled from the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, established in 2015 during the migration crisis in which more than one million refugees and asylum seekers poured into the EU from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. The Trust Fund was intended to address the root causes of irregular migration and instability in Africa.

“The EU is by far the main financial actor in the region for humanitarian and development assistance. They are the biggest players and the EU representative has a very big role and is listened to and consulted a lot. That said, they have not really achieved the alignment of development and humanitarian policies in a nexus with security,” says Eric Hazard, Director

(1) For an incisive discussion of the EU's application of an “integrated approach to Mali”, see Katherine Pye, A Means to an End or an End in Itself? The EU Integrated Approach to Conflict in Mali, College of Europe research paper: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/edp-5-2019\\_pye.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/edp-5-2019_pye.pdf?download=1)

(2) Interview with the author, January 2021

(3) Interview with the author, January 2021

of NGO Save the Children for West Africa. <sup>(3)</sup>

“The EU, which is the champion of the nexus in theory, is dysfunctional in practice because the security response remains very largely in French hands,” Hazard said. “The Sahel countries didn’t align their needs, but also the European Commission directorates DEVCO [development cooperation] and ECHO [humanitarian assistance] didn’t align their practices. They are separate silos and don’t do much joint strategic planning. There’s an obvious split and they have different teams on the ground and don’t work out of the same offices.”

The EU has an ambassador in each of the Sahel countries, and a special representative for the Sahel who handles diplomatic negotiations, but they do not control the financial levers.

As already noted, the EU is also providing most of the funding for the G5 Sahel Joint Force - a major contribution to the fight against armed jihadist groups.

The EU Training Mission (EUTM) for the Malian armed forces, and the EU Capacity Missions (EUCAP) in Mali and Niger for the internal security forces come under the External Action Service, with inter-governmental decision-making, dependent on member states to second advisors and trainers who often do not speak French, the common language of the Sahel. EUTM trainers rotate on four-month assignments - too short to become familiar with

the local context. Some return for subsequent stints as contractors to EUCAP missions, but the assignments are not career-enhancing for European police or gendarmerie officers and tend not to attract top talent.

The EUTM has trained an estimated 14,400 members of the Malian armed forces, but as Denis Tull, a Sahel expert at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs puts it, “the deterioration of the security situation in Mali seems to belie the idea that EUTM Mali has a significant impact on [their] performance, that is, their ability to at least hold on to their positions and prevent an expansion of insecurity.” <sup>(4)</sup>

“Contrary to Barkhane, which is a fast track to promotion staffed by the best and brightest of the French military, EUCAP missions are often seen as a career siding where countries send staff they don’t need at home,” said Guillaume Lacaille, a former political advisor to the EUCAP Sahel Mali. <sup>(5)</sup>

Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha González, who chairs the Sahel Alliance, the international umbrella group that focuses mostly on economic development and on supporting the return of the state to areas where central governments had lost control, says EU countries such as hers understand their own vital interest in stabilising the Sahel. “We have to keep investing in this region. For a country like Spain which sees that the Sahel, the neighbours of our neighbours, has a large potential to destabilise the neighbourhood, we believe this is probably

(4) [https://www.irsem.fr/data/files/irsem/documents/document/file/3233/RP\\_IRSEM\\_89.pdf](https://www.irsem.fr/data/files/irsem/documents/document/file/3233/RP_IRSEM_89.pdf)

(5) Interview with the author, December 2020

(6) Interview with the author, March 2021

one of the most serious geopolitical risks that we have to take very seriously,” Gonzalez said in an interview. <sup>(6)</sup>

Gonzalez pointed to progress in a range of areas, reflected in internationally-financed projects being implemented along with commitments by Sahel governments to ‘the return of the state’ in abandoned regions, improvements in the

rule of law and the provision of public services and action to improve human rights and end impunity.

A senior EU diplomat in the region is more cautious about progress. “We have to be honest: we are not winning the war on many fronts. We need to repair the car while the engine is running.” <sup>(7)</sup>

## Who's in charge here?

Part of the problem of coordinating the action of the EU and its member states coherently is that no one is in overall charge of Sahel policy in Brussels. In theory, the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, should lead EU policies and ensure their coherence.

However, Borrell is only in charge of diplomatic efforts and the military and civilian training missions. He doesn't hold the purse strings of the main spending programmes, which are divided between two powerful arms of the European Commission, the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (INIPA, previously called DEVCO) and the Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian

Aid Operations (ECHO). Each has its own autonomous rules and decision-making processes.

“What we see on the ground is a reflection of a split foreign policy mechanism. There are institutional turf wars. Coordination and interaction mechanisms in Brussels have really improved over the last 10 years, but the situation at delegation level is not as advanced,” said Volker Hauck, Head of the Security and Resilience Programme at the European Centre for Development Policy Management, an independent think tank. He argues that EU policies in the Sahel have been skewed towards short-term objectives by the priority to halt irregular migration. <sup>(8)</sup>

(7) Interview with the author, January 2021

(8) Interview with Volker Hauck, Sophie Desmidt and Fabien Tondel of ECDPM, January 2021

The EU engaged in a major review of its Sahel policy leading up to the adoption of a new strategy by foreign ministers in spring 2021 to coincide with a new seven-year EU budget framework. The aims include focusing more effort on improving governance, assisting the ‘return of the state’ with police, justice and public services to areas long abandoned by the central government, and taking a tougher approach to combat impunity and corruption.

On the security side, the goal is to adapt EU military and civilian training better to local conditions, with stronger follow-up mentoring and accompaniment of graduates as they deploy, and a greater emphasis on international humanitarian law training. The creation of a new European Peace Facility will permit the EU for the first time to supply lethal weapons to the forces it trains, on top of the vehicles and non-lethal kit it has donated so far. Supplying lethal weapons with EU funds was previously impossible under the bloc’s legislation.

The EUTM’s mandate was enlarged in 2020 to include training G5 Sahel forces as well as the Malian national army, and trainers were sent on decentralised missions to provide tuition in the northern cities of Gao and Timbuktu, much closer to the combat zones than the mission’s main base in Koulikoro, close to Bamako, in relatively safe southern Mali.

However, COVID-19 has hampered the effectiveness of EUTM since early 2020, reducing the number of trainers and the size of classes. The EU military and civilian training

missions in Mali were temporarily suspended between August and November 2020 in response to the military coup in Bamako.

EUTM also provides advice to all levels of the armed forces and is also working with the Ministry of Defence on modernizing inventory, procurement and payroll systems, although it has faced entrenched resistance to efforts to introduce greater transparency.

“They don’t have all the capacity for rational management of forces and there’s a certain opacity about how the army managed its big budget, but it is very hard to get Mali to accept for example digital management of army pay. There are interests at stake, and that weakens the effectiveness of our action,” said an EU official who has been involved in the programme. <sup>(9)</sup>

(9) Interview with the author, January 2021

# Sticks and carrots

EU officials insist they have sought to apply pressure behind the scenes on Sahel governments to clean up their act, improve governance and extend public services and protection to abandoned areas. But like the French, they speak of maintaining a delicate balance in an emergency situation when the EU tried to marshal global assistance for the Sahel and prop up weak institutions.

“The international donors’ conference in 2013 was happy to have some legitimacy restored in Mali and closed its eyes to the flawed election and the not-very-dynamic president [Keita],” the EU official said. “Our efforts on that score were not very visible. We didn’t wash our hands of it, but we were dealing with crisis management, doing the most urgent things to avoid a collapse of Mali in 2013 and avoid the collapse of the entire Sahel in 2018. We have reviewed our strategy precisely to deal with these two points - impunity for human rights violations and corruption.”

The new buzzwords in the EU strategy are ‘mutual accountability’ and ‘each partner’s responsibility to fulfil its commitments’ - euphemisms for making EU assistance more conditional on the implementation of promised reforms. Such changes do not come easily to

the EU, which for both ethical and historical reasons is reluctant to hector former colonies and better at carrots than sticks. “We don’t want to fuel a donor-recipient relationship, we want a partnership,” another EU official said.

In the debate about conditionality, EU insiders say member states fall into three groups:

- a group of mostly Nordic and northern ‘progressive’ states actively committed to development who tend to be sticklers for democracy, the rule of law, women’s and children’s rights, and ethical spending of EU funds, and more wary of hard military support;
- a group of former colonial powers with long experience and complex enduring ties with African countries, who tend to be more reticent (or realistic, in their own eyes) about the limits of good governance in poor, often ethnic-based societies and give priority to stability and security; and
- a big group of smaller EU states with little experience or representation in Africa, who tend to defer to partners with strong interests in the region, in return for transactional help on other EU

issues of greater national importance to themselves.

Achieving a consensus among such diverse interests can produce lowest-common-denominator policies cloaked in ambiguous wording that everyone can live with, at least until a hard decision has to be taken.

The final formulation of the new EU policy reflected such a compromise. “Given the need to achieve tangible results as soon as possible, the EU wants to make its action part of a partnership based on each partner’s responsibility to fulfil its commitments. This mutual accountability is based on close and continuous political dialogue, allowing progress to be made in jointly agreed priority areas, in a climate of trust. Its aim is to encourage the achievement of concrete and measurable objectives, in particular in the areas of governance, the rule of law and the fight against corruption and impunity,” the EU’s Integrated Strategy for the Sahel said. <sup>(10)</sup>

Ideological sensitivities among EU states unrelated to Africa can also get in the way. For example, one of the last sticking points in adopting the strategy concerned promoting sexual and reproductive rights for women, with Poland’s conservative Catholic government resisting any phrase that might imply support for abortion.

Officials involved in the policy review said the main lessons of a decade of EU Sahel policy were that there had been insufficient emphasis on improving governance and the rule of law, too many small and fragmented projects receiving

‘sprinkler funding’, an insufficient prioritisation of geographical areas and a small number of priorities.

“In the next financial framework we are preparing and concentrating on two or three transformative sectors in each country to avoid saupoudrage (the sprinkler),” said a senior EU official. “We need to be mutually accountable, more transactional. National governments in the Sahel have a lot of responsibility. We are going to take the stance that if we feel you are not doing something you said you would do, we will change things, for instance by delaying a budget support payment.” <sup>(11)</sup>

EU officials are keen to stress that such money would not necessarily be lost to a country, but could be channelled directly to the population via NGOs, member state development agencies or international organisations, bypassing a government that did not keep its commitments. They cite the example of Burundi, where the EU has adopted such an approach.

(10) <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

(11) Interview with the author, February 2021

# African eyes on the EU

Seen through African eyes, the EU is an indispensable but rigid, top-down and at times patronising partner.

“We all know that the future of the Sahel cannot be decided in Brussels,” said Sidikou, the Executive Secretary of the G5 Sahel. “I think our Brussels friends agree with us on that. They are aware themselves of the difficulties the EU faces. The world is changing in the Sahel, as elsewhere. That also means that what some of our Parisian friends still call ‘development aid’ and humanitarian assistance must evolve if they don’t want to disappear. What we are asking for is a better listening capacity, greater confidence in your partners, and a more pragmatic approach that would enable the EU and other partners to act in a more effective and coherent way.”<sup>(12)</sup>

Sidikou urged the EU to engage more with mayors, regional authorities and local community actors, and to loosen its procedures to get help onto the ground more rapidly as soon as security forces have cleared a zone of armed rebels.

“We need to start from citizens’ daily needs rather than having generous, lofty ambitions that are bound to run into reality. Too often,

our partners and we announce theoretical priorities and forget the basics: the economy and creating opportunities and value,” he said. Sidikou lamented what he called “the high transactional cost” of coordinating the multiplication of initiatives by European and other partners, too often yielding no immediate tangible result on the ground.

“That said, the EU is our partner of first choice which supports us every day, so we just urge it to be more flexible because it too is a bureaucracy,” the G5 Sahel official said.

EU officials are sensitive to such criticism but say the Sahel Alliance and the overarching Coalition for the Sahel are doing better at delivering promised resources and aligning them with the priority investment programme agreed by Sahel states.

“The financing is there and it’s being programmed,” said Spanish Foreign Minister González. “Is the governance on the Sahel complicated? Yes. It has four pillars. One hard core against terrorism. The second about strengthening capacity of Sahel armed and internal security forces with training. The third pillar is support for the return of the state and administration, which is a lot to do with

(12) Interview with the author, March 2021 - for full text of Sidikou interview click on: xxxx

Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S). And there is a fourth pillar which is about development, and that's the main task of the Alliance.”

“I think we could streamline more. I do think the Coalition has to have a better role in making sure all these four pillars are connected and speak to each other, but the complexity is a reflection of the complex nature of the problem we're trying to address,” she said. <sup>(13)</sup>

Critics of EU policy say Sahel governments have learned to play the French and other Europeans off against each other to avoid hard choices. “You don't have a single Europe. You have the French and the Europeans, not always with the same objectives and strategies. That gives the regional governments leverage and they take advantage of it,” said Daniel Eizenga, a Sahel expert at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, a think tank funded by the US Defense Department. <sup>(14)</sup>

The next step is for the European Commission to narrow down the number of projects it supports and target them more rapidly at geographical priority areas, where public services such as schools, dispensaries, courts and local police need to be restored, to enable the population to feel a rapid benefit after the removal of the jihadists.

(13) Interview with the author, March 2021

(14) Interview with the author, January 2021

# National contributions

While the EU collectively is the biggest provider of development assistance and humanitarian aid, several European governments are big players in their own right, and much national as well as EU support is delivered through implementing agencies such as Germany's GIZ and France's AFD. Nordic countries such as Sweden, Denmark and non-EU Norway have a long-standing presence and commitment in the Sahel, as do Britain, the Netherlands and Spain.

These contributions ought to give those countries influence over European policy in the region, but in practice, when there are differences, France mostly calls the shots because its military engagement trumps other countries' cheque-books and development expertise. France also has by far the biggest diplomatic and institutional presence on the ground, notably in Bamako.

"France has a lot of focus on security issues and military action. We put more emphasis on that big part of the package that involves development, human rights, equality, democracy. If we're not going to stay there forever with soldiers, we've got to invest in other things. That's not really how the French operate. They sometimes find us a bit annoying," a diplomat from one northern European country said. <sup>(15)</sup>

Chancellor Angela Merkel has made the Sahel a priority of German development and security policy, not just because of strong pressure from France to do more to support its military effort against the jihadists, but also because of her awareness that this region with a rapidly growing young population is on Europe's doorstep. It was part of her response to mounting pressure from allies for Germany to take more international responsibility. The 2015 migration crisis, in which Germany threw open its doors to more than one million refugees and other migrants - a big political risk for Merkel - injected an extra sense of urgency into Berlin's policy in the region.

Germany has contributed troops and equipment such as reconnaissance drones to MINUSMA and trainers to the EUTM and EUCAP missions, but it has rebuffed pressure to participate in Operation Barkhane or Task Force Takuba. There is no parliamentary appetite for a role in combat operations, no belief among German policymakers that greater Western military intervention would make the problem better, and German law would anyway require an explicit UN mandate.

Mali was in the first wave of the German Defence Ministry's 2016 Enable and Enhance Initiative

(15) Interview with the author, February 2021

to provide advice, training and equipment to help developing countries engage in 'preventive security'. Burkina Faso and Niger were added in 2018. The guiding philosophy was that local forces were better placed than external actors to pacify local conflicts.

Merkel visited Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2019 and held a summit with G5 Sahel leaders to underline her personal commitment to the G5 Sahel initiative. Berlin took the lead in establishing the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S), designed to strengthen the region's security forces, and was irritated when Macron summoned G5 Sahel leaders to the Pau Summit and created the Coalition for the Sahel in January 2020 without consulting or inviting Germany.

The level of political commitment to the Sahel may decline when Merkel retires later in 2021. A new chancellor will likely have other domestic priorities.

German development efforts focus both on short-term stabilisation goals such as improving border management and on long-term community-based projects for infrastructure, water management and revenue generation to improve socio-economic prospects for women and young people. Delivery is hampered by violence and lawlessness.

"In Gao, there are lots of criminal actors. Banditry has increased enormously with the breakdown of law and order. There is no control whatsoever by the state," said Anne-Katrin Niemeier, the GIZ Head of Stabilisation Projects in Mali. "The Malian military have a camp with a

combined force of Malian soldiers and former rebel combatants who have been integrated into the army. They are supposed to patrol regular rounds in Gao and the region, but they cannot move for their own safety. It's a very interesting model in theory, but it doesn't work."<sup>(16)</sup>

In agriculture, GIZ is supporting more intensive use of small-scale irrigation, which enables farmers to produce good harvests even in years with little rain. The German agency is training women to process their harvests and market their produce to support livelihoods, particularly in the Inner Niger Delta region, where inter-community tensions are high.

The GIZ is also supporting Mali's Justice, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has held public hearings and collected depositions from victims of human rights violations since the 1960s and is due to submit its final report to the government soon. The Germans have been providing help on reparations policy and transitional justice, but it remains to be seen whether a dysfunctional justice system follows up on the evidence presented with prosecutions.

The UK and the Netherlands, traditional trading nations, focus some of their effort on facilitating cross-border trade and payments between Sahel countries and their southern neighbours around the Gulf of Guinea. Britain beefed up its diplomatic presence in the Sahel following a 2018 review of Africa policy and is one of the few European countries actively supporting Operation Barkhane with three Chinook heavy-lift helicopters and their crews - altogether 100

(16) Interview with Randa Kurieh-Ranarivelo, Anne-Katrin Niemeier and Sacha Bepoldin of GIZ, February 2021

personnel. The UK also sent 450 soldiers to MINSUMA in 2021 but has so far declined to join Task Force Takuba.

Spain's Civil Guard is sharing its long experience of fighting domestic terrorism by helping train gendarmerie units in Senegal, Mali, Chad, Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso. The Spanish have been working for years with the Mauritanian gendarmerie to combat illegal migration with the Blue Sahel programme.

Perhaps the most striking, if small, European military contribution comes from Estonia, in what is clearly stated to be an act of reciprocity for France's participation in air policing and NATO's rotating military presence in the Baltic state. Riga sent 50 soldiers and 5 armoured vehicles to Barkhane in 2018 and became the first partner to send special forces to join Task Force Takuba in 2020, training and accompanying G5 Sahel forces on counter-terrorism operations.

The Dutch, Swedes and Norwegians are among nations actively promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights, including birth control through the so-called Ouagadougou Partnership to extend modern family planning methods. Denmark's refugee council is working to promote women's role in peace-making on the ground. And Switzerland, along with the EU, Canada and Denmark, is co-funding inter-community mediation efforts in the central Sahel by the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.<sup>(17)</sup>

But some of the most committed European countries in the Sahel are also among the most frustrated. "It's important that we talk about the issues in Mali and the Sahel in a comprehensive way, not in bits and pieces with very little information sharing or willingness to work together," a north European diplomat said. "As long as we can't get the External Action Service and DEVCO [INTPA] to sit with us to hammer out a few priorities, it's hard to see how things are going to get better. It's not in the DNA of the Brussels bureaucracy."<sup>(18)</sup>

(17) <https://www.hccentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/HD-Brochure-Afrique-francophone.pdf>

(18) Interview with the author, February 2021



Burkinabe children reach up to grab a Czech Army drone during Flintlock 2019 in Burkina Faso, prior to a Burkinabe-led community engagement.

## CHAPTER 4

# DESERT DIPLOMACY AND DIALOGUE

# The road to Algiers

While France's main focus has been and remains on counter-terrorism, the Malian authorities, under pressure from neighbours and international partners, have made episodic efforts to pursue a negotiated settlement to the conflict, or at least to use dialogue and devolution to try to detach non-jihadist rebels from the hard-core Al Qaeda and ISIS groups.

Attempts to find a political solution to Mali's long-running Tuareg rebellions date back to the 1990s and early 2000s, when the first democratic president, Alpha Oumar Konaré, sought to decentralise power and strengthen local administration.

“The deeper causes of today's problems lie in the choices our countries made at independence,” says Ousmane Sy, a former UN development economist who served as Konaré's minister for territorial administration and local authorities. “Throughout the Francophone countries, our states just transferred power from the colonial authority to the political [and] administrative elite. We didn't debate alternatives that would have been more acceptable to our communities. We replicated almost identically the centralised French Jacobin system.” <sup>(1)</sup>

Sy, who founded the Centre for Political and Institutional Expertise in Africa (CEPIA), a think tank on governance, said the newly independent Sahel states failed to take into account two key features of their countries - human and territorial diversity - and regarded any cultural and administrative pluralism as potentially subversive. “A gulf opened between 'le Mali réel et le Mali légal' - between the state as defined in legal texts and the real country of communities,” he said. “Despite all our reform attempts, this gulf has never been bridged.”

The regional empires that preceded colonialism were more accommodating of different ethnic and geographical identities. The challenge now is to adapt the governance of the states of the Sahel to those realities, he said.

In Sy's view, “communities that suffered in silence” - notably Tuaregs and Fulani - have become less submissive, partly because communications technology has empowered them, partly because religion offered a perceived alternative to a state that ignored or excluded them. Konaré's decentralisation drive was aimed at striking a balance between central government and regional diversity, but “when

(1) Interview with the author, January 2021

Konaré's team left, we reverted to the status quo and stagnation.”

The next serious attempt to resolve what had become an entrenched armed conflict came in 2014 and 2015. Alarmed at the spread of cross-border terrorism from Mali following the bloody 2013 attack and hostage-taking at its In Amenas gas facility, Algeria led a diplomatic initiative to broker a negotiated settlement between the Bamako government and two non-jihadist northern rebel groups. Ramtane Lamamra, then Algeria's foreign minister and the current African Union envoy for 'Silencing the Guns', called it “an African solution to African problems.”<sup>(2)</sup>

The Algiers peace process was strongly supported by the African Union, the United Nations, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as the EU and its member states, whose special envoys for the Sahel were all part of the mediation team.

The 68-article accord, clinched after nine months of negotiations, called for disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration of rebel fighters into a reconstituted Malian army and security forces, known by the initials DDR. It provided for a broad decentralisation of power with regional assemblies and a special status for the North, with a pledge of economic investment in the region. It also called for the establishment of a senate as a second chamber representing the regions, which would balance the Bambara domination of parliament.

The document officially recognised the Azawad Tuareg denomination as a socio-cultural reality within the Malian state and set out a process of dialogue and reconciliation to account for the past. Its annexes provided a detailed timetable for each step in the process. None of the agreement's five pillars was properly implemented.<sup>(3)</sup>

Sy, who was one of the Malian negotiators of the accord, said Keïta was forced reluctantly to the table by his international backers and never took ownership of the Algiers agreement or explained it to the public. Apparently confident that having reached a pact with non-jihadist Tuareg rebels would be sufficient to divide and weaken the insurgency, he sat back and played for time.

The Tuareg signatories, the Platform and the Coordination of Azawad Movements, were loath to disarm completely since they did not trust either the Malian army or their erstwhile jihadist allies. Some analysts saw those groups' objectives as being more about control of trafficking routes and the informal economy than a role in government. While a limited number of combatants did disarm under UN supervision and some were eventually integrated into the security forces, the process was opaque and gave rise to widespread accusations of corruption, with Malian officers allegedly selling DDR positions.

Lamamra, the Algerian mediator, said the Bamako government treated the agreement as a technical administrative arrangement without

(2) Interview with the author, January 2021

(3) Full text of the Algiers agreement: [https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML\\_150620\\_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali\\_Issu-du-Processus-d'Alger.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML_150620_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali_Issu-du-Processus-d'Alger.pdf)

realising it would launch a political refoundation of Mali. The northern rebels, for their part, were not interested in what happened in Bamako. “Both sides lacked the necessary intense and mutual political will to implement the accord,” he said.

The veteran diplomat saw the document as a potential template for many African countries that face instability after the failure of post-independence one-party states and military regimes. “We need a new balance between the centre and the periphery in many countries. Resources tend to be spent in the capitals,

on the coastal plains or in the head of state’s home village. The rest of the country is often neglected in public services,” Lamamra said.

However, Algeria turned inward during the twilight years of ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Its diplomatic attention span for Mali dwindled. The African Union, which had appointed former Burundi President Pierre Buyoya as its envoy for the Sahel, promised but failed to deliver its own peacekeeping force and carried correspondingly little clout in Bamako.

Meeting of the Monitoring Committee of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, resulting from the Algiers process



# Hostage politics

For Keïta, the most pressing problem was no longer pacifying the North but coping with the alarming spread of violence to central Mali on the back of inter-community conflicts over land, water and pasturing rights, which the jihadists exploited to extend their footprint. In Bamako, he was under pressure from a swelling protest movement led by his former ally, Imam Mahmoud Dicko, the Saudi-trained religious leader. Ironically, some of Keïta's Bambara political opponents, including presidential candidate Soumaïla Cissé accused him of giving away the store to the northerners.

So in 2019, Keïta summoned an 'inclusive national dialogue', including some former Northern rebels but boycotted by the main opposition parties, which called for new parliamentary elections, a referendum on a new constitution, security for all and a revision of some articles of the Algiers agreement. Many of the participants called for negotiations with the main GSIM leaders, Iyad Ag Ghaly and Amadou Koufa.

In February 2020, Keïta changed strategy and declared he was willing to talk to the two Al Qaeda-affiliated leaders. "Because the number of deaths today in the Sahel is growing exponentially, I believe the time has

come to explore other paths," he said, stressing he had no illusions about the likely outcome. Ag Ghaly responded the following month that he was willing to talk peace provided French forces withdrew from Mali. The French were apoplectic and insisted there could be no talks with 'terrorists', only war.

Behind the scenes, the Bamako government was negotiating with Ag Ghaly for the release of opposition leader Cissé, who had been kidnapped in Timbuktu by a jihadist group linked to GSIM, in exchange for a large number of imprisoned fighters. Dicko acted as an intermediary. People familiar with the negotiations say Paris insisted that kidnapped French relief worker Sophie Pétronin be included in the deal, raising the price in the number of jihadists to be released. Koufa was not involved in the talks and his fighters were not freed.

The prisoner exchange was eventually concluded by the military junta that overthrew Keïta. Ag Ghaly staged a propaganda banquet, disseminated on social media, for the more than 200 released jihadists, including men implicated in the deadly 2014 assault on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako. A Mali-based diplomat said the deal illustrated the fact that "in Mali, everyone talks to everyone."<sup>(4)</sup>

(4) Interview with the author, February 2021



Meeting between the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, the Head of MINUSMA and Malian President of the Transition, Bah Ndaw

The August 2020 coup in Mali was both a setback and a boon for France. It removed an elected, legitimate if feckless president in a throwback to the bad old days of military takeovers, prompting calls in Africa, at the UN and in Europe to cut off international aid to Bamako. The United States, in line with its own law, suspended military assistance. Paris made clear it had no intention of halting Operation Barkhane and worked intensively with regional states in ECOWAS to seek a quick transfer to civilian-led rule and an 18-month transition to democratic elections.

At the same time, the replacement of the immobile Keïta with a junta, which needed to make concessions to secure international

acceptance, opened an opportunity to revive the Algiers peace process and press for governance reforms on which the ousted president had stalled.

The military authorities enjoyed more public support than had Keïta. They installed former defence minister Bah Ndaw, a retired colonel, as interim president, with the colonels who led the coup taking key roles as vice president and head of the interim legislature.

# To talk or not to talk

The transitional government included several former rebels, as well as figures close to Dicko. In December 2020, Prime Minister Moctar Ouane said “the will of the Malian people” was that Ag Ghaly and Koufa should be included in a “dialogue among all of Mali’s children”. He insisted there was no contradiction between that and French military action against GSIM. The two were complementary, Ouane said. He later said that “talking with the terrorists is a way to fight terrorism”, but declined to give details of the contacts due to the political sensitivity.<sup>(5)</sup>

The Algerians, who have returned to a more active diplomatic role in the Sahel peace process under President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, are also quietly pushing for talks with Ag Ghaly, often described by diplomats as ‘Algiers’ man’. A long-awaited first meeting of the review committee of the Algiers agreement was held in the northern town of Kidal in February 2021, raising hopes of progress in implementing the accord.

Lamamra noted that many Malians wanted the government to open a dialogue with Ag Ghaly and Koufa. “The value of a policy of national reconciliation, if it is well managed, is to reduce the terrorist numbers by isolating the most hard-line jihadi internationalists, so that ordinary

Malians who enlisted out of frustration can return to the fold,” he said, adding that Dicko had often acted as an intermediary. “Reducing the number of enemies makes sense.”

French officials, on the other hand, say talking to Ag Ghaly and Koufa would only confer legitimacy on mass murderers who pay allegiance directly to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the successor of Osama bin Laden as leader of Al Qaeda. They contend that it would also undermine efforts to implement the Algiers agreement by side-lining the original signatory groups.

Besides, they ask, what would they talk about? Most Malians do not want Sharia law imposed in place of the country’s secular legal system. Nor were Ag Ghaly and Koufa likely to be bought off with a role as mayor of Kidal or governor of a central region.<sup>(6)</sup>

The long-running debate about whether or not to talk to the jihadists may well be a proxy for other fears and expectations. As in the Middle East, the Malian peace process is often more process than peace. Actors have many motives for engaging in talks other than achieving a just and lasting settlement.

(5) <https://www.france24.com/fr/%C3%A9missions/l-entretien/20201203-le-dialogue-avec-les-terroristes-est-une-volont%C3%A9-des-maliens-assure-le-premier-ministre-du-mali>; <https://www.maliweb.net/interview/moctar-ouane-sur-rfi-il-aura-pas-de-prolongation-2919868.html>

(6) Interview with the author, March 2021

These may include deflecting external pressure for governance reforms or power-sharing, managing domestic public opinion or political allies and opponents, firing warning shots at moments when France is contemplating reducing or withdrawing its presence, or raising pressure on international partners to increase their financial support.

The peace process that matters may be at a much more local, community level. Below the radar, MINUSMA officials, local and international NGOs are involved in mediation efforts to try to resolve conflicts between Fulani and Dogon communities in central Mali. Here and there, local deals have been clinched. In January 2021, three peace agreements were concluded in the Koro district, on the border with Burkina Faso, thanks to mediation by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Geneva-based NGO funded by the EU as well as Denmark and Switzerland. <sup>(7)</sup>

In mid-March, a one-month truce was concluded between jihadist fighters and Dozo militia in Niono, in the central Segou region, negotiated by Dicko's High Islamic Council of Mali. Such accords are straws in the wind, not necessarily harbingers of a broader solution.

The civil affairs division of MINUSMA is involved in a project for five inter-community dialogues in the region of Mopti and Ségou, involving local religious, traditional and community leaders, local authorities, women and young people,

backed by Swiss funds. Four of the dialogues led to the signing of local reconciliation agreements with a monitoring mechanism on practical issues like access and management of land, and delimiting fishing zones along the Niger River. But such welcome local actions are not necessarily scalable. <sup>(8)</sup>

Veterans of long-running conflicts say negotiations with the principal enemy are inevitably part of any exit strategy for international forces. Sidikou, the G5 Sahel Executive Secretary, served as a UN official in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, trying to get girls to go to school after US-led intervention ousted the hard-line Islamist Taliban.

“Look what is happening today. After everything that occurred in between, we are coming back to negotiations [with the Taliban] because the Americans need to leave. It's obvious. So they have to find an internal solution,” he said. <sup>(9)</sup>

The French may have to hold their noses, look away and tacitly accept negotiations between the Malian government and the GSIM jihadists as part of their exit strategy. “If the Malian government decides sovereignly to talk to certain groups, they don't need our permission ... We have to be realistic, we can't do away with those people. And certainly some of the violence is being done by other groups, by the militias,” a senior European diplomat in the region said. <sup>(10)</sup>

(7) <https://www.g5sahel.org/intervention-du-secretaire-executif-a-la-conference-internationale-sur-la-stabilisation-dans-les-zones-de-conflit-et-le-terrorisme-insurrectionnel-dans-le-sahel-central-et-le-bassin-du-lac-tchad/>

(8) <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/media/MINUSMA%20Article%20EN.pdf>

(9) Interview with the author, March 2021

(10) Interview with the author, January 2021

## Separate approaches

Each of the three central Sahel states has taken a separate approach to political efforts towards national reconciliation though none has yet managed durably to reduce the level of violence and instability.

Niger, the world's poorest country, has experienced three military coups and lived under five constitutions since independence. It is now on its Seventh Republic and has been a multi-party democracy since 2010. In a rare example among African leaders, elected President Mahamadou Issoufou agreed to step down after serving his constitutional two-term limit. His former interior minister and long-time associate Mohamed Bazoum was elected to succeed him in 2021, marking the

first peaceful transfer of power between two elected presidents in the country's history.

Niger has managed to hold together as a multi-ethnic state despite being surrounded by violence in Mali, Libya, Sudan, Chad, Nigeria and the remnants of Algeria's civil war. However, it suffered from the fallout of Libya's prolonged civil strife since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, leading notably to an influx of arms and the growth of irregular migration routes across the porous border with its northern neighbour, as well as growing spill-over both from the destabilisation of Mali on its western border and the spread of Boko Haram jihadist militants from Nigeria in the southeast.

Meeting between MINUSMA, regional authorities, representatives of signatory groups, civil society, etc. to take stock of the progress of the "Ménaka without guns" initiative



Like Mali, Niger experienced Tuareg revolts in the 1990s and again from 2007 to 2009 in the northern Agadez region, targeting the armed forces and economic interests, notably the French-run uranium mines around Arlit. The rebels took foreign hostages and made swathes of northern desert into no-go areas for the security forces. But the rebel Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ) split and after a ceasefire was agreed in neighbouring Mali, the insurgents reached a Libyan-brokered armistice with the authorities in Niamey, in exchange for an amnesty in 2009.

In contrast to Mali, the Niger government has since made a much greater effort to integrate its roughly two million Tuareg citizens, who are spread more evenly across the country, into political and economic life. In 2011, Issoufou appointed a Tuareg, Brigi Rafini, as prime minister. Several other Tuaregs have served as ministers in Niamey.

At the same time, Issoufou developed close defence ties with the United States and France, both of which have bases in Niger, as well as the EU, which has trained 13,000 Nigerien police, border guards and gendarmes since 2012. The biggest US air base in the region sits near Agadez, from where an armed drone fleet conducts reconnaissance, surveillance and remote air strikes throughout the central Sahel region.

The Tuareg separatist uprising that began in 2012 in Mali initially had little resonance in Niger. However, the growth of inter-community conflicts between herders and farmers, often

targeting Fulani pastoralists, spread across the border into Niger, drawing in Al Qaeda jihadists and later Islamic State fighters blamed for the worst massacres of civilians. Since December 2020, some 500 Nigerien villagers and 150 soldiers have been killed in a series of attacks in the border zone.

So while Niger has pursued a constructive strategy of political inclusion, it is increasingly prey to cross-border violence, despite the G5 Sahel Joint Force's efforts to assist its relatively small and weak armed forces. It remains to be seen whether the deployment of 1,200 battle-hardened Chadian troops in southwestern Niger in March 2021 will help pacify the border zone.

Chad and Mauritania have been largely spared from Al Qaeda- and ISIS-affiliated jihadist groups, although the Chadians are fighting a guerrilla war against jihadists linked to Nigerian-based Boko Haram in the southwest region around Lake Chad.

Chad's veteran authoritarian President Idriss Deby, who seized power in 1990, was killed fighting off an armed insurgency in the north in mid-April 2021, hours after being declared the runaway winner of a deeply flawed election that would have given him a sixth term after 30 years in power. The violent death of this vital military ally of the French, whose country hosts the headquarters of Operation Barkhane, raised fresh doubts about the sustainability of Western strategy in the Sahel.

Deby's chequered record of abuses of human rights and freedom of expression caused some embarrassment but no perceptible second

(11) Human Rights Watch statement on Chad presidential campaign: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/08/chad-pre-election-crackdown-opponents>

thoughts in Paris. Whether his 37-year-old son Mahamat, a four-star general and commander of the presidential guard, will have the authority to succeed him durably is far from certain.

Despite its Chinese-dominated oil production of 140,000 barrels a day, Chad is second bottom in the UN Human Development Index and has one of the highest infant mortality rates in Africa. The parody of a presidential election was marked by a “ruthless crackdown” on peaceful protests, the disqualification and intimidation of serious opposition candidates and widespread public indifference. <sup>(11)</sup>

Mauritania, which has gradually become more democratic after a long cycle of single party rule and military coups, faces more problems with transnational organised crime than with terrorism, since its sparsely populated desert expanses are a major drug smuggling route from Latin America to Europe.

Nouakchott is the seat of the G5 Sahel Secretariat. The Mauritanian capital also hosts the Secretariat of the Nouakchott Process - a mechanism to strengthen regional security cooperation among 11 west and north African states and information sharing in the fight against terrorism.

## Burkina Faso talks

For its part, Burkina Faso, where security has deteriorated rapidly since 2017, is exploring a negotiated settlement with armed rebels, including jihadists, who have sown violence in its northern tri-border region, driving nearly one million people from their homes.

After winning re-election in 2020 in a vote regarded as clean given the extraordinary security challenges, President Roch Marc Kaboré appointed one of his defeated opponents, Zéphirin Diabré, as Minister for National Reconciliation with an explicit mandate to conduct talks for a settlement with armed

groups, which have fed on the fears of the minority Fulani pastoralists. <sup>(12)</sup>

"If we want to end the security crisis, we will need to find paths and ways to talk with those responsible for terrorist attacks so that we are in peace," Prime Minister Christophe Dabiré told parliament in February 2021.

An investigation by journalist Sam Mednick for The New Humanitarian revealed that senior security officials had launched secret talks with the jihadists before the election, leading to a fragile ceasefire in the northern Djibo region,

(12) <https://www.voanews.com/africa/burkina-fasos-national-reconciliation-no-easy-path>

(13) [https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/3/11/Burkina-Faso-secret-peace-talks-and-jihadist-ceasefire?fbclid=IwAR0\\_ZiNTQpQZ00ZWQF5HAsBe3Atxe96LKqMhkhDDNMhK\\_EnF13C-x3\\_wSXI](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/3/11/Burkina-Faso-secret-peace-talks-and-jihadist-ceasefire?fbclid=IwAR0_ZiNTQpQZ00ZWQF5HAsBe3Atxe96LKqMhkhDDNMhK_EnF13C-x3_wSXI)

near the border with Mali, and a sharp drop in the level of violence. Some fighters have laid down their arms and returned from the bush but the situation remains precarious. Ad hoc negotiations appeared to be taking place elsewhere in the country, Mednick reported. <sup>(13)</sup>

Whether the Mossi-dominated government in Ouagadougou is willing to make substantial

concessions on regional power-sharing and land access for the Fulani, or to rein in the Koglweogo militias remains to be seen. The most hard-line jihadists, notably in ISGS, are unlikely to disarm or cease violence whatever the outcome of the talks. On the contrary, they are highly likely to try to sabotage them through bloodshed.

## Anxious neighbours

As bloodshed in the Sahel has mounted and jihadist groups extended their footprint southwards towards the Gulf of Guinea, the Sahel countries' anxious neighbours have become more deeply involved in trying to shore up stability and security and mediate in political standoffs.

ECOWAS, the regional community in which Nigeria is the biggest power, was the first to offer peacekeepers for Mali after the French intervention in 2013 and played a role in delivering the Bamako government to the Algiers peace agreement.

After the Malian coup in August 2020, ECOWAS refused to accept military rule and wielded its leverage over the landlocked country by closing borders to trade and remittances to persuade the colonels to name a civilian-led transitional

administration with an 18-month timetable for elections. Some fragile West African states, such as Côte d'Ivoire, were particularly tough, viewing the military takeover as a dangerous precedent for their own domestic situations.

Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo launched a regional Accra Initiative in 2017 to try to prevent spill-over from the Sahel jihadist conflict, and fight transnational organised crime and violent extremism in border areas - a key vulnerability in West African states where traffickers ply the ill-controlled seams between countries.

The self-financed initiative brought together Ghana, Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire, with Mali and Niger as observers. The members signed a memorandum of understanding on security and intelligence cooperation in 2020. The Gulf of Guinea states

(13) [https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/3/11/Burkina-Faso-secret-peace-talks-and-jihadist-ceasefire?fbclid=IwAR0\\_ZiNTQpQZ0OZWQF5HAsBe3Atxe96LKqMnhkDDNMHK\\_ErF13C-x3\\_wSXI](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/3/11/Burkina-Faso-secret-peace-talks-and-jihadist-ceasefire?fbclid=IwAR0_ZiNTQpQZ0OZWQF5HAsBe3Atxe96LKqMnhkDDNMHK_ErF13C-x3_wSXI)

are actively stepping up security in their northern border regions following a series of kidnappings and killings of westerners. Closer interaction with the G5 Sahel Joint Force is likely, as it grows in capability.

How neighbouring West African countries would feel about talks between Sahel governments

and armed extremists is less clear. Togolese Foreign Minister Robert Dussey has been a frequent visitor to Bamako to promote political dialogue and governance reforms. A senior African diplomat said any dialogue that helped contain and reduce violence in the Sahel and counter the southward creep of jihadist groups would be supported. <sup>(13)</sup>

## EU, US diplomacy

The EU's special representative for Sahel, Ángel Losada, has been one of the most active conveners of diplomatic efforts for a settlement in Mali and is highly regarded in the region. But in the complex architecture of the EU, he lacks levers in Brussels to coordinate the multiple European programmes or use them to apply pressure. His hand has been weakened, rather than strengthened, by the proliferation of overlapping umbrella organisations such as the Sahel Alliance, the P3S and the Coalition for the Sahel, each with its own secretariat.

"We have a strong commitment to promoting ownership by Sahelians of the peace process, of all those institutions and of their own solutions. That has been one of my main concerns," Losada said in an interview. <sup>(14)</sup>

Although the conflict has spread across borders, he is convinced that the key to stabilising the

entire region lies in Mali. "There won't be peace in the Sahel if there is no peace in Mali. There's no Plan B to the [Algiers] peace process. The challenge is to get Malian political actors to take ownership of their own peace process, and to build inclusivity."

Under the Trump administration, the United States kept a low profile in Sahel crisis management, not least for fear that the president would discover how deeply engaged US forces were in helping the French below the radar and would order them out. However, Washington did appoint an energetic special envoy for the Sahel, J. Peter Pham, who for a year in 2020 sought to convince Sahel governments to take more responsibility for solving their own problems.

"The Sahel crisis is ultimately a crisis of state legitimacy and of governance," Pham said in

(14) Interview with the author, February 2021#

an interview. “You can carve out a little space with security actions, but until there is a political settlement with better governance, there are limits to what that can achieve.”<sup>(15)</sup>

Against French resistance, the United States and Britain have pushed for a role for NATO in building the capacity of Sahel countries’ armed forces. They argue that the Mauritanian military already has a training partnership with the alliance and that NATO, which opened a southern hub in Naples in 2017 to try to improve strategic foresight and outreach south of the Mediterranean, has expertise that it can share with Sahel countries.

After 13 French soldiers were killed in Barkhane’s most deadly helicopter accident in late 2019, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg suggested the alliance would respond positively to any request by Paris to provide assistance. “NATO has the capacity to do a wide range of issues in support of France in Sahel,” he said.<sup>(16)</sup>

The offer fell on deaf ears, partly because NATO’s brand is tainted in Mali and Niger by its role in Libya, where it waged an air campaign to oust Gaddafi in 2011 but did nothing to prevent anarchy in the country after he fell, but also because France wants the European Union, not NATO, to provide training and military support for its African partners.

(15) Interview with the author, February 2021

(16) <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20191129-interview-nato-chief-stoltenberg-optimistic-allies-will-support-france-sahel-france-macron-french-military-mali-operation-barkhane>



Refugee camp for Malians fleeing conflict in Mbera, Mauritania

## CHAPTER 5

# TOUGH LOVE FOR THE SAHEL

Conclusions and recommendations

# “It’s governance, stupid!”

As this report has illustrated, terrorism and irregular migration are consequences rather than root causes of destabilisation in the Sahel.

Jihadism - a totalitarian ideology alien to the tradition of socially conservative but tolerant Islam in the region - feeds on injustice, poverty, predatory governance and the neglect of peripheral regions and minority communities. Irregular migration and people-smuggling feed on hopelessness and the lack of economic and educational opportunity.

The arbitrary nature of some Sahel regimes, even where their constitutions are nominally democratic, is another driver of migratory pressures, as is the impact of climate change. It should be noted that by far the most migration in and from the Sahel is directed towards other, usually coastal, African states rather than to Europe.

That does not mean there is not a need to combat the symptoms of terrorism and migration, which pose a threat to weak Sahel states themselves, to their African neighbours and ultimately also to Europe. But the military-heavy response applied both by successive Malian governments and by France and its international partners has demonstrated its limits.

Simply branding the insurgents ‘armed terrorist groups’, as the French do systematically, denies their political and community identity, while turning a blind eye to abuses by state security forces and allied militias, says Niagalé Bagayoko, Chair of the African Security Sector Network, a think tank which works on civil-military relations and reforming security forces. <sup>(1)</sup>

Military action to contain and degrade jihadist groups can only buy time for political, economic and social solutions. Where it is accompanied by human rights violations, corruption and impunity, it fuels the very grievances on which militant groups prosper.

After the initial successes of French intervention with Operation Serval in 2013 and of the Algiers agreement in 2015, the Malian authorities squandered the space created for implementing longer-term solutions. Paris, Brussels and Washington failed to use their leverage to press for reform. The contagion spread to Burkina Faso and Niger, and beyond.

The key to stabilising the Sahel lies above all in a far-reaching reform of governance, combining genuine decentralisation, an overhaul of the security sector giving priority to protecting civilians, and investments in education,

(1) Interview with the author, March 2021

training and agriculture. This requires the return or creation of public services such as schools, healthcare, justice and local policing in areas from which the state has withdrawn.

To paraphrase James Carville's line on how Bill Clinton could win the 1992 presidential election, "it's governance, stupid!"

## Metrics heading south

Despite the military engagement, training, diplomacy and development assistance of the European Union, other African countries and international partners such as the United States, Canada, the UK and Norway, the situation across the Sahel continues to deteriorate by most conventional metrics.

President Macron and the G5 Sahel's Sidikou characterised the January 2020 Pau Summit as a turning point, at which France and the Sahel leaders renewed their vows to defeat terrorism with a 'military surge'. A year later, after the N'Djamena summit in February 2021, Macron stretched the hyperbole as far as to assert that "we have saved the Sahel for the second time".

Yet 2020 was the worst year since the start of the conflict in the number of casualties, violent incidents, internally displaced persons, schools closed and people facing food insecurity and needing emergency humanitarian assistance. Though they lost two key leaders and hundreds of fighters, the jihadist groups' footprint continued to spread in West Africa.

"These alarming statistics make it clear that military victories will have lasting effects only if public services are (re-)established in the areas liberated from terrorists," EU High Representative Josep Borrell wrote after the N'Djamena summit. "Despite this unprecedented effort, it must be recognised that the results achieved to date have been limited." <sup>(2)</sup>

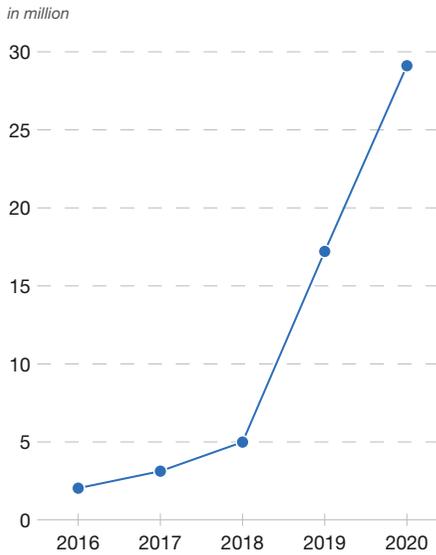
Simply to argue that it would be far worse if we weren't there, and that international action has at least prevented the collapse of the Malian state and the hypothetical establishment of a caliphate in the Sahel, is not good enough, and will not sustain public support for continued engagement.

(2) [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/94953/sahel-if-war-be-won-peace-must-be-won-now\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/94953/sahel-if-war-be-won-peace-must-be-won-now_en)

## Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and Refugee Population trend in the Sahel

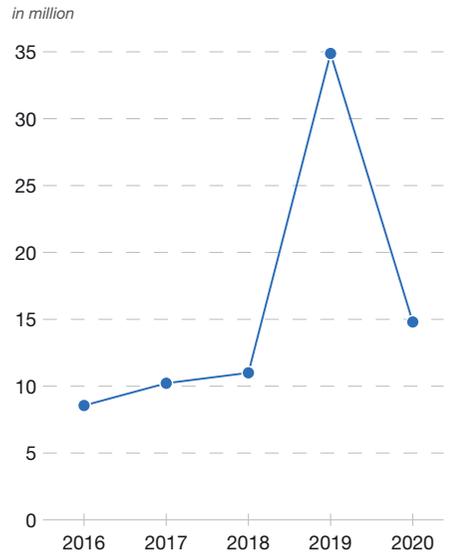
### IDP Population trend

 **29.11 million**



### Refugee Population trend

 **14.8 million**



**Data Source:** Source - UNHCR, Government



MINUSMA led civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) activities with the local community in Gao, Mali

## Glimmers of hope

While the overall picture in the region remains grim, there are some glimmers of hope for a better outcome.

The successful conduct of elections in Burkina Faso and Niger despite severe security challenges has lent fresh legitimacy to governments in those countries and created a window for political dialogue, negotiations and difficult reforms of security and governance. However, an apparent military coup attempt in Niger quashed in March 2021, two days before Mohamed Bazoum's inauguration, showed how fragile civilian democratic rule remains.

Despite the setback to constitutional order of the Mali coup, the military-dominated transitional authorities appeared to be using their popular support initially to establish a more inclusive government, revive steps to implement the Algiers agreement, work on national dialogue and reconciliation and address some of the most glaring issues of human rights and corruption. That popularity will prove ephemeral unless the colonels are more effective in combating insecurity and stick to their pledge not to cling to power beyond the transition deadline in early 2022.

The Algiers agreement has been criticised as lacking democratic legitimacy and flawed due to the dubious representativity of the rebel signatories, but it contains the only comprehensive blueprint for decentralisation and procedures for justice, truth and reconciliation that are worth preserving.

The development of the G5 Sahel as a forum for regional political as well as military cooperation was reflected in the ambitious N'Djamena summit communique, pledging a 'civilian surge' to restore public services and a 'return of the state' to areas cleared of 'terrorists'. The increased effectiveness of the G5 Sahel Joint Force in joint operations with the French military raises the prospect of a new division of labour over time in the battle against the jihadists. Sahel leaders are at least publicly recognising the problems of human rights, corruption and impunity that plague their countries and pledging to improve accountability. Their chequered record of implementing past reform promises gives grounds for vigilance.

The acknowledgement of backchannel contacts in both Mali and Burkina Faso between the authorities and armed insurgents for reducing violence and achieving local or wider truces suggests that governments realise they cannot rely on military action and militias indefinitely.

The proliferation of local inter-community dialogues, in particular in central Mali to address disputes between Fulani and Dogon communities over land and water access, grazing and fishing zones, raises the prospect of creating a patchwork of local solutions, even

if hard-core jihadists and their transnational leaders have no interest in making peace. Yet the mere signature of local accords does not guarantee peace. They need to be embedded in a wider national dialogue and buttressed by rapid practical action to improve living conditions through public services, water and sanitation and improved grazing access.

This region was among the world's richest in the 14th century under Mansa Musa, king of Mali, and there is no reason why, with a judicious application of sound policies and investments, it could not aspire again to greater prosperity.

The adoption of new EU policy guidelines for the Sahel offers hope of a better prioritised, targeted and leveraged approach to promoting governance reform and development, provided the EU empowers its representatives on the ground to implement it flexibly.

(4) [https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport\\_final\\_bounty\\_bounty9.pdf](https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport_final_bounty_bounty9.pdf)

(5) <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/articles/reaction-du-ministere-des-armees-au-rapport-de-la-minusma-sur-les-frappes-de-janvier-au-mali>

# Towards the end of Operation Barkhane

The military historian Michel Goya notes that since the end of the Algerian war, no French military operation in which soldiers have fallen has lasted longer than nine years. <sup>(3)</sup> The Mali intervention is now in its ninth year with 55 French soldiers dead, and 2022 is a presidential election year in France.

Operation Barkhane has done a remarkable professional military job with a small expeditionary force operating in a region the size of Europe but it has reached the point of diminishing returns. Although he opted not to reverse the surge in early 2021, Macron will be looking to declare victory and reduce the military presence significantly before polling day - hence his increased verbal pressure on European partners to share the burden.

Domestic calls to withdraw are muted so far, largely confined to the radical left and a handful of military and Africa experts who contend that Barkhane is delaying Sahel governments taking more responsibility for cleaning up their act and pursuing political solutions. However, another setback like the 2019 helicopter crash in which 13 French soldiers died, or a serious confirmed instance of collateral damage to civilians, could tip public opinion in Paris or Bamako.

A MINUSMA investigation of one such incident concluded that a French airstrike killed 19 civilians attending a wedding along with three suspected armed jihadists near the village of Bounti in central Mali on 3 January 2021. <sup>(4)</sup> The French Armed Forces Ministry disputed the report, saying the planes had struck a gathering of an “armed terrorist group”, after rigorous intelligence-checking and targeting. An official statement did not explicitly deny civilian deaths but cast doubt on the UN fact-finding mission’s methods and offered no apology or compensation for the victims. <sup>(5)</sup>

There are also rumblings in the French general staff that fighting gunmen carrying Kalashnikovs and shoulder-fired rockets on motorbikes and pick-up trucks in a remote desert is gobbling up precious resources and distracting focus from the military’s adaptation to future high-end missions in space, cyberspace, artificial intelligence and beneath the oceans.

In “Une Guerre Perdue” (“A Lost War”), researcher Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos argues that “France’s political and military failure in the Sahel was bound to happen ... Rather than denounce the turpitude of their local allies, they refused to admit the disastrous consequences of a dirty war that tarnishes France’s honour and

(6) Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Une Guerre Perdue*, Paris 2020, JC Lattes

may lead to serious international accusations of having been a passive or even an active accomplice of troops that are massacring the population.”<sup>(6)</sup>

The Africa scholar argues that the Sahel is too remote and hostile an environment to become a hub for global jihad if French forces leave. “On the contrary, disengagement by the international community could ultimately be healthy by pushing the Africans to take their fate into their own hands. Despite the atrocities that have been committed, the jihadist threat might then give Sahelians an incentive to rethink their stance on religion and tradition, and to lay the foundations of a social contract that is less authoritarian and less dependent on former colonial powers.”

An outright withdrawal is not on the cards, given France’s historic and strategic interests in West Africa. For Sahel states, it would be all shock and no therapy. But the time must surely be coming for a new division of labour in which the G5 Sahel Joint Force and better trained national armed forces bear the brunt of ground operations while the French provide intelligence, surveillance and air support, as well as training and command advice along with their European partners. An appropriate

measure of success would be the day rural populations see the arrival of Malian forces as a source of reassurance and security rather than, as now, fear and anxiety.

The recommendations below seek to address the shortcomings of national and European policies in the Sahel by giving a greater role to two institutions closer to the ground - the G5 Sahel Secretariat and the EU Special Representative, both of which serve multiple masters. Most power remains in national hands, but to achieve more effective outcomes, it is worth delegating some of it to these cross-border actors, in conjunction with local communities.

# Recommendations

## To the European Union:

- adopt a more conditional approach to budget assistance for Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, linking payments to meeting agreed benchmarks for governance reforms, including ending impunity, with a credible mechanism to withhold direct financial support if a government does not fulfil its own freely made commitments; this could take the form of a joint Commission and External Action Service decision to suspend that could be overturned only by a qualified majority vote of member states;
- empower the EU special representative for the Sahel to coordinate security training and development programmes as well as mediation efforts, supported by a beefed-up EU diplomatic presence in central Sahel capitals to improve political intelligence gathering and exercise closer supervision of programme implementation;
- earmark an additional financial incentive for the phased implementation of the Algiers agreement including its decentralisation provisions; give the special representative a small discretionary fund to be used to support peace and reconciliation initiatives, and the power to recommend suspensions if commitments are breached;
- simplify and speed up EU approval procedures for immediate impact projects in fragile zones, especially in the tri-border area of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso;
- provide more robust mandates for the EU military and civilian missions in Mali and Niger, with longer tours of duty for seconded trainers, continued mentoring in the field for graduates of EU training, and the supply of more tailored and appropriate equipment to increase the mobility and flexibility of Sahel forces; include support for military justice systems of Sahel states in the training package; encourage EU member states to commit higher quality personnel to the training missions;
- in partnership with Sahel governments and local authorities and in coordination with other major partners (US, Canada, UK, Norway), align key priorities for development cooperation with community needs centred on education and vocational training, especially for girls, locally managed irrigation and agriculture projects, micro-credit and small business support, and institution-building in justice, human rights, health care and sexual and reproductive rights;







# Annex - Sahel timeline

9th century		Islam is introduced to Western Africa by Tuareg and Berber merchants.
13th century		Sundiata Keita founds the Mali Empire, expanding the Mandinka kingdom from inner present-day Mali to the coast of Senegal. It fragments from the 15th century.
Late 19th century		France colonises Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad. The conquest of Mali is gradual as Tuareg groups in the north hold off the French longer.
1857 – 1964		France enrolls soldiers from all five countries as part of its armies and Senegalese Tirailleurs legions engaged in wars in Africa, Europe and Indochina.
1958		Islam becomes a driving and unifying force against colonialism. Mauritania becomes the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and gains independence two years later. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad also become independent in 1960.
1966	Chad	A civil war pushes President Tombalbaye to turn to France for support to quell the rebellion.
1968 – 1985		Sahel drought triggers famine, killing some 100,000 people, and causes massive displacement across the region, fuelling insecurity and dissent.

<p><b>1966 – 1978</b></p>		<p>First wave of coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania overthrows socialist-leaning leaders and leads to a series of military juntas and dictatorships.</p>
<p><b>1979</b></p>	<p>Chad</p>	<p>Civil war in Chad follows an attempt to oust the military junta. Libya occupies northern Aouzou Strip in Chad from 1973 to 1987.</p>
<p><b>1987</b></p>	<p>Burkina Faso</p>	<p>Coup led by army captain Compaoré ousts and kills revolutionary socialist President Sankara. Compaoré remains in power for 27 years.</p>
<p><b>1990</b></p>	<p>Chad</p>	<p>Army colonel Déby seizes power in French-backed coup, extends his rule through a series of flawed elections, surviving multiple coups attempts and armed revolts, and remains in office for 31 years until his violent death in 2021.</p>
<p><b>1991</b></p>	<p>Niger</p>	<p>National Sovereign Conference puts an end to the military rule in Niger.</p>
<p><b>1991</b></p>	<p>Mali</p>	<p>A second coup d'état, known as the March Revolution, leads to a transitional government and a new democratic constitution in Mali.</p>
<p><b>1991</b></p>		<p>Islamist rebels fighting in the Algerian Civil War establish contacts with traffickers in northern Mali and Niger for fuel, food and spare parts.</p>
<p><b>1992 – 2009</b></p>		<p>Mali and Niger experience attempts at multi-party democracy. Burkina Faso and Mauritania see greater political freedom as multi-party authoritarian regimes.</p>

Dec 2002	Mali	Algerian Islamist rebel leader Belmokhtar flees to northern Mali, near the Mauritanian border, followed by more Algerian jihadists. Malian government observes a 'policy of avoidance', delaying confrontation.
June 2005	Mauritania	Belmokhtar leads an incursion against a military camp in Mauritania, attracting the attention of Al Qaeda. Belmokhtar transforms his Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) into Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2006.
2008	Mauritania	Coup led by General Abdel Aziz puts an end to the first multi-party presidential regime, leading to a disputed election won by Abdel Aziz. He launches a years-long offensive against jihadists in Mauritania and Mali, supported by Western allies.
2010	Niger	Military coup puts an end to elected President Tandja's attempt to extend his rule, and a one-year transition leads to new constitution and presidential elections.
Jan 2012	Mali	New wave of Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali and return of Tuareg fighters from Libya weaken a Malian government beset by corruption and protests.
Mar 2012	Mali	Malian soldiers overthrow the government. Seizing the opportunity, the Tuareg Azawad National Liberation Movement takes control of northern Mali and declares an independent state.
2013		Burkina Faso, Niger and several African countries send troops to Mali with a UN peacekeeping mandate, drawing them into an initially internal Malian conflict.

**Jan 2013**

Mali

Islamist fighters who have captured the main population centres in northern Mali attack the strategic central town of Konna on the route to the capital, Bamako, prompting France to intervene militarily through Operation Serval at the request of the Malian authorities to repel the rebels.

**Feb 2013**

European Union launches a military mission (EUTM) to train the Malian military. The EU also establishes two civilian capability building missions to train police, gendarmes and border guards in Mali and Niger (EUCAP Sahel).

**Apr 2013**

United Nations Security Council authorizes deployment of a multidimensional peacekeeping operation in Mali (MINUSMA).

**Aug 2014**

France's Operation Serval is replaced by Operation Barkhane, a long-term counter-insurgency mission.

**Nov 2014**

Burkina Faso

Following a popular uprising against his bid to perpetuate his rule, President Compaoré is deposed by the army after 25 years in power. After a period of uncertainty, President Kaboré is elected.

**Dec 2014**

G5 Sahel organisation of five Sahel states is launched, grouping Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

**May 2015**

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is founded by breakaway group from Al Mourabitoun as an affiliate of the wider Islamic State. It operates in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, especially in the tri-border area.

Aug 2015

Mali

Mali signs internationally-mediated Algiers peace agreement with two northern rebel movements, but not jihadists, pledging decentralisation and integration of rebel fighters into reformed security forces. It has yet to be fully implemented.

Nov 2015

G5 Sahel establishes a cross-border Joint Force to fight terrorism.

2016

Niger

Niger faces several attacks remotely organised from Mali.

Mar 2017

Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) is created as merger of AQIM, Al Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front. After initially cooperating, GSIM and ISGS clash sporadically in central Mali in 2019-2020.

Jan 2020

Pau Summit strengthens military cooperation between G5 Sahel and France and creates international Coalition for the Sahel to coordinate counter-terrorism, security training, civilian capacity building and development. France deploys an extra 600 soldiers to Sahel, taking Barkhane force to 5,100.

Mar 2020

Creation of French-led European special forces' Takuba Task Force to support Operation Barkhane. Troop contributors include Estonia, Sweden, Czech Republic and Italy.

Aug 2020

Mali

Military coup ousts President Keita following street protests against corruption and insecurity. African neighbours impose sanctions until coup leaders agree to 18-month civilian-led transition to democratic elections.

**Jan 2021**

Mali

French air strike kills 22 people near Bounti in Mali. UN MINUSMA investigation finds 19 civilians and three suspected armed jihadists attending a wedding party were killed. France disputes findings, saying it hit an armed terrorist gathering.

**Feb 2021**

Chad

G5 Sahel countries pledge at N'Djamena summit with France and international partners to pursue a 'civilian surge' to return state administration and public services to areas of their countries cleared of rebels.

**Mar 2021**

Niger

Niger thwarts coup attempt days before swearing-in of President Bazoum, marking first peace transition between two elected leaders in country's history.

**Apr 2021**

Chad

Proclaimed winner of a flawed election, President Déby is fatally wounded leading troops against an incursion by rebels from Libya. His son, General Mahamat Idriss Déby, takes power as head of military council, suspends the constitution, dissolves parliament and declares a state of emergency. Several people are killed in protests against the military takeover.

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