ANALYSIS

STABILISING THE SAHEL
The Role of International Military Operations

| Kalev Stoicescu |
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Author: Stoicescu, Kalev
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Cover page photo: Boys play on the roof of the entrance to a football stadium in Gao, February 2013. Reuters/Joe Penney/Scanpix.
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©International Centre for Defence and Security
63/4 Narva Rd., 10152 Tallinn, Estonia
info@icds.ee, www.icds.ee
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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQIM</td>
<td>Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb</td>
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<tr>
<td>EUTM Mali</td>
<td>European Union Training Mission in Mali</td>
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<tr>
<td>G5 Sahel</td>
<td>Group of Five (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISR</td>
<td>Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance</td>
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<tr>
<td>JNIM</td>
<td>Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAF</td>
<td>Malian Armed Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>MINUSMA</td>
<td>Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOF</td>
<td>Special Operations Forces</td>
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<td>TFT</td>
<td>Task Force Takuba</td>
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INTRODUCTION

The large Sahel region in northern Africa is plagued by a combination of poverty, explosive demography, weak statehood, corruption, climate change and desertification. Instability and insecurity resulting from inter-ethnic feuds and terrorism are widespread and aggravated by the ease with which people can move unhindered across the region’s virtually uncontrolled borders. In Mali, the Arab Spring created favourable conditions for a Tuareg rebellion that led to civil war in 2012-2013. Islamic terrorist groups (notably Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar-al-Dine and al-Murabitum, which in March 2017 merged to form a new group, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)) began to pose serious threats to countries in the Sahel—in particular Mali itself, but also Algeria, Cameroon, Libya and Nigeria. More recently, the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria forced terrorists to seek new havens. The weak states of the Sahel, with their vast, poorly controlled areas and borders, and potential recruiting pools of new followers and allies within their Islamic populations, were obvious choices.

Western nations and organisations, in particular France, the EU and the UN are determined to take action in the Sahel to alleviate the security, humanitarian and economic situation and have launched various operations and programmes to this end. European actors, again especially France, are also motivated by geography, history and a wish to manage migration from the area.

The governments of the region have themselves also made joint efforts aimed at enhancing stability and eradicating terrorism, mainly in Mali. But the security situation remains precarious and there is a pressing need to continue, and indeed to strengthen, anti-terrorist operations and other efforts.

This analysis examines what has been achieved through EU, UN and coalition military operations in the Sahel, and considers whether international organisations and coalitions of nations might expand their operations there. The Sahel here refers to the so-called ‘group of five’ or ‘G5 Sahel’ nations that was established in 2014 and comprises Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The main focus of this analysis, however, is Mali, which is centrally located among the G5 Sahel nations and hosts the multinational military operations (although French and other forces are also present in Chad and Niger).

The first chapter of this analysis provides an overview of the general situation in the Sahel, with a focus on Mali, and outlines the main regional challenges and threats. The second and third chapters describe the various multinational operations that are currently being conducted by the EU and the UN, and those led by France, and outline where and how Estonia participates. The fourth chapter briefly assesses the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The conclusions chapter considers the prospects for the expansion of international military operations in and around Mali. The key question is whether EU and/or NATO allies, including Estonia, would be willing and able to continue to support such efforts, in particular following the pandemic.

This analysis has been prepared on the basis of a review of the open source literature and several

remote non-attributable interviews with civilian and military experts in Estonia, France and Sweden.

1. THE SAHEL: AN OVERVIEW

The G5 Sahel nations are part of Françafrique, France’s historic sphere of influence in Africa that comprises seventeen north African and sub-Saharan countries, as well as Madagascar. These were all colonies of France until the 1950s or early 1960s (French Algeria was administered as an integral part of France until independence) and, with the exception of Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania, have French as their official language. The political, economic and military elites of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad are French educated and oriented, while local languages, for example Bambara in Mali, are increasingly used by the poor and mainly agricultural populations, many of whom regard France and the West in general with mistrust.

1.1. GEOGRAPHY

The Sahel is a vast belt, up to 1 000 kilometres wide and spanning 5 400 kilometres from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. It is the zone of transition between the Sahara desert and the Sudanian Savanna. The Arabic words sāḥil (meaning border or margin), as-ṣahrā’ (desert) and bilād as-sūdān (lands of the Blacks) point to the historical, geographical and anthropological differences between northern and sub-Saharan Africa.

The region is also where Islam meets the religions that prevail further south. Islam—mostly non-denominational and Sunni—dominates entirely in Mali, Mauritania and Niger, but is far less prevalent in Burkina Faso and Chad, where about 60% of the population is Muslim and the rest mainly Christian. Tuareg/Moor minorities inhabit the northern half of Mali and most of Niger, totalling about 10% of the population in each country.

Together, the G5 Sahel countries occupy more than five million square kilometres, exceeding the territory of the EU by almost 20%, and have a combined population of 80 million, a little less than that of Germany. The hyper-arid, arid or semi-arid climate conditions in about 95% of the region mean that large expanses are either unpopulated or very sparsely inhabited. Only relatively small areas in southern Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad enjoy a sub-humid climate. Global climate change and overgrazing by the large herds of cattle owned by nomad groups are causing intense desertification of the predominantly savanna landscape. Nonetheless, annual population growth in the region is very high, ranging from 2.6% in Mauritania and 2.9% in Mali to 3.9% in Niger.\(^3\)

1.2. ECONOMY

The International Monetary Fund estimated the 2018 combined nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the G5 Sahel nations to be 55 billion euros (less than Croatia) or 148 billion euros according to their Purchasing Power Parity (less than Bulgaria). Unemployment rates are high and in many areas about 80% of the population are engaged in or otherwise dependent on subsistence agriculture and exports of livestock, and cotton or other crops. The G5 Sahel nations are, however, above averagely rich in natural and mineral resources that contribute significantly to their earnings from exports (see Table 1) even if they are unable to make full use of these resources, or to share revenues more widely because of the cultural acceptance of corruption, the weak rule of law, the precarious security situation, and the risk—particularly in Mali and Niger—of terrorist attacks.

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The EU estimates that 5.2 million people in the region are displaced (the figure increased by 0.55 million in 2019) and 24.4 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, including 19 million requiring emergency food aid. Poverty, poor education, unemployment and insecurity are the main drivers of migration from the Sahel to other regions, mainly Europe.

The G5 Sahel countries are not sustainable in the long run if desertification due to climate change and overgrazing, and extensive, environmentally damaging exploitation of natural and mineral resources continues. Further factors include weak statehood, corruption and the loose rule of law, continuous demographic explosion and very low levels of literacy. International aid can help to save lives, but donors will struggle to find the extensive resources necessary to help turn these states around.

### Table 1. Natural resources as percentage of exports by value. Data: The Observatory of Economic Complexity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Percentage of exports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>Gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>Crude oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>Gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>Iron ore, gold and copper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>Uranium, refined petroleum, gold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

International aid can help to save lives, but donors will struggle to find the extensive resources necessary to help turn these states around.

The EU, one of the largest donors, provided humanitarian assistance worth 187 million euros in 2019 to Sahel countries (including also Senegal, Nigeria and Cameroon). In June 2013, the UN Security Council endorsed an Integrated Strategy for the Sahel for conflict prevention and resilience building in the framework of long-term development plans.

### 1.3. The Security Situation

The Tuareg rebellion that started in January 2012 in the northern half of Mali is the most recent of a series of conflicts that took place in the 1990s and 2000s (the previous one ended in 2009) between Tuareg factions and the Malian Government. Each of these conflicts ended with promises of greater autonomy, political participation, inclusion in the country’s national army, and economic development and assistance for the Tuareg population. These promises were largely broken. The mounting frustration of the Tuareg people, influenced by the Libyan Civil War of February to October 2011, led to aspirations for independence in north Mali.

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad took advantage of the political chaos in Mali’s capital, Bamako, following a military coup in March 2012. By April 2012, Tuareg rebels with the help of Islamic fundamentalist groups (particularly Ansar Dine, a faction of AQIM) had taken control of almost two thirds of the country’s territory, including important cities such as Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. However, the Islamists soon turned against the Tuaregs who, by July 2012, had lost control of most of the captured areas to Ansar Dine and other Islamic groups. When France

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5 The Sahel Alliance, Alliance Sahel, c. 2020.
7 United Nations, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, “The Sahel.”
8 Tuaregs call Mali’s northern half Azawad and regard it as their historic homeland.
intervened militarily in January 2013 under Operation Serval, soon followed by the forces of African Union states, Mali was saved from total collapse and a likely Afghanistan/Taliban scenario.\(^{10}\) In June 2015, the Malian Government signed a peace agreement with several factions of Tuareg rebels, giving them increased autonomy and cancelling arrest warrants for their leaders.

The fighting between Malian and French armed forces and the Tuaregs practically ceased, but Islamic fundamentalist groups continued to conduct terrorist attacks.\(^{11}\) Dozens of terrorist attacks have been carried out in the Sahel in recent years by al Qaeda, as well as various factions affiliated to the Islamic State: Islamic State West Africa Province in the tri-border region of Chad, Niger and Nigeria, and Islamic State in Greater Sahara and JNIM mostly in Mali, but also in western Niger. France and its partners have struck back, including, for example, by eliminating Abdelmalek Droukdel, the emir of AQIM, in an operation in northern Mali on 3 June 2020.\(^{12}\)

Today, the security situation in the Sahel remains very tense, as confirmed by the April 2020 terrorist attacks in the Malian cities of Bamba and Tarkint.\(^{13}\) Terrorist activity has recently concentrated in the region to the east of Gao where the borders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso meet. Chad is also affected by the terrorist threat, particularly from Boko Haram whose attack on a military base in Bomo claimed 98 lives and pushed the Chadian President and Government to take action.\(^{14}\) Some experts, noting the longtime absence of confrontation between al Qaeda and Islamic State offshoots in the Sahel region, conclude that these organisations will continue to evolve in the Sahel in spite of the heavy involvement of France and other nations as local grievances have not been addressed and US disengagement from Africa is looming.\(^{15}\)

In Mali, the frontline in the fight against terrorism is the towns along the river Niger. Gao has a large garrison that hosts forces of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) and the French-led Operation Barkhane. The terrorists prefer to attack poorly defended targets and rarely venture against the international forces in Gao, but do organise occasional suicide attacks.\(^{16}\) MINUSMA forces are less capable and are restricted by rather stringent rules of engagement, making them a more likely target of terrorist attacks.

French and Western support is vital to the G5 Sahel nations if they are to preserve stability, fight terrorism and prevent separatism and turmoil. This need became very clear in May 2014 when the Malian army suffered a quick and humiliating defeat by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in the town of Kidal in north-east Mali.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, the international community faces the risk of terrorist and other criminal activities spreading to neighbouring coastal countries—in particular Benin, Ivory Coast, Togo and Ghana—if military security efforts coupled with development and

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\(^{10}\) Kathryn Reid, “Mali Conflict: Facts, FAQs, and how to help,” World Vision, 14 August 2018.


\(^{17}\) “Mali: Tuareg rebels defeat government army in Kidal,” BBC News, 22 May 2014.
governance projects are not sufficiently strengthened.

International efforts to fight terrorism and stabilise the situation have increased continuously, but the terrorist groups have proved resilient. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, for example, has survived by adaptation and cooperation with other groups such as the Group for the Support of Islam and the Muslim.

1.4. The G5 Sahel Armed Forces

Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger all have regular armies, a variety of gendarmeries and/or paramilitary organisations, and air forces (organised under the army in Mali). Mauritania also has a small navy (see Table 2). The Malian Armed Forces (MAF) have, in recent years, become better organised and more proficient. EUTM Mali has helped to train disciplined and combat-ready battalions and the Special Operations Forces (SOF) are well trained and capable, but need considerable support from other nations, particularly France. Senior officers throughout the MAF have a good knowledge of both French and English.

The MAF’s armour, artillery and small calibre weapons are mostly of Soviet origin, but since 2017 France has provided 8 million euros worth of military aid to the G5 Sahel joint force, including to Malian units, in the form of pick-up and transport trucks, machine guns and other equipment. Much of the modern military equipment of the G5 Sahel countries was donated by France, Germany, the US, Qatar and other countries. The Malian Air Force is equipped with about two dozen combat and transport planes and helicopters, many of them provided decades ago by the Soviet Union, as well as some newer acquisitions from Western countries and China.
### Table 2. G5 Sahel Armed Forces. Data: IISS, The Military Balance 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Defence Budget 2019 (USD million, % GDP)</th>
<th>Active Personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>361 (2.5%)</td>
<td>6 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>206 (1.9%)</td>
<td>27 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>727 (4.1%)</td>
<td>13 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>160 (2.8%)</td>
<td>15 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>176 (1.9%)</td>
<td>5 300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The armed forces of Niger and Burkina Faso are smaller than the MAF, but are equipped with modern and mostly Western armour and aircraft. The Chadian Armed Forces are far larger. Their armour and artillery as well as their combat aircraft are mostly Russian-made. Mauritania has forces of a similar size to the MAF, with a similar range of equipment.

### 1.6. INTERNATIONAL INTERESTS

As the former colonial power in the region, France has a historic and moral responsibility to support the G5 Sahel countries, most of which are French speaking, and have French educated and oriented elites. France itself has sizeable groups of citizens and residents who originate from the Sahel. In the economic sphere, France needs natural resources from the region. Niger, for example is, alongside Canada, the main supplier of uranium to the nuclear power plants that produce almost 72% of France’s electricity).

The French Treasury guarantees the East African CFA franc, which, because this is held at parity with the West African CFA franc and is tied to the euro, guarantees the financial stability of Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso and other African countries. Some critics condemn this monetary bond as a “colonial hangover.”

In May 2020, the German Bundestag approved the country’s continuing participation in MINUSMA and EUTM Mali with up to 1500 personnel, its largest military deployment abroad. While Berlin is very interested in contributing to strengthening security and building stability in Sahel, the domestic political debate is dominated by arguments concerning...

the scale of engagement, Germany’s role vis-à-vis France, and the risks associated with the mission. Some politicians and experts argue that international efforts in Sahel, particularly in Mali, rely excessively on military means, which could be counterproductive if the use of force is not implemented in a clearly targeted manner. Building state institutions and promoting economic development are obvious complementary actions. Others ask whether Germany cooperates with France in the Sahel for the sake of bilateral relations and in support of European integration, or rather because it considers the vast African region to be important. These views are not mutually exclusive, and no one questions the leadership of France. Another concern stems from the perception that Mali/Sahel is analogous to Afghanistan, and that the prospects for international success are rather slim.26

The main goal of Western activities in the region is to fight against Islamic terrorism and strengthen security, through a combination of military assistance, and economic development aid coupled with assistance in the health and education sectors. Massive illegal migration is also a central issue for the EU and its member states, particularly in the Mediterranean Basin. The G5 Sahel countries are both sources and avenues of migration through North African countries, particularly Libya and Morocco. Security and economic development, as well as improved border control in Mali and other Sahel states would certainly have a positive impact in reducing migration to Europe.

More broadly, Africa has once again become a theatre of great power competition and the Sahel is no exception. China, and to a lesser extent Russia, are actively pursuing political and economic objectives in Africa, including by exercising military tools. The US and French desire to counter Chinese and Russian influence requires military presence and their own political and economic activity in the G5 Sahel countries.27 The US, though, is considering reducing its military presence in Africa in order to focus more on East Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The military and economic abandonment of Africa by the US could have severe consequences for wider Western influence and interests in the Sahel.

1.7. Western Military Presence

France deploys ‘forces of presence’ to Africa under two command structures: a headquarters in Gabon for Chad and other central African countries, and one in Senegal for the rest of the G5 Sahel countries and other western African nations. France also has a headquarters in Djibouti for the Horn of Africa and another in Abidjan for the Ivory Coast alone.28

The 3 000 personnel deployed by France in Djibouti, Senegal, Gabon and Ivory Coast do not, however, directly take part in operations in and around Mali. These are organised through the French Operation Barkhane (see Figure 1), which was launched in August 2014 after the termination of Operation Serval, and is intended to support and strengthen the coordination of the MAF and forces of the other G5 Sahel countries, and to prevent the re-emergence of strongholds of terrorists. Under Barkhane, 4 700 French troops are assigned to a theatre joint command post in N’Djamena, Chad, and stationed in three permanent bases: Gao in Mali, from where troops can be deployed to temporary advance bases in Tessalit and Kidal; Niamey in Niger; and N’Djamena itself. France has also deployed a significant amount of equipment for Operation Barkhane, including: 3 Reaper drones, 7 Mirage 2000 combat aircraft, 21 combat and force utility helicopters, between 6 and 10 tactical and strategic lift aircraft, 260 heavy and 210 light armour combat and transport vehicles, and 360 logistic vehicles.

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In January 2020, President Macron announced that France was preparing to deploy an additional 220 personnel to the Liptako Gourma region (the tri-border area of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) in anticipation of the deployment of forces by other European countries who had pledged to contribute to a new initiative—Task Force Takuba (TFT).  

For the last decade, the US has sent SOF detachments to the Sahel in a training and advisory capacity. For example, about 800 US troops, including air force and SOF units, were recently reported to be deployed in Niger. It has also operated an air base in Niamey and built a temporary C-17 and MQ-9 Reaper capable airfield in Agadez. The Nigerien Government has authorised the use of armed drones from there (as well as Niamey) and its location in the middle of Niger is perfect for conducting surveillance and strike missions in all directions. American Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and logistic support, in particular strategic and tactical airlift, is vital for the international operations in the Sahel. France and the US routinely share ISR assets, and other capabilities such as medical evacuation. A terrorist attack on Nigerien and US forces in the Liptako Gourma region in October 2017 resulted in four American and five Nigerien deaths. This incident provoked high-level political discontent in Washington D.C., in part because of allegations that the French military in the neighbourhood failed to offer air support for some hours, but ultimately sent reinforcements.

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and saved the survivors, and because of the cowardice of the Nigerien soldiers who immediately fled from the battlefield.33

Estonia was the first country to join France in Operation Barkhane, in September 2018, following a decision of the Estonian Parliament.34 It had also been the first country to join France in the Central African Republic in April 2014 at the start of the EU’s EUFOR RCA mission, but this was—as previously agreed—a one-rotation deployment to be followed by an increase in Estonia’s contribution in Mali.35

Estonia initially contributed to Operation Barkhane with up to 50 personnel conducting base protection in Gao. In November 2019, the Estonian Parliament decided to increase this to a maximum of 95 personnel, in addition to officers and NCOs deployed to MINUSMA and EUTM Mali.36 Estonia will thus deploy a mechanised infantry platoon as well as medical, demining and fire control capabilities, and a SOF detachment. There is political and military support in both Tallinn and Paris for Estonia’s increased and continuous participation in international operations in Mali. Estonia values the experience its forces gain in the Sahel and is also motivated to strengthen defence cooperation with France, which it sees as a means to enhance European and NATO solidarity. The UK, Spain and Denmark are also important contributors to Operation Barkhane.

2. INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS

The international organisations most involved in the Sahel, and in particular in Mali, are the UN, through MINUSMA, and the EU, through EUTM Mali. The African Union also plays a supporting role. In present circumstances, these operations are able to preserve the status quo, but can do little to substantially improve the security situation. They do, however, at least offer Mali the opportunity to seek a political resolution and unify the country.

2.1. MINUSMA

The UN’s MINUSMA operation started in July 2013 with the aim of supporting the political process between Bamako and the Tuareg separatists. It was mandated by the Security Council to protect civilians and lines of communication, and to create the conditions to permit the provision of humanitarian assistance and the return of internally displaced persons.37 Due to the sharp rise of terrorism in the following years, it has become one of UN’s most dangerous peacekeeping operations with over 200 peacekeepers killed.

Today, MINUSMA has 15 600 personnel, of whom 12 300 are military (including 500 staff officers) and 1 750 are policemen; the major troop contributing nations are Chad, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Senegal, Togo, Niger and Guinea.38 The 54 contributing countries include 20 NATO and/or EU member states, which mainly provide equipment such as helicopters and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles as well as special operations personnel and staff officers. Estonia contributes staff officers to MINUSMA.

Estonia values the experience its forces gain in the Sahel and is also motivated to strengthen defence cooperation with France.

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34 Riigikogu (Parliament of Estonia), “Riigikogu toetas Eesti kaitseväelaste osalemist operatsioonil Barkhane Maliis” (Riigikogu supported the participation of Estonia’s Armed Forces personnel in Operation Barkhane in Mali), 9 May 2018.
36 “Riigikogu andis loa kuni 160 kaitseväe osalemiseks välismissioonidel” [Riigikogu gave permission for up to 160 EDF personnel to participate in missions abroad],” ERR, 6 November 2019.
37 “History,” MINUSMA.
38 “MINUSMA Fact Sheet,” United Nations Peacekeeping.
MINUSMA is commanded by Swedish Lieutenant General Dennis Gyllensporre from a headquarters in Bamako with forces deployed in Gao (east Mali), Kidal and Tessalit (north Mali), Timbuktu (west Mali), Mopti and Douenza (central Mali). Its approved budget for July 2019 to June 2020 is 1.221 billion US dollars.  

2.2. EUTM MALI

The EU launched its training mission in Mali in January 2013, upon a decision by the European Council. Its purpose is to provide advice at all levels, and to train units and improve the operational capabilities of the MAF and the G5 Sahel joint force.

The almost 700 personnel of EUTM Mali come from 28 European states, and 5 EU partner countries. The mission is subordinated to the Military Planning and Conduct Capability—the non-deployable and permanent command and control structure of EU’s Military Committee. EUTM Mali’s commander is Portuguese Brigadier General João Boga Ribeiro and the force consists of a Mission Force Headquarters (Bamako), an Educational and Training Task Force (Koulikoro), an Advisory Task Force (Bamako), and Force Protection Units and Medical Units (in Koulikoro, Bamako and Sévaré). Estonia contributes staff officers and NCOs to the mission.

EUTM Mali has trained about 15 000 MAF personnel. The mission’s budget for 2018 to 2020 is 59.7 million euros.

3. FRENCH OPERATIONS

The French-led Operation Barkhane, which includes European and US contributions, has inflicted severe losses on terrorist groups in and around Mali since 2014. The terrorists have, however, demonstrated an unexpected level of resilience and an ability to adapt. They have concentrated their activities to the east of Gao in the Liptako-Gourma region—a hilly, cross-border area in eastern Burkina Faso, southwestern Niger and south-east central Mali historically inhabited by the Gourma people. The Operation Barkhane contributors and other interested countries have agreed that, given the central geographic location and other important features of the Liptako-Gourma region, the terrorist threat there should be countered with the most capable air and land forces, and have established Task Force Takuba, made up of the G5 Sahel joint force and SOF from the Barkhane countries.

3.1. OPERATION BARKHANE

France launched Operation Serval in January 2013 to stop, at Mali’s request, the jihadist offensive that threatened to reach the capital, Bamako. The tasks related to stabilisation were soon taken over by MINUSMA, and Serval’s successor, Operation Barkhane, was launched in July 2014. The aims of Barkhane are to prevent the re-establishment of safe havens for terrorists in the region, to strengthen coordination and cooperation between the military forces of the international actors, and to support the armed forces of the G5 Sahel countries.

Operation Barkhane, presently under the command of Major General Pascal Facon from a single joint headquarters in N’Djamena, Chad, is France’s largest foreign deployment. France provides the bulk of the 4 700 personnel, who are deployed to three permanent bases: Gao in Mali; Niamey in Niger; and N’Djamena. In Mali, the Barkhane land forces consist of two Desert Tactical Groups in the country’s northeast (in

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39 Ibid.
40 “Background,” EUTM Mali.
41 “Organization,” EUTM Mali.
Kidal and Tessalit), supported by a Desert Operational Base in Gao. Desert-relay platforms and temporary advance bases allow action in remote areas, including operations with the MAF or other G5 Sahel forces. At present, Estonia is the only contributing nation taking part alongside France with land forces personnel and armoured personnel carriers.

Another major element of Operation Barkhane is its air-land units (see Figure 2), equipped with 16 combat and utility helicopters (including three British CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift transport helicopters and two Danish Merlin transport helicopters) and transport aircraft (tactical and strategic lift) provided by France, the US, Spain and Germany. French combat aircraft and ISR platforms (7 Mirage 2000 C or D and 3 Reaper drones) are also stationed in Niamey and N’Djamena ready to support the land and air-land units in the event of ambushes by terrorists in remote areas.44 The huge distances involved make the logistics of Operation Barkhane a major challenge, but logistic support is planned and executed over the entire theatre of operations through a network of permanent support bases, logistics and air support platforms, temporary forward bases, and maritime support bases in the ports of Dakar, Abidjan and Douala.

Barkhane is a complex and tough combat operation even for the very professional and well-equipped French and other forces. It has a cross-border dimension, covers millions of square kilometres in different countries, provides support to MINUSMA, EUTM Mali and the G5 Sahel forces, actively pursues and eliminates terrorists, and conducts outreach projects such as the provision of water supplies and the development of education and access to information to benefit and gain the support of local populations.

Figure 2. Operation Barkhane. Ministère des Armées (France).

44 Ibid, 18.
According to the UN, around 4 000 people were killed in militant attacks in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso during 2019. Operations Serval and Barkhane have eliminated thousands of terrorists in the G5 Sahel countries since 2013, but the recruiting pool is certainly not close to becoming exhausted. France has lost 41 personnel in Mali since 2013, including 10 in Operation Serval. Estonia, too, has suffered (non-fatal) casualties in a terrorist suicide attack in July 2019.

3.2. TASK FORCE TAKUBA

Task Force Takuba was established under Operation Barkhane by several European nations at the request of the Malian and Nigerien Governments to support the Malian and G5 Sahel forces, as well as the UN and EU missions. Its operational area is the semi-arid Liptako region, a contiguous geographic space that covers about 370 000 km² (roughly the size of Norway) on the right bank of the river Niger. The economy here is still very dominated by agriculture and livestock herding, but has considerable potential for hydropower and mining that is currently hampered by the terrorist threat. TFT will accompany Malian and Nigerien forces, and its missions will certainly include cross-border actions in pursuit of terrorists. The contributing and host nations have pledged that TFT will respect international law and any agreements reached with the Malian and Nigerien Governments. TFT operations, across a vast open area infested with terrorists, are likely to be riskier than any actions conducted so far under Operation Barkhane.

The idea to establish a multinational task force including SOF and support units from NATO and EU member states arose in early 2019 and was probably inspired by the Western multinational coalitions used to some effect in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The name chosen by France for the new task force—takoba, or takuba—is a Tamasheq (the Tuareg language) word for a sabre that is widely used in the western Sahel among all the largest ethnic groups, including the Hausa, the Fulani and the Tuareg.

The host nations and France welcome the participation of other European nations in TFT. Estonia is strongly motivated, politically and militarily, to continue and strengthen its participation in all operations in Mali, particularly in Operation Barkhane. It recognises a need to take part in demanding international operations to maintain competencies in its land forces and SOF and is ready to deploy additional forces to Mali in the second half of 2020.

On 27 March 2020 Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France and Portugal released a political declaration in which they agreed to contribute SOF elements and other capabilities to TFT, which is planned to achieve Initial Operational Capability by summer 2020 and Full Operational Capability by early 2021. The host countries Mali and Niger also signed the statement, to which Germany, Norway and the UK offered their full political support. Sweden, which has participated since 2013 in MINUSMA, and Czechia will also probably join TFT pending erääksused [Additional Special Operations Forces will be deployed to Mali under French leadership],” 28 March 2020.

46 “Eesti kaitseväelaste baasi Malis ründasid terroristid [The base of Estonian military in Mali was attacked],” Uudised.ee, 23 July 2019.
48 “Task Force Takuba: political statement by the governments of Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Italy, Mali, Niger, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom.”
governmental and/or parliamentary decisions.\textsuperscript{49} Sweden deployed a 250-strong ISR unit to MINUSMA from 2015 to December 2019, and is currently relocating a light infantry company from Timbuktu to Gao, while preparing a 150-strong Quick Reaction Force with its own helicopter for TFT.

One obviously missing party, however, is the US, whose logistic, intelligence and other support has proved so far to be very valuable, if not critical, to operations in the region. France has been an active supporter of the US in the fight against terrorism in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, and it has similarly enjoyed American support in the Sahel. But the White House has clearly changed its attitude towards its involvement in Syria, and perhaps in Africa too. TFT will face an uphill struggle to succeed without US assistance.

While TFT will certainly and substantially enhance Western and local efforts to suppress terrorism in and beyond the Liptako region, its actual size and roles are still to be clarified, for example the interactions and cooperation it will have with other international forces. One possible component is that TFT will build upon the role of EUTM Mali by continuing the training of the MAF with mentoring in the field following basic training by EUTM.

4. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The SARS CoV-2 coronavirus has reached Africa, but has so far had relatively little impact on the G5 Sahel countries, who have each carried out only a few thousand tests. The official numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths as of early June was 1350/78 in Mali, 960/65 in Niger, 880/53 in Burkina Faso, 800/66 in Chad, and 670/31 in Mauritania.

Poor sanitary and healthcare conditions and substantial concentrations of people with few means of protection and mitigation make the Sahel countries particularly vulnerable to Covid-19. The G5 countries were quick to undertake emergency measures in mid-March, but the populations became anxious, particularly about the closure of markets and mosques. Covid-19 might accentuate economic and security difficulties of the Sahel nations, as well as impacting food supplies.\textsuperscript{50}

As of June 2020, no nations have withdrawn troops and the consequences of the pandemic on their operations have been manageable, even if the pace of missions has slowed. EUTM Mali and MINUSMA have continued with their essential activities, while applying strict quarantine measures to any personnel suspected of being infected. Operation Barkhane has similarly continued with preventive measures put in place to avoid any local contamination from and to European troops. Troop contributing nations and organisations have been in close contact and have carefully monitored the situation so as to be able to take coordinated steps. France has a large Role 2 hospital facility in the Gao garrison, while patients with cases beyond Role 2 can be evacuated to Bamako (and Europe).\textsuperscript{51}

Mali has experience in dealing with deadly viruses from the outbreak of Ebola in the southernmost part of the country in October 2014.\textsuperscript{52} Covid-19, however, might prove to be an insurmountable challenge and the spread of the evacuation from Role/Echelon 1 (small unit) facilities, triage and resuscitation, treatment and holding of patients until they can be returned to duty or evacuated, and emergency dental treatment. Though normally this level will not include surgical capabilities, certain operations may require their augmentation with the capabilities to perform emergency surgery and essential post-operative management: NATO, Logistics Handbook, Chapter 16.\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{51} Role 2 support is normally provided at larger unit level, usually of Brigade or larger size. In general, it will provide

disease within the MAF and other G5 Sahel forces could demoralise and disable them. In the longer term, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economies of both the European and G5 Sahel nations will certainly have an impact on the financing of ongoing operations in Mali.

**Conclusions**

Mali and the other G5 Sahel countries are politically and economically weak. They suffer from poverty, corruption and unsustainable demographic growth, aggravated by degrading environmental and agricultural conditions. Persistent Islamic terrorism hinders their political stability, threatening widespread chaos and their economic development, for example through the intimidation of possible foreign investors in mining and other sectors. Mali, the focus of this instability, has yet to implement a durable and peaceful political settlement that would unite the country and provide acceptable conditions, including development aid, to the populations in its north.

Western military and security aid, and economic, educational and other forms of support are absolutely necessary to stabilise the security situation if the G5 Sahel countries are to be prevented from collapse. The ‘Talibanisation’ of the region is not just a theoretical scenario, but nearly inevitable if the West fails to provide sufficient support. There is a very real risk of civil wars, humanitarian disaster and the massive displacement and migration of populations to North Africa and Europe. Any future international intervention in a newly destabilised Sahel would be far more perilous and costly than the continuation and strengthening of the present multilateral efforts conducted in cooperation with host nations.

The total number of Western and local military and police personnel presently in the G5 Sahel countries, particularly in Mali, is impressive. These forces should be sufficient not only to deter, but also to pursue and destroy, terrorist groups in any part of the region. However, the geographic and other conditions in the Sahel are evidently different from those in northern Iraq and eastern Syria where ISIS was able to operate. The distances are far greater and the terrorists are able to disperse and hide in heavily populated areas rather than control a contiguous territory and have a ‘capital’ of their own—although the Liptako region could have presented such a scenario. The local and Western forces, therefore, have to fight not for the conquest, but for control of territory and the support of local populations.

The international missions and operations in the G5 Sahel countries, and in Mali in particular, complement each other well and together cover the whole spectrum of the military and security assistance required, including basic and advanced training and support at all levels in actions against terrorist groups. These international missions and operations do nevertheless need to be strengthened in order to break the basis of the terrorists’ resilience, especially the support of marginalised communities, but this should be achievable through the more effective use of available resources and assets (including the TFT), rather than by bringing in more Western personnel and equipment.

The resilience of terrorist groups in the Sahel and their ability to adapt is, however, not the only major challenge to Western and local efforts to stabilise the region. In responding militarily to the security situation, Western and local actors are addressing the symptoms, but not the root causes of the region’s problems. Military and police action against terrorists is absolutely necessary, but still insufficient for the stability and development of the G5 Sahel countries. The major responsibility for the security and economic processes in the region, which now lies mostly with the West and international organisations, must ultimately be transferred to the G5 Sahel governments. However, as was the case in, for example, Afghanistan and Iraq, strong local historical and cultural traditions do not allow genuine democracy to take root and corruption to be eradicated. This major conceptual challenge in the G5 Sahel countries makes the preservation of the status quo of relative stability and minimal progress the best or maybe even the only possible outcome. The Sahel could eventually share the same fate as Afghanistan, and be more or less abandoned after many years of huge Western and international efforts have failed to make major and sustainable progress.
France has strong historical links and some long-term economic interests in the G5 Sahel countries, and is likely to remain committed to the region. However the US may choose to withdraw from the Sahel. US presence and support is crucial, and France also needs to maintain and even to increase military and security contributions from other EU member and partner states, for example Estonia and the Scandinavian countries. Operation Barkhane and TFT will undoubtedly suffer without American ISR, logistic and other forms of support. Keeping the US interested and engaged in Africa, including maintaining a presence at its bases in Niger, is as important as preserving Europe’s political motivation and readiness to contribute with forces and capabilities in the Sahel. The implication is that Europe must in turn be ready to support the US appropriately and proportionately in dealing with other challenges in other regions of the world, for example in contributing to securing freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz through operation Sentinel, or by offering political support to the US in its dealings with China.

Meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic has reached the G5 Sahel countries. It is difficult to predict the extent to which they will be damaged, or the restrictions that it might impose on the operations of the multinational and local military and police forces. For now, the nations that contribute to MINUSMA, EUTM Mali and Operation Barkhane/TFT are focused on maintaining a good level of missions, while ensuring the best possible coordination of efforts and action to avoid unnecessary duplication and the drainage of resources.
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