

Providing Security in the Sahel: A ‘Traffic Jam’ of Military Interventions, and Al Qaeda Terrorists

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Despite the presence of multiple military actors in West Africa’s Sahel region, a steady growth in jihadi activity seems to thrive in the presence of foreign military operations. With their focus on fighting cross-border terrorism and reconstructing ‘failed states’, while failing to adequately address local grievances, these military operations risk producing the danger they aim to abate.

On January 10, 2013, as jihadist factions advanced south and threatened to attack Mali’s capital, Bamako, France launched its ‘[relatively small-scale expeditionary operation](#)’ Serval, at the request of Mali’s interim President, Diounda Traoré . At the peak of Serval’s initial combat operations, close to 4,000 French troops were present in Mali. While the French government [declared operation Serval a success](#), jihadist groups had not in fact been defeated. Thus, to replace Serval, in July 2014 France expanded its presence throughout the region with the deployment of operation Barkhane. Consisting of 4,500 French soldiers with operational headquarters in Chad’s capital, N’Djamena, Barkhane is now operating in the former French colonies of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. As jihadist violence is increasing and spreading across the region, with the deployment of Barkhane any immediate exit-strategy for France has evaporated. Thus, to sustain its anticipated long-term regional presence, France has turned to a strategy of alliance-making with regional states as well as other Western security actors. Furthermore, tasks related to addressing the complex set of internal and regional conflict drivers and so-called root causes of instability have been outsourced to other actors in the field.

The framing of the Sahel as a new frontier in the global ‘War on Terror’ predates the deployment of Opération Serval. In fact, both France and the US [have been involved in the fight against terrorism](#) in the Sahel for decades. After September 11, 2001, the US introduced new security measures to monitor ‘Al Qaeda in Africa’, which, in addition to surveillance programmes, included security cooperation instruments such as the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership, initiated in 2005 to train and equip regional security forces, as well as give intelligence and logistical support to US’ allies, such as France. After 2017, US deployment in the Sahel – and Niger in particular – has expanded. According to the US Department of Defense, in 2018 800 US troops were operating in Niger as part of the French-led counterterrorism efforts. In October 2017, the Tongo Tongo ambush, in which four US soldiers were killed, created heated public debates about American ‘secret wars’ in Africa, while the US was granted authority to arm its drones in Niger. Though in late 2018 Pentagon announced that it would step down its engagement in the Sahel, there are still no signs on the ground of American troop withdrawal.

With the deployment of Serval, a broad range of international intervention actors have

stepped up their security engagements according to the perception that transnational threats of terrorism, irregular migrations and organized crime, deriving from ungoverned weak Sahelian states, could directly affect Europe's security. However, in a context of scrutinized budgets, a history of failed interventions in the global South and popular sensitivity to direct military engagements, there are a number of constraints that shape how Western actors can and will deploy. As such, similar to how the US deployed militarily in Afghanistan and Iraq, [security and development interventions in the Sahel](#) are increasingly characterized by having limited boots on the ground, using drones and transferring risks to proxy forces while increasing intelligence, financial and political support to regional states, border reinforcement and outsourced aid.

The launch of Serval also accelerated the deployment of the AU-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) consisting of 6,200 African troops. Until then, both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union (AU)-led forces had been at a halt due to lack of capabilities and insufficient support. The precarious security situation in Mali called for a counterterror intervention that the UN had, so far, been reluctant to undertake. Regardless of initial hesitation, MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) deployed to replace AFISMA in April 2013 alongside a French counterterrorist force authorized to intervene at the request of the Secretary General.

The establishment of MINUSMA in April 2013 also marked the return of Europe to UN peacekeeping. Nevertheless, African countries still provide more than half of the mission's troops. In January 2019, around 7,000 MINUSMA troops were from Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Senegal, Togo, and Guinea. Most of these countries are struggling with deep poverty, state fragility and increasing threats from jihadist groups. The return of European soldiers with highly specialized capabilities and combat experience from Iraq and Afghanistan [contributed to a militarization](#) of MINUSMA. However, partly due to caveats regarding where and how European soldiers deploy in the mission, the highly specialized Western military capabilities have not adequately benefitted the African soldiers. Meanwhile, countries like Niger, Guinea and Chad do not have the same restrictions as the European soldiers as to where they can operate and the conditions for their deployment. Consequently they are often posted in the most exposed areas of the mission to [carry out the most dangerous tasks](#) without adequate training, equipment and support to meet the dangers they encounter. This observation is reflected in the fact that, in total, African soldiers [constitute more than 80%](#) of the 202 UN soldiers who have lost their lives in Mali. MINUSMA's modest results in peace and conflict resolution have undermined its legitimacy, and neighbouring countries have lost trust in the mission's ability to impact positively on regional stability.

In response to the precarious security situation in Central Mali, where inter and intra-communal conflicts are fuelling due to the dynamics of terrorism and counter-terrorism, UN renewed the mandate of MINUSMA from June 29, 2019, giving priority to "protect civilians, reduce intercommunal violence and re-establish State authority, State presence and basic social services in Central Mali". Furthermore, MINUSMA is under pressure to extend its support to the regional G5 Sahel Joint Force (JF-G5S) beyond Mali.

Other actors in the field struggle to fill the gap that both the UN and French counterterror operations have left behind.

Before the 2012 security crisis, the EU's engagement in the Sahel was mainly focused on

development cooperation. In 2011, the launch of a new 'Sahel Strategy' accentuated the fact that the EU had been advocating for a 'Comprehensive Security and Development Approach' in the region since 2008. Thus, under the auspices of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU deployed its training mission to Mali (EUTM) in 2013 to support the rebuilding of the Malian forces and security sector reform.

The EUTM's third (2016-2018) and fourth (2018-2020) mandate have included supporting the regional joint force as part of the European regionalized approach in the Sahel. Since the EU only has status of forces agreement (SOFA) with Mali, there are limitations to the operationalization of EUTM's regional support. Furthermore, its civilian missions, EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012) and EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014), were deployed to sustain internal security forces including the police, the gendarmerie, the national guard, to strengthen their capacity to fight terrorism and organised crime. The mission in Niger has also assisted central and local authorities, as well as security forces in developing measures to better control irregular migration.

A priority, which since the so-called 'migration crisis' in 2015 has been a major driver for European security and defence engagements in the Sahel. Despite the strategic importance of the EU showing its ability to provide security in its own backyard, these initiatives have been widely criticised. Mainly for being insufficient, unaligned with local realities and caught up in a frictional relationship with the state, and consequently [failing to deliver tangible results](#) for peace and justice.

In addition to the CSDP mission, over the past few years, individual member states have also stepped up their presence in the Sahel to strengthen their partnerships and showing ability to curb migration. Since 2014, Germany has demonstrated increasing political and military engagement in the Sahel through the support to multilateral initiatives, such as MINUSMA (1100 troops) and EUTM (350 troops), the latter which came under German leadership in 2018.

Moreover, German air bases in Niger also provides logistical support to Operation Barkhane. Managing and shaping migration is a core objective of Western actors' engagement in the region. While the deployment of Italian troops in Niger has been presented as an instrument to support the G5 Sahel initiative, observers find it to be more of a continuation of Italy's anti-migration policy as the Sahel, and northern Niger in particular, continue to be considered as an important transit hub for mixed-migration flows. Italy has positioned itself as a relevant EU security actor, in order to gain influence on the strengthened EU security and defence agenda.

Since the 'bold and dramatic' deployment of operation Serval, the Sahel has turned into an arena for international security actors with different mandates, rules of engagement and conflicting objectives of intervention (fighting terrorism, stemming migration, stabilization, etc.). In their responses to the expanding security threats in the Sahel, international and regional actors often emphasize synergy and cooperation between multidimensional and comprehensive approaches and counterterror operations. However, so far, the focus on rebuilding states and countering cross-border terrorism tends to overlook the complex set of internal and external conflict dynamics. As such, the presence of foreign military operations seems to strengthen the jihadists' narratives of a neo-colonial occupation by Western powers that they use to win local support. If Western security actors fail to address local grievances and build long-term relationships with local populations, their engagements in the Sahel have few chances of succeeding.

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