

## Special report



# The new war on terror: how heart of Africa became front line against jihad

In the first part of a Telegraph series, Adrian Blomfield reports from Gao, Mali, on what awaits British forces when they join the fray

## Battle for the Sahel



According to ACLED (the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project), a charity that monitors death tolls, another 1,214 have died so far this year. Officials in the region also warn that the crisis could soon spread even further, engulfing stable states in the West African Gulf of Guinea coastline.

If the issue is not addressed and solved, the risk is that terrorism will continue expanding to other countries," says Annadif Mohammed Saleh, the UN secretary general's special representative to Mali. "It is not just the Sahel that is being affected, but countries beyond it like Ivory Coast, Ghana, Benin and so on."

War-weary Westerners might be tempted to look away, but the problem for themselves, but Gen David Anderson, who commands US special forces in Africa, warns that if the jihadists consolidate their hold, they could easily use the region to launch terrorist attacks against the West.

"We know that al-Qaeda, especially, has the will and desire to attack the West," he says. "Africa is not the solution for them. But on the southern fringe of the Sahara, along a vast and underpopulated semi-desert known as the Sahel, which stretches across Africa, the armies of militant Islam have massed anew and the black flag of ISIL is flying again."

For several years now, international forces – one by France, the second by the United Nations and a third drawn from the nations of the Sahel – have tried to stop the jihadist miasma.

So far, they have failed. As Britain prepares to step up its political, military and humanitarian involvement over the coming months, officials across the West are warning that the threat is beginning to eclipse the Middle East as the main front line in the war on Islamist terror.

Despite frequent French airstrikes, the reach of jihadist groups with allegiance to al-Qaeda and ISIL has expanded beyond their northern Mali强holds, exporting bloodshed as they go. Stirring latent ethnic and religious animosities, they have caused tribal bloodbaths in northern Mali, massacres of Christian churches and villages in neighbouring Burkina Faso, and taken the war into Niger.

The death toll is rising alarmingly – in Burkina Faso alone, it rose 600 per cent last year. Some 5,366 people were killed across the franco-phone Sahel – Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania – in 2019, and has widely been seen as a failure.

The US has been a particularly fierce critic, arguing that UN-style peacekeeping is not enough and has demanded an "alternative approach". Gen Gyllensporre does not disagree, acknowledging that the Minusma force "is not fit for purpose". Operating under a mandate to protect civilians and stabilise the country, it has failed to do either because it exerts only the most tenuous authority in the northern towns in which it is based.

Outside the towns, the jihadists roam at will. In the meantime, Minusma itself has become a target. UN bases in much of the world are lightly defended. Not in Mali, where peacekeepers live behind layers of razor wire and barbed cables to protect them from jihadists and mortar attacks.

Minusma's head of office in Timbuktu reckons the UN base in the city has been attacked 41 times since he arrived in 2015. Twelve peacekeepers were killed when jihadists overran the base in Aguelhok last year, adding to a total of 203 who have now died in Mali since Minusma first deployed there in 2013. "Make sure you know where the nearest bunker is," a UN spokesman says. "If you're in a camp in Gao, where the British contingent will be stationed, 'When you hear the sirens, you will have about 15 seconds to get under cover.'

Gen Gyllensporre acknowledges that things need to change. And in a radical adaptation of peacekeeping norms, he plans to split his force in two. One element will play a traditional peacekeeping role, with UN troops stationed in bases more important than ever before. The second, to be spearheaded by the British contingent, will carry out long-range reconnaissance patrols of up to 30 days, deep into jihadist territory, and be on standby for rapid deployment anywhere in the country.

"With a manoeuvrable force, we will be more proactive in anticipating attacks, projecting force and deterrence, and going in where there are concentrations of the enemy," the general said. "This will be a more robust, versatile part of the force. The British contribution will be the tip of the spear."

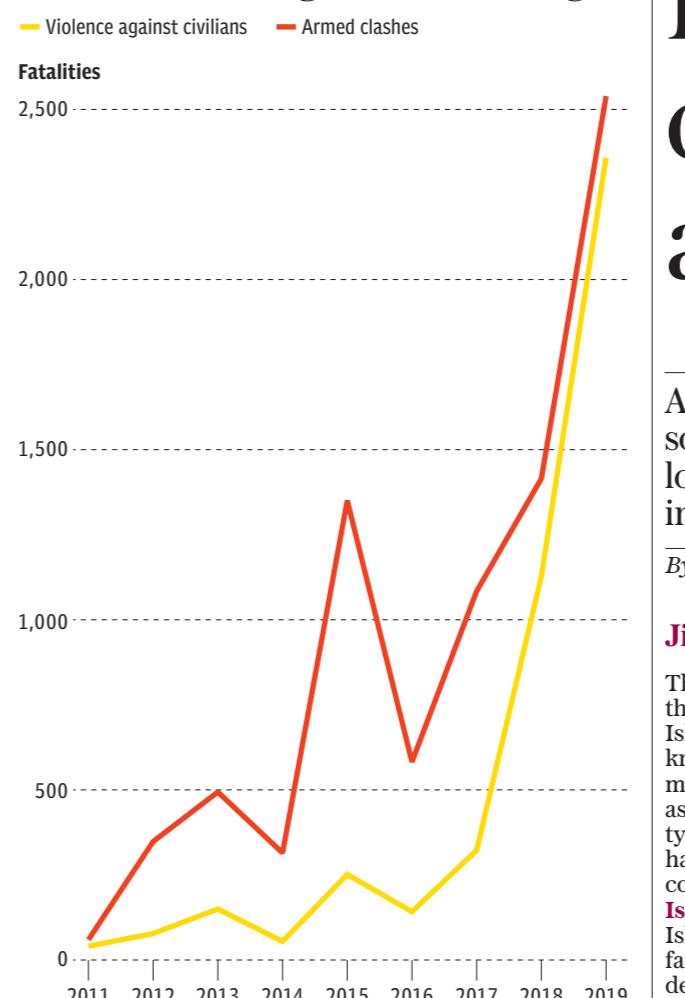
SAHEL offers political benefits. A high-profile UN mission will help to demonstrate Britain's continued international relevance after Brexit. It will also help forge closer ties with France, which is growing increasingly anxious that it will be left to shoulder responsibility for the crisis in its former Sahelian colonies alone after the UN announced it was considering a reduction in its military presence in Africa.

French troops have been in Mali since January 2013 when they intervened to drive jihadist groups, which had hijacked a rebellion against the Malian state, out of northern areas such as Gao and Timbuktu. The jihadists regrouped, and France launched a counter-terrorism campaign but despite previous airstrikes, the militants have given ground, leading to fears France is facing its own Afghanistan, a "mission impossible" as many French commentators call it.

At the Barkhane military base in Gao, it is easy to see why Emmanuel Macron, France's president, is worried. Beneath the Tricolore, a simple whitewashed monument bears the names of the 41 French soldiers killed in Mali since France intervened. A memorial is at the foot of the memorial is a reminder that Britain has already been supporting the French mission. It was laid by an RAF chinook detachment, a three-helicopter, 94-man contingent based in Gao since 2018. French officers say it has played a vital role in plugging a gap in France's operational capability by airlifting supplies and even armoured vehicles to French forces engaged in combat.

Minusma is vital to France's exit strategy. If British troops turn a failing UN mission into a success, Mr Macron's biggest foreign policy headache could be cured. And Britain could win, too. A grateful France would be a useful ally to have as the UK heads into post-Brexit trade talks with the European Union.

## Deaths in the region are soaring



As British peacekeeping soldiers are deployed, we look at the enemies and international participants

By Will Brown in Bamako

### Jihadist groups

The jihadist groups that operate across the Sahel are believed to extreme Islamic ideology and have become known for their brutality – sometimes massacring entire villages, using rape as a weapon of war. The groups typically work alone but intelligence has suggested increasing levels of co-operation.

#### Islamic State

Islamic State's Sahelian branch moves fast on motorbikes, launching deadly attacks on villages and military camps in the region between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. It is thought to be behind two recent attacks that killed 150 soldiers at two military bases in Western Niger.

#### Nusra al-Islam

Formed in 2017 out of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and several other smaller groups, Nusra al-Islam – Macina and Al Mourabitoun – Nusra al-Islam is a powerful alliance spread across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. It seeks to expel foreign forces, establish a caliphate and enforce Shariah law. In late January, the group killed 20 Malian soldiers near the Mauritanian border.

#### Ansar ul Islam, Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's Ansar ul Islam is a close ally of NIMW and responsible for much of the chaos spreading across West Africa's linchpin state. Ansar ul Islam has forced schools to close, leaving hundreds of thousands of children without education, and is thought to be behind massacres of hundreds of churchgoers in the last year.

#### International actors

**France** Historically a small player in the Sahel, Britain has made a pivot towards the region and is supporting France with three Chinook helicopters and 90 soldiers. Later this year, 250 long-range reconnaissance troops will be sent to join Minusma in the largest deployment of British soldiers to a peacekeeping mission since the Balkans war. The UK is also now a major donor to the region, spending more than £450 million over the last five years.

#### United Nations

The UN has a further 16,000 blue helmets and UN police in Mali on its peacekeeping mission, Minusma. The mission is being down-sized and more than 200 people have died since it was launched in 2013, making it one of the deadliest in the UN's history.

#### G5 Sahel Joint Force

A 5,000-strong army made up of 1,000 troops each from Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, this force can chase fighters across national borders – but so far it has struggled to get the international funding it needs to operate.

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A British soldier with a 'prisoner' captured by Nigerian forces in a Senegal exercise

Macron ordered the deployment of a further 600 troops.

#### United States

The US is an important part of the fight against terror in the Sahel, with an estimated 5,000 troops spread out across Africa and a drone base near Agadez in Niger. The US is also considering a "full-scale" withdrawal from West Africa, according to *The New York Times*. France, which relies on US intelligence and logistics, would be hit hard by any withdrawal.

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