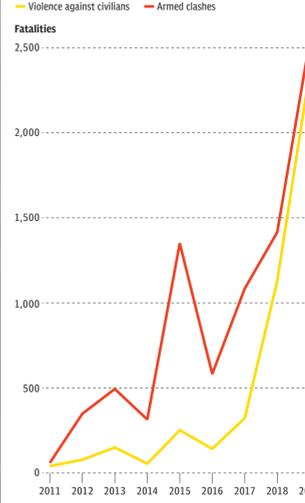


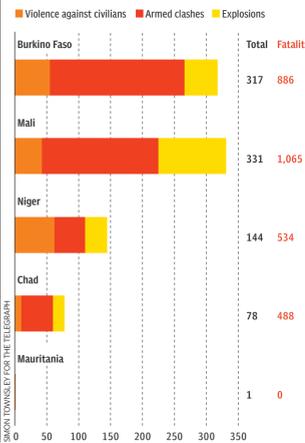
Special report



Deaths in the region are soaring



Violent incidents in the G5 Sahel countries in 2019



Key players in the Sahel conflict zone that jihadists are trying to dominate

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 share a belief in 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.

International actors

France has 4,500 troops deployed in the Sahel, where it has been fighting for seven years with special forces aided by airstrikes and helicopter gunships. However, criticism is growing at home, and many locals believe that France is secretly exploiting hidden resources in the Sahara.



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

Macron ordered the deployment of a further 600 troops. 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.

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.

United Nations The UN has a further 16,000 blue helmets and UN police in Mali on its peacekeeping mission, Minusma. The mission is bogged down, and more than 200 people have died since it was launched in 2013.

Other actors Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and other Gulf states are spending millions of dollars funding mosques and imams in the Sahel. The money is thought to be channelled through private actors and countries including Mauritania.

Russia Russia has been running a disinformation campaign against French and Western forces in the region. Operatives of the Wagner Group, a mercenary outfit with links to the Kremlin, have also reportedly been seen in trouble spots.

European Union The EU has spent billions of euros cracking down on the migration routes that spurt across the Sahel - but it has no mandate to engage in combat.

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



AS FAR as Donald Trump is concerned, the news from the war on terror's old battlegrounds has been exceedingly good of late.

Last year, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil) was driven from its last strongholds in Syria and Iraq. And last weekend, the US signed a peace deal with the Taliban, paving the way for American troops to leave Afghanistan.

It might be tempting to think that the forces of jihadism are in retreat. 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 seven years, three international forces - one led 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 region has begun to eclipse the Middle East as the new 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 strongholds, exporting bloodshed as they go. Stirring latent ethnic and religious animosities, they have caused tribal bloodshed in central Mali, massacres in 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 more than 600 per cent last year. Some 5,300 people were killed across the franco-phone Sahel - Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania - in 2019.

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 on West Africa's Gulf of Guinea coastline.

"If the crisis 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 risks being affected, but countries beyond it like Ivory Coast, Ghana, Benin and so on."

War-weary Westerners might be tempted to let African states sort out the problem for themselves, but Gen Dag 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.

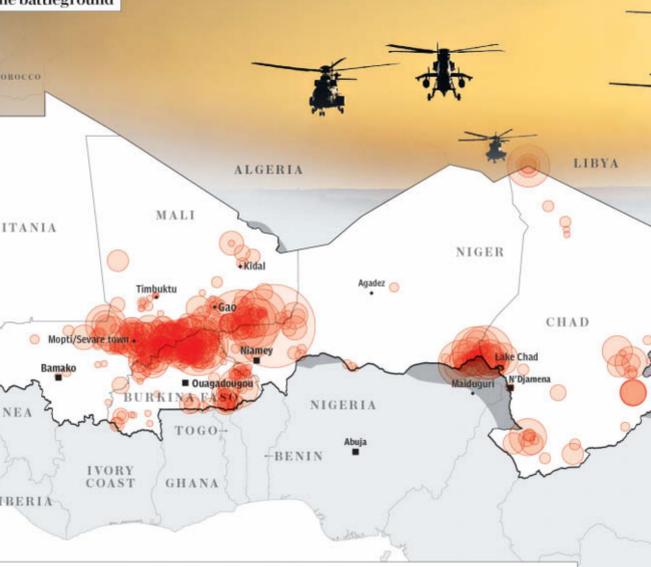
"We know that al-Qaeda, especially, has the will and desire to attack the West," he said. "We don't see a direct threat to the US or Europe right now but, if left unchecked, we know that's their desire. If we aren't able to check this, then eventually they will pursue those objectives."

More immediately, the spreading conflict has already forced more than one million people to flee. Given that Africa's main people-smuggling routes cross the Sahel, continued bloodshed could prompt a new surge of refugees into Europe.

It is against this backdrop that Britain will embark on its most significant front-line peacekeeping deployment since Bosnia in the 1990s when it sends 250 troops to join the UN mission in Mali, known as Minusma, in the coming months.

Given that Minusma already has 11,020 troops in Mali, it might not sound like a significant contribution, especially with 4,500 French soldiers also operating across the Sahel. But the British contribution will play a vital role in turning around a mission that, so far, has widely been seen as a failure.

The battleground



- 4,500 troops across the region. Plans to boost force by 600.
A 16,000-man peacekeeping operation in Mali. Most deadly in the world.
Some 5,000 troops across Africa. Has a \$110 million drone base in Agadez, northern Niger.
3 Chinook helicopters and 94 soldiers in Gao, northern Mali. Deploying 250 peacekeepers to MINUSMA later this year.
850-1,000 troops serving in the UN peacekeeping mission.
Small presence in the region, troop numbers unknown.

An RAF gunner, pictured in a Chinook helicopter, part of the RAF mission to back the French anti-jihadist operation in Mali

The US has been a particularly fierce critic, arguing that UN-style peacekeeping is ill-equipped to deal with terrorism. It 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 barricades to protect them from jihadists and mortar attacks.

Ricardo Malin, Minusma's head of office in Timbuktu, reckons the 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 208 who have now died in Mali since Minusma first deployed there in 2013.

"Make sure you know where the nearest bunker is," a UN official tells visitors to the Minusma 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 near important towns, as they are today.

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 can be more proactive in anticipating attacks, projecting force and deterring and going behind enemy lines, they will also travel on roads strewn with roadside bombs. Lt Col Taimur Javed, who is in charge of civil

military co-operation at the Minusma base in Timbuktu, reckons that of every two UN resupply convoys that leaves central Mali for UN facilities in the north, at least one strikes an improvised Explosive Device (IED).

But British officials are undeterred. Years of experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has prepared the Armed Forces well for just this type of operation. Hi-tech equipment will forearm them of jihadists advancing through the scrub, while the IED attacks, though proliferating, are fairly primitive in comparison with those British soldiers have encountered in the past, and they can be fairly easily detected.

The risk aside, deploying in the 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 US 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 repeated airstrikes, the militants have grown stronger, leading to fears that 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 so worried. Beneath the Tricolore, a simple whitewashed monument bears the names of the 41 French soldiers killed in Mali since France first intervened. A poppy wreath at the foot of the memorials 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.

"This will be a more robust, versatile part of the force. The British contribution will be the tip of the spear"



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