



ORG Explains #12: The UK's Pivot to the Sahel

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As the UK moves resources and personnel to the Africa's Sahel region, we examine what the "pivot to the Sahel" is, why it is happening and what it will look like.

***Author's note:** Thanks to Zoe Gorman and Delina Goxho for their help with the piece (all the mistakes are the author's own)*

What?

During a [speech](#) in Cape Town, South Africa in September 2018, then-Prime Minister Theresa May laid out the UK's new "Africa Strategy", promising "a new partnership between the UK and our friends in Africa...built around our shared prosperity and shared security." This new strategy was further fleshed out both by the former Minister for Africa, Harriett Baldwin, during [an evidence session with the Foreign Affairs Committee \(FAC\)](#) in March 2019 as well as in [written evidence](#) from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to the same committee's inquiry into the UK's Africa strategy.

All three have said that the strategy is made up of five key "shifts" or areas:

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The first of these has been referred to as the UK's "pivot to the Sahel" and – while this is just one aspect of the UK's Africa Strategy – it has been an important change. The FCO's written evidence to the FAC stated: "We will pivot UK resources towards Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, which are areas of long-term instability and extreme poverty." This has instigated a large uplift in staff (working both in Whitehall and in the region) and resources (including additional aid, military support and embassies) aimed at this region of the continent, including 250 soldiers to be deployed to Mali and new embassies opening in the region.

Where?

Definitions of the exact boundaries of the Sahel vary; however, according to *Britannica*, the Sahel is a "region of western and north-central Africa extending from Senegal eastward to Sudan. It forms a transitional zone between the arid Sahara (desert) to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south. The Sahel stretches from the Atlantic Ocean eastward through northern Senegal,

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southern Mauritania, the great bend of the Niger River in Mali, Burkina Faso..., southern Niger, northeastern Nigeria, south-central Chad, and into Sudan.”

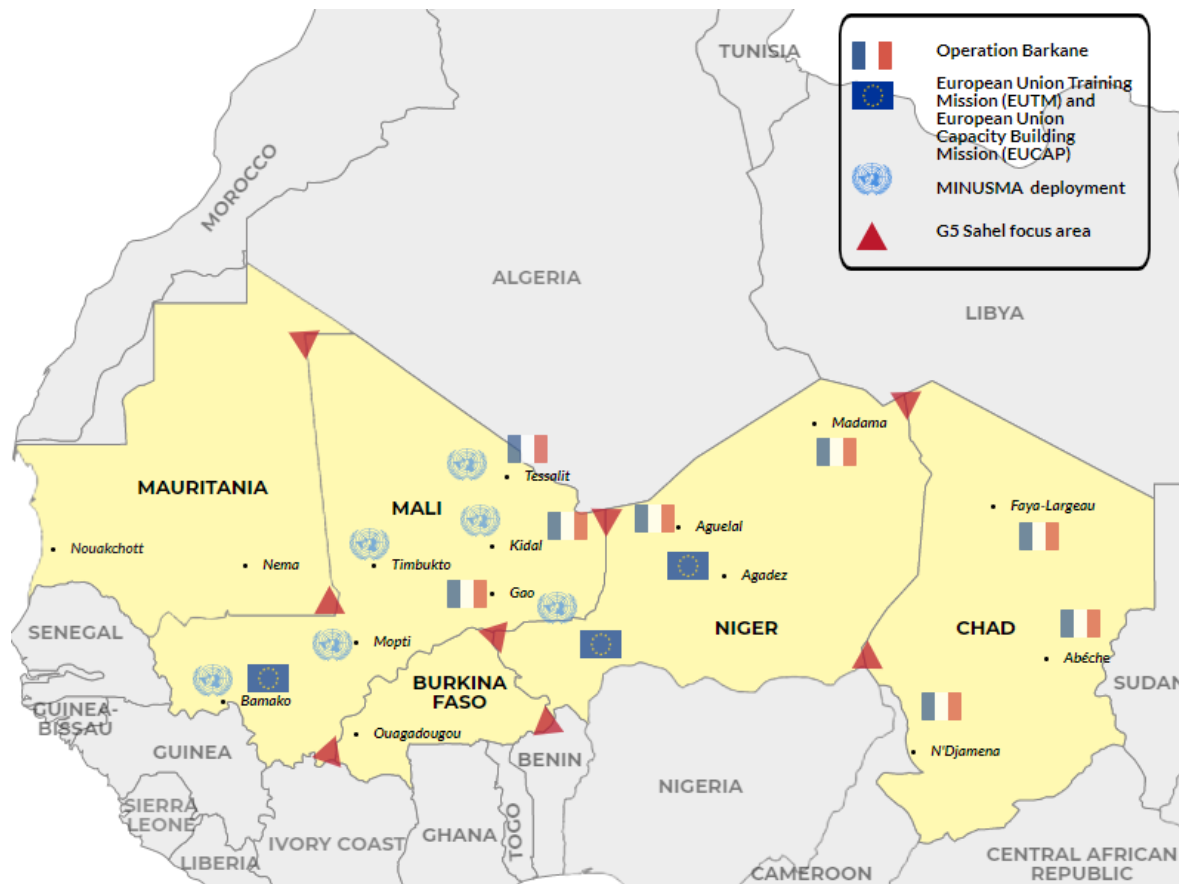


Figure 1 International engagement in the Sahel region (Image data source: Africa Centre Strategic Studies)

Why?

As the FCO recently noted, this is an area “where [the UK has] traditionally had little representation”. Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania were French colonies that gained independence in 1960. Even after this, France has maintained significant economic and political ties to the region. As such, the UK has previously conceived of this region as France’s domain. The recent “pivot to the Sahel” begs the question: why has the UK started working in this region?

1. Instability and threats to the UK

One reason for the UK’s pivot is to help address the instability that has engulfed the region in the last few years. In her Cape Town speech, Theresa May said the UK will be “supporting countries and societies on the front line of instability in all of its forms. So, we will invest more in countries like Mali, Chad and Niger that are waging a battle against terrorism in the Sahel.”

The Sahel is a region that has historically been troubled by weak governance, high levels of youth unemployment, porous borders, frequent drought, high levels of food insecurity and paltry development progress. Since the 2012 crisis in Mali, the region has also witnessed

UK contribution to Opération Barkhane



Almost **100**
personnel



3 Chinook
Helicopters

UK contribution to Opération Serval



Almost **100**
personnel



3 Planes

an escalation in jihadist activity and a burgeoning of illicit migratory networks and trafficking. The area is therefore the subject of increasing international concern, as ungoverned spaces could provide 'safe havens' for terrorist activity.

Seven years ago, in **March 2012**, Islamist groups gained control over the northern part of Mali. They had benefited from the instability (and the spread of weapons) following the Libyan civil war. Returning fighters after the fall of Muammar al-Gadhafi's regime in Libya brought weapons and sparked a new rebellion under the **National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)**, some of these were tied to jihadist groups but others were not. Meanwhile, a political coup in Mali ousted

President Amadou Toumani Touré, creating a momentary power vacuum. Northern Islamist groups **Ansar Dine**, **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)** and the **Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)** also took up arms, driving the MNLA from strategic cities in Timbuktu and Gao regions. The absence or inability of the state to respond to growing insecurity has

contributed to a proliferation of self-defence militias which may be party to one community or ethnic group, lack legitimacy and contribute to cycles of violence.

In January 2013 French forces intervened at the request of the Malian government to stop the groups advancing on Bamako (the capital of Mali) through a military operation called Opération Serval.

The same year, [David Cameron](#), British Prime Minister at the time, said the French action in Mali was "in our interests" and the UK "should support the action that the French have taken." He promised that the UK would be "first out of the blocks, as it were, to say to the French 'we'll help you, we'll work with you and we'll share what intelligence we have with you and try to help you with what you are doing!'"

The UK sent the following support to the French operation:

- 330 military personnel were deployed – including 200 soldiers going to West African nations and 40 military advisers to Mali
- Two cargo planes (used to ship French military equipment to Mali) and a surveillance plane, supported by 90 support crew

None of these soldiers were deployed in combat roles; instead they focused on [non-kinetic](#) activity such as logistical support and training.

[Opération Serval](#) proved militarily successful in pushing jihadist groups back and stopping them from overtaking key airports. In 2014, the military campaign moved to a different stage with Operation Serval becoming Opération Barkhane. Broader in its purpose than Serval, Opération Barkhane was launched to provide long-term support to the wider region, in order to prevent 'jihadist groups' from regaining control. [Opération Barkhane](#) is a longer-term

military intervention that operates not within a country, but over the countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

In the same year, Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz galvanised the creation of the G5 Sahel while president of the African Union. Bringing together Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, the G5 Sahel joint force (FC-G5S) gained support from the African Union and United Nations, although the US has repeatedly blocked Security Council Chapter VII funding of the force. An agglomeration of 5000 military personnel, police officers, gendarmerie and border patrol officers from the five states, the FC-G5S undertakes operations in conflict hotspots in border regions between the countries to curtail terrorism, illicit trafficking and illegal migration. According to General Lecointre, the Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces, France hopes that the FC-G5S will take over some of the responsibilities of Opération Barkhane – but the FC-G5S has been slow to operationalise.

The following year, in March 2015, the Malian government and coalitions of armed groups in the North agreed on a peace accord in Algiers following months of negotiations. Unfortunately, this agreement does not include jihadist groups or the multitude of armed groups flourishing in the centre, and its provisions have gone largely unimplemented.

The French government has also continued calls for help from regional and international actors. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established in 2013 to support political processes in the country and carry out a number of security-related tasks. It currently has 14 874 staff from nearly 60 countries. The European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM-Mali) also started in the same year, to strengthen the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces. It is now made up of

600 soldiers from 25 European countries. More generally, the EU and its member states are projected to spend €8 billion on development assistance in the Sahel.

France, Germany, the EU, the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme also launched the [Alliance for the Sahel in July 2017](#) to coordinate donor activity. The UK – along with Italy, Spain and most recently, Saudi Arabia – have now joined the Alliance. In July 2018, the UK also announced its support to Opération Barkhane, sending three Royal Air Force [Chinook](#) helicopters (supported by almost 100 personnel).

In August 2019, France and Germany announced the “[Partnership for Stability and Security in the Sahel](#)” to bring together countries in the region and international partners to identify gaps in the counter-terrorism response. [Operation Tacouba](#), a planned operation to reinforce Malian forces with European special forces, will also seek to support regional forces in their fight against jihadist groups.

Despite this, violence has continued, the northern region of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, have been suffering some of the deadliest attacks to date, with the area ravaged by inter-community conflict and attacks on military, peacekeepers and civilians. The [number of reported violent events linked to militant Islamic group activity](#) in the Sahel has been doubling every year since 2016 (from 90 in 2016 to 194 in 2017 to 465 in 2018). Added to this, [there have been abuses against civilians by state forces](#), for instance the Malian armed forces have been accused of shooting civilian market-goers and burning members of a pro-government self-defence militia. This has worsened the humanitarian situation. For instance, since January 2018, more than [one million people have been internally displaced](#) across the Sahel region.

In light of this continued instability, the UK is reassessing its engagement to help stem the violence. The FCO has suggested that: “Our efforts in the Sahel seek to contain threats to regional security and wider UK interests, and make migration safer while providing critical humanitarian support to those who need it.” Similarly, when announcing the UK’s most recent contribution to the UN mission then-UK Defence Secretary, Penny Mordaunt, said “[t]he UK is committed to supporting the international community in combating instability in Mali, as well as strengthening our wider military engagement across the Sahel region.”

2. Global Britain

The UK’s pivot to the Sahel is also part of the UK’s Global Britain strategy. This strategy is “about reinvesting in our relationships, championing the rules-based international order and demonstrating that the UK is open, outward-looking and confident on the world stage.” The Global Britain strategy is referenced throughout UK policy documents and public statements and is often seen as an attempt to demonstrate the UK’s global focus – especially in light of the UK’s imminent withdrawal from the EU. The pivot to the Sahel helps this strategy in two ways: it maintains international relationships (especially with European allies) and it coincides with the UK’s renewed commitment to the UN.

To the first of these, the focus on the Sahel is an important way of maintaining alliances with the UK’s (especially European) allies. For instance, the FCO has said the pivot to the Sahel will “support our alliances with international partners such as France, Germany and the [African Union] as we exit the European Union.” A number of officials we spoke to also argued that maintaining relations with France was a key driver for the UK’s renewed focus in the region;

for example, [one soldier in Kenya said](#) of the pivot to the Sahel, “post-Brexit we need trade deals with France.”

Another aspect of this is supporting the UN. In September 2019, ahead of his trip to the UN General Assembly in New York, Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab said: “As we make progress in our Brexit negotiations, we are also taking our vision of a truly Global Britain to the UN – leading by example as a force for good in the world.” The [UK has exceeded its commitment to double its 2015 contribution](#) of personnel to UN Peacekeeping operations, increasing their number from 291 to 740 by May 2018, and is now globally the sixth largest contributor financially.

There is already evidence of the UK's commitment to the UN impacting the UK's approach to the Sahel. For example, the UK has pledged £49.5 million to the UN mission in Mali as part of the UK's regular contributions to UN peacekeeping missions. It is clear then that there will be a number of big changes in how the UK engages in this region of Africa. Below we set out some concrete changes that we might expect to see in the year ahead.

How?

It still remains unclear exactly what this pivot to the Sahel will look like, but it is likely to see a shift of British people and resources to the region. In the [FCO's own description of this shift](#), it listed a number of new funding streams, including:

- £2.3 million of humanitarian aid across the region between 2015-19 (making it “the third largest humanitarian donor to the Sahel”)
- £50 million to support climate change resilience

- £30 million “to support education in the Sahel and neighbouring countries.”

To support these commitments, more UK personnel will be working (in the region and in Whitehall) on the Sahel. Harriet Matthews, Director for Africa at the FCO, noted that the UK Government has “[expanded a joint unit on the Sahel](#)” (a unit made up of people from different UK departments, such as the FCO, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development) to oversee activity in the region.

The UK has also promised “[an increased UK presence](#)” in the Sahel. It has said that it will increase the size of UK embassies in Mali and Mauritania, open “a regional hub” in Dakar, Senegal, and establish new embassies in Niger and Chad. The FCO does not provide a specific timeline for these changes.

In one of her last acts as British Defence Secretary, in July 2019, [Penny Mordaunt](#) also announced that a long-range reconnaissance task group of 250 personnel will be deployed to Mali in 2020. These UK soldiers will be “asked to reach parts of Mali that most militaries cannot, to feed on-the-ground intelligence back to the [UN] mission headquarters.” This represents one of the biggest British peacekeeping deployments since Bosnia and it will be the most dangerous mission for British forces since Afghanistan. MINUSMA is the UN peacekeeping mission with the highest casualty rate in the world and, since its inception, [206 UN peacekeepers](#) have been killed as part of it.

Internationally, the UK is also likely to play a greater role in conversations about the region. For instance, it is a member of the [Sahel Alliance](#), which was set up by France, Germany and the EU to focus on increasing coordination between partners working in the region. The UK also aims to place “extra staff in Paris to work alongside the French government on the Sahel.” The UK has said that it

hopes that engaging with other international partners more effectively will allow it to “drive forward progress on long-term solutions to the drivers of conflict, poverty, and instability.”

Changes with the "Pivot to the Sahel"



Financial commitments to support the UN mission, humanitarian aid, education programmes and climate change resistance.



Growing UK embassies in Mali and Mauritania, opening a regional hub in Dakar, Senegal and establishing new embassies in Niger and Chad.



A long-range reconnaissance task force of 250 personnel will be deployed to Mali in 2020.



More UK-based staff working on the Sahel, including through an expanded joint unit on the region.



Greater role in international conversations about the Sahel e.g. through the Sahel Alliance.

Want to know more?

This has been a brief overview of the key issues and considerations of the UK's recent “pivot to the Sahel”, something which our team look at for its own work. You can read some more in depth pieces we have written on the pivot and what it means for UK foreign policy here:

- **Improving the UK offer in Africa: Lessons from military partnerships on the continent** by Abigail Watson and Emily Knowles
 - **Fusion Doctrine in Five Steps: Lessons Learned from Remote Warfare in Africa** by Abigail Watson and Megan Karlshoej-Pedersen
 - **Mali: Consequences of a War** by Paul Rogers
 - **Devils in the Detail: Implementing Mali's New Peace Accord** by Richard Reeve
 - **Security in the Sahel: Two-Part Briefing** by Richard Reeve
 - **The Military Intervention in Mali and Beyond: An Interview with Bruno Charbonneau**
 - **Libya: Between the Sahel-Sahara and the Islamic State Crises** by Richard Reeve
 - **From New Frontier to New Normal: Counter-terrorism Operations in the Sahel-Sahara** by Richard Reeve and Zoë Pelter
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About the author

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