



Influence or Strategy: Lessons from Iraq ahead of Mali

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“Influence should not be set as an objective in itself. The exercise of influence is a means to an end.” This is one of the many truisms permeating the UK’s Iraq Report, which was published in 2016 following years of national soul searching attempted to answer the questions: What went wrong? And, how can the UK avoid the same mistakes again?

Despite efforts to improve UK strategy making, it is still unclear how well it has learned some of these lessons – especially the dangers of putting influence with allies above strategy. One of the key criticisms of the UK’s involvement in the Iraq War was that it was more important to “stand shoulder to shoulder” with the U.S. than to develop an end goal or assess the prospects for success. This not only resulted in the UK being part of a disastrous and destructive war, but led to a breakdown in trust between the Government and the British public and parliament.

This particular risk may well be tested with the UK’s upcoming deployment of 250 troops to Mali to support the UN mission in the country. These troops are additional to “the existing commitment of three UK Chinooks and accompanying personnel deployed in support of the French-led counter-terrorism operation” in the region (known as Operation Barkhane). The new British forces will provide a reconnaissance task group to provide intelligence and situational awareness to the UN Integrated Stabilization Mission for Mali (MINUSMA). This is a significant contribution of British forces to the frontline of

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a UN peacekeeping mission and could be the most dangerous mission for British forces since Afghanistan.

Many UK officials and soldiers acknowledge that this deployment, while aligned with the UK's commitment to peacekeeping, is largely about building international relations with European allies (and especially France) given the UK's decision to leave the European Union. In fact, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) said in evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) that its pivot to the region will "support our alliances with international partners such as France, Germany and the [African Union] as we exit the European Union." A British soldier we spoke to put it more bluntly: "post-Brexit we need trade deals with France."

It is a common trope to compare contemporary deployments with Iraq, and this article does not try and suggest there are many similarities between the two campaigns; however, it does argue that there is a danger of once again prioritising influence above strategy. As such, there are two important lessons from Iraq that policymakers should consider when making decisions about Mali:

1. The UK must be clear about its various objectives and how it plans to mitigate potential conflicts between them.
2. The UK must focus on how to improve the existing international efforts to build sustainable peace – not on how to use military deployments to achieve influence.

Unless it considers these two lessons carefully, the UK may repeat many of the same mistakes. In doing so, it could poorly account for the potential risks,

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undermine domestic support, add to the fragmentation and ineffectiveness of international peace-building efforts, and fail to build meaningful influence.

Being clear about its objectives

The UK commitment to MINUSMA – and continued support of Barkhane – appear to be designed to fulfil two strategic objectives. First, it hopes to demonstrate continued commitment to multilateralism through the UN; second, it hopes to further build the bilateral relationship with France in the aftermath of Brexit.

Strategically these objectives are largely compatible, and the deployment could be considered an efficient way of achieving them both; however, at the operational and tactical level such a split focus can become problematic. While Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA seek to stabilise the Sahel, they approach the problem from different directions. The French mission is largely focused on counter-terrorism objectives; while MINUSMA's mandate is focused on implementing the peace process in Mali and uphold the protection of civilians. There are, then, clear differences between the two missions, which could make delivering both objectives challenging.

This is made more difficult because it remains unclear how the UK's contributions to Barkhane and MINUSMA relate. For instance, there are a number of questions about whether the UK helicopters committed to Barkhane could be used to help UK forces committed to MINUSMA (especially given MINUSMA is “urgently in need of more air assets”). Similarly, the UK contribution to MINUSMA is focussed on intelligence, a sensitive subject in any UN mission. At the very least, there will be a perception that British forces will have access to information via their commitment to Barkhane and their

intelligence sharing relationships with the U.S., which is also active in the region. Any incident that led to a perception that the UK did not share information that could have saved the lives of civilians or other troops would be very disruptive to the mission.

Unfortunately, these risks have not been properly discussed by the British Government. Following the initial announcement, there has been minimal [parliamentary](#) or [public debate](#) about the deployment. For instance, there has been very little clarity about why the UK chose to move UK forces to Mali and how it will interact [with other UK commitments on the continent](#). The government was [criticised by the FAC](#) for calling its approach to Africa a 'Strategy'; instead the Committee said it amounted to “effectively a bunch of bullet points” which made it difficult to criticise or even engage with effectively.

This is a mistake; continued public discussion as well as parliamentary oversight of the mission is essential. As the most dangerous UN mission, MINUSMA is not without risk. The lack of public discussion risks a reaction like that seen in the US after the [death of four soldiers in Niger](#) in 2017 which led politicians and policymakers to [question the nature of the US military commitment in the Sahel and Africa](#) more generally. A strategic shock to the British contingent in MINUSMA – such as UK fatalities – could lead to a broader debate about whether UK forces should be deployed into UN missions all together, echoing the [perceived failure of UNPROFOR in the Balkans](#) in the mid-1990s. [In other words](#), choosing not to be transparent now, could lead to broader unintended consequences later.

Helping international peace and stability

The Iraq War also showed that numerous actors adding small contributions to build influence and their own international reputation was deeply problematic. Many nations were there to reaffirm ties with the US and NATO in case their own national interests were threatened nearer to home, and not because they prioritised long-term prospects of peace and stability in Iraq. This argument was certainly made about the so-called “New Europe” countries like Estonia and Bulgaria. The consequence of this was that the international community lacked a united strategy and “compounded” many of Iraq’s existing problems. Iraq expert Emma Sky said in an interview with ORG: “There is no “international community” as such – rather an array of external actors who pursue their own interests in Iraq.”

There is a danger of this happening again in the Sahel. There are numerous actors engaged, including: large national footprints from the US and France, international engagement through the EU and the UN, and regional multilateral deployment like the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Many of the other individual countries engaged in the region are there to, among other things, build international reputation, reaffirm ties with countries like France and the US and support the EU in tackling illegal migration. While they care about the long-term peace and stability of the Sahel, these other objectives often take priority.

This can lead to a less effective international effort. It can create a situation where countries provide a host nation with military support because this is what will achieve political access and influence, even though regional stability would be better served by a greater focus on, say, poverty or corruption reduction. For instance, at an ORG-run expert roundtable, one participant said of the international effort in Niger, “it is one of the poorest countries in the world, but

the focus on food security has fallen on deaf ears, while at the same time there is a whole list of countries queueing up for providing more military support.”

One way to avoid this is to focus much more on what the countries in the Sahel need, rather than what the UK wants out of it. Some commentators have recommended providing small-scale specialist capabilities to fill gaps in the international contribution as a means to do this. For instance, [Nina Wilén](#) complimented Belgian Special Forces for working with Nigerien forces to develop first aid kits that are essential and sustainable, as local troops can build such tools without a need for external support or materials. Similarly, the UK’s last major UN deployment – in [UNMISS in South Sudan](#) – provided a field hospital and, with it, a context in which troop contributors felt happier to commit, knowing that their troops could receive appropriate medical care in an area known not only for conflict violence but tropical diseases.

Both these examples speak to the fact that the most useful UK contribution may be non-military. Some of the greatest drivers of terrorism in the Sahel are political, such as [a sense of injustice](#) or the [need to be employed](#). It is, then, unsurprising that a militarised response has often been ineffective. For instance, it has led to the supporting or condoning of [self-defence groups](#), who were recently accused of committing more human rights abuses and violations in Mali than terrorist organisations.

The UK has already acknowledged this in evidence [to the FAC, when the FCO noted](#): “The four thematic areas [of prosperity, security and stability, climate change and sustainable natural resource management, demographic transition] ... all come together in the Sahel.” However, the deployment of more soldiers to Mali adds to a growing narrative that the solution is more military means. This can be seen in statements from various commentators and

policymakers, most recently typified at the European Parliament level, with a [report proposed by MEP Javier Nart](#). The UK could play a powerful role in bucking this trend, if it practiced what it preached and focussed on the real issues facing the region.

Nor would such an approach necessarily risk its international reputation and influence. Several experts interviewed by ORG suggested that such an approach may well help the UK's international reputation, stating that in some parts of the world we are "perceived ... as hypocrites." Similarly, while countries like Russia, China and Iran have deployed their military abroad, much of their influence comes more from infrastructure, trade and religious ties than military means. In fact, [a CSIS brief recently argued](#) that the way to build influence is not through small-scale military deployments but through "an integrated campaign approach that elevates information, diplomacy, economic incentives, and private-sector and civil society engagement tools."

Conclusion: Getting influence right

The Iraq War is an important reminder of the dangers of prioritising influence with partners above delivering peace and stability in the places the UK intervenes. Doing so, risks the worst of both worlds, where the UK fails to build lasting influence among its allies and, at the same time, exacerbates the drivers of conflict in the places it intervenes.

The UK's deployment to Mali is, of course, very different to its contribution to Iraq; however, there are important lessons that it should bear in mind. UK policymakers must clearly communicate differing objectives and how it plans to mitigate against contradictions between them. This will make for a more robust debate about why UK soldiers are being sent into harm's way. Policymakers

should also consider how seeking influence over peace and stability may fragment rather than help international efforts.

As the UK embarks on the Integrated Review and attempts to define its place in the world over the next five years, these lessons may be even more important now than ever. When considering how to prioritise its objectives, it is essential to remember that influence is not an end in itself. The UK must instead have a clear end goal, focused on securing national interests but also on helping the international community work towards a safer and more prosperous world for all. Only then can it consider how influence with other nations might help deliver this.

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