European Parliament

New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel

Addressing regional challenges through better governance

SUMMARY

Recent events have shown that the Sahel region remains highly politically unstable. The military takeover of the Chadian government following President Idriss Déby's sudden death in April 2021 and the repercussions of the August 2020 and May 2021 military coups in Mali are worrying signs of weak democratic governance structures. Burkina Faso's transitional democracy has also been severely destabilised by the activities of extremist groups and internal conflicts. This political fragility and the lack of government legitimacy have made the responses to the Sahel's security and humanitarian issues all the more challenging. The continued threat posed by terrorist armed groups and rising intercommunal violence over land and resources have led to both internal and cross-border displacements in Sahel countries. Meanwhile, the inadequacy of governance mechanisms for managing this displacement, compounded by environmental degradation, resource scarcity and population growth, has created a severe humanitarian crisis.

Since 2011, the European Union (EU) strategy for the Sahel has focused on both security and development to address these numerous and interconnected challenges. However, EU efforts have remained dominated by a military approach to tackle rising terrorist activity, achieving concrete results but ultimately falling short of long-term regional stability. The new EU integrated strategy in the Sahel aims to strengthen action at the political level, focusing on governance mechanisms, human rights, and collaboration with civil society and local authorities, while maintaining security cooperation with states in the region.

IN THIS BRIEFING

➢ Introduction
➢ A region marked by protracted and complex threats
➢ Overview of the integrated strategy
➢ Actions, stakeholders and partnerships
➢ European Parliament position
➢ Outlook

EN

Introduction

The EU strategy in the Sahel region specifically targets Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, and their regional grouping, G5 Sahel. The region's strategic location between the north-African coast and southern sub-Saharan countries makes it a key transit point for migrants and therefore a region that is of significant interest to the EU. In addition, the Sahel is at the centre of a complex regional security and humanitarian situation, where weak state governance and fragile political structures, particularly in Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali, only exacerbate regional instability. In light of these threats and the EU's concerns over migration and terrorism, the EU has been increasingly involved in the Sahel since the early 2010s. Its revised strategy for the Sahel confirms the need for an integrated approach, moving away from a security-oriented course to greater insistence on the political dimension. Government and EU accountability to the Sahelian population, as well as between EU and Sahel partners, is central to the 2021 strategy, especially on issues of governance and human rights.

A region marked by protracted and complex threats

The 2021 Normandy Index ranks the Sahel countries as some of the most vulnerable to threats in the world, particularly in terms of terrorism, violent conflict, climate change, and state fragility – more so than other sub-Saharan countries (see Figure 1).[1] Since 2011, the region has been marked by jihadist violence and increasing communal conflicts over land and resources. Displacement, population growth and food scarcity have led to an acute humanitarian crisis. Meanwhile, weak state structures and lack of government legitimacy hamper efforts to address threats to peace and security: recent transitional tensions in Chad, a coup in Mali and deadly attacks in Burkina-Faso confirm the Sahel's fragile political landscape.
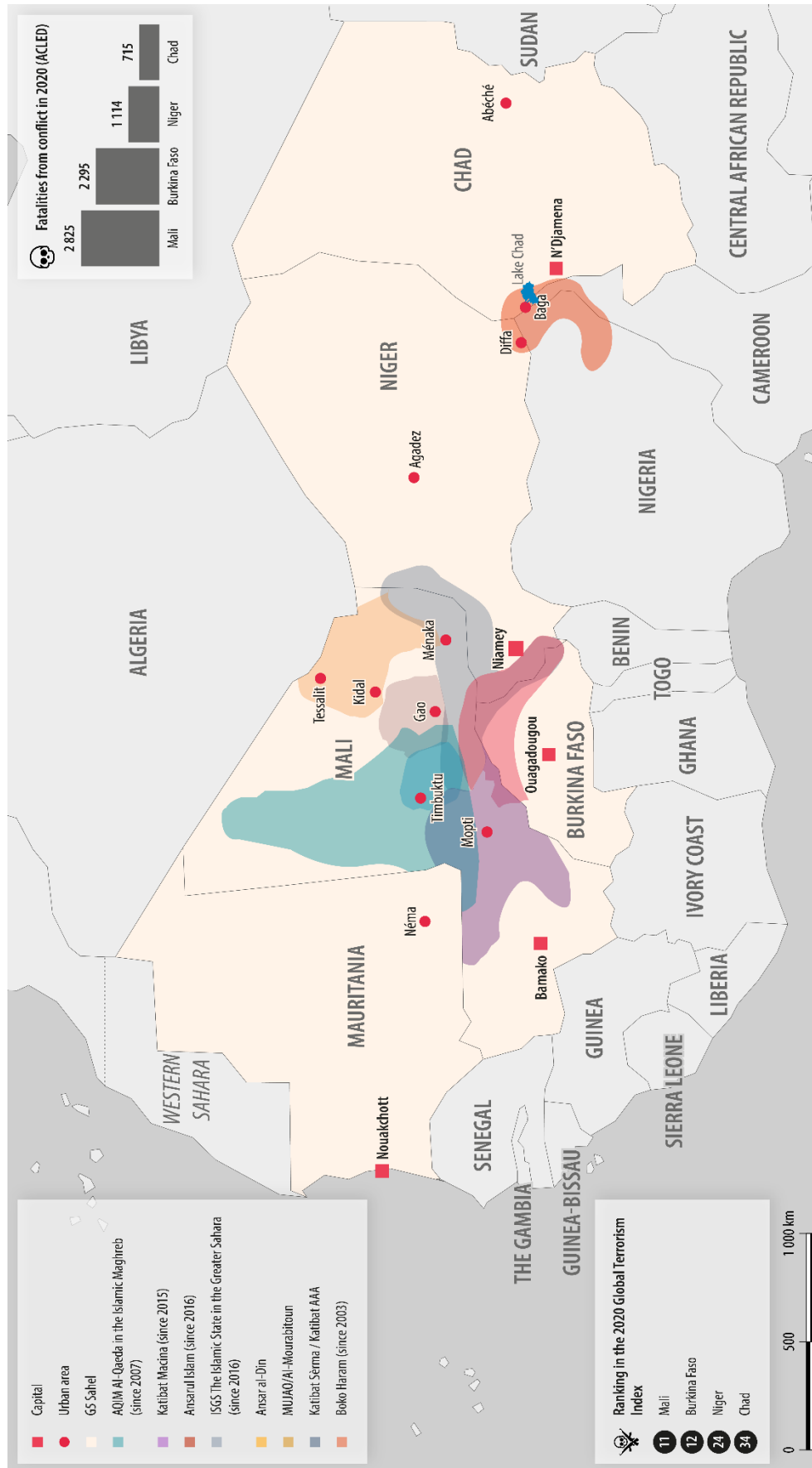
Jihadist and communal violence

The Sahel region is characterised first and foremost by its persisting insecurity, in particular due to the presence of jihadist and other armed groups.[2] In 2012, the jihadist group Ansar al-Dine mobilised in support of the Tuareg insurgency in northern Mali, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). While this alliance later fragmented, the activities of these groups led to the creation and proliferation of new armed factions that continue to pose a threat in the region to this day. In response to the insurgency, the Malian government asked for military support from the French military, which pushed back the insurgency under 'Operation Serval' (January 2013 – July 2014), creating a persisting dependency on foreign armed forces. In the past year, the Sahel countries have experienced a significant increase in violence, with close to 6 500 people killed in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in 2020. Jihadist terrorist group Boko Haram (also known as Islamic State West Africa Province) operates mainly in the Lake Chad region, while other jihadist groups operate in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (see Map 1). In January and March 2021, Niger experienced its worst terrorist attacks in decades, killing 100 and 137 civilians respectively in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions close to the Malian border. Sahel countries continue to rank at the top of the Global Terrorism Index (see Map 1). Meanwhile, jihadists are suspected of forming alliances with criminal groups responsible for kidnappings and ambushes, potentially increasing their territorial influence across the Sahel.

Figure 1 – G5 Sahel peace profile
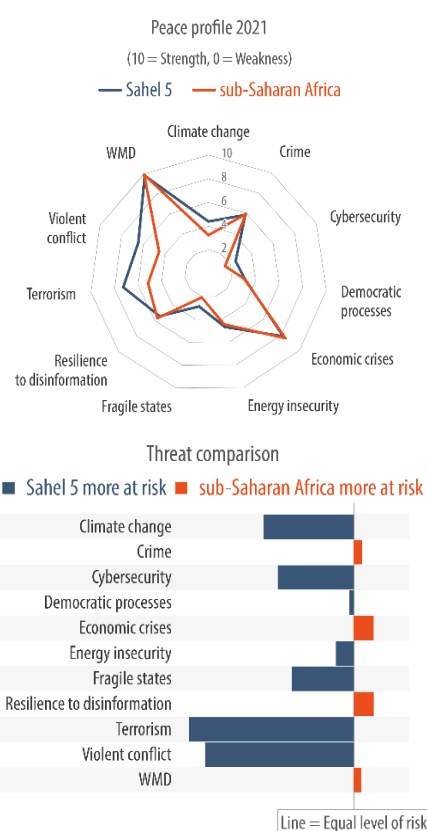
Source: EPRS, Normandy Index 2021.

Map 1 – Jihadist groups in the G5 Sahel countries

Data sources: European Council on Foreign Relations, ACLED, Global Terrorism Index 2020.

Jihadist violence is not the only form of violence plaguing the Sahel countries. Intra- and inter-communal conflicts over land and resources have increased since 2015 in Central Mali, and are now spreading to parts of Burkina Faso and Niger. Conflict in the Sahel is made all the more challenging by its regional, cross-border nature. In fact, the most insecure regions of the Sahel, Lake Chad and Liptako-Gourma, are located respectively in the Burkina Faso-Mali-Niger and Chad-Niger-Nigeria tri-border areas. The EU's launch of a new and more comprehensive strategy in the Sahel, taking into account the wider regional context, is also motivated by the threat that violence might spread further than the Sahel, notably to the Gulf of Guinea.
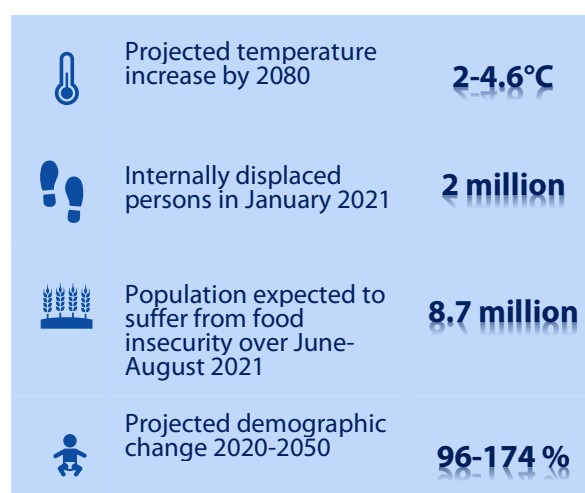
Compounding humanitarian and security threats

Climate change, land degradation and resource scarcity

Amid this continuing security crisis, the Sahel is experiencing severe climate-related vulnerabilities. According to the Notre Dame Vulnerability Index, Sahel countries are some of the most vulnerable and worst prepared to face the consequences of climate change globally: out of 181 countries monitored, Niger ranks 180th; Chad, 179th; Mali, 174th; Burkina Faso, 160th; and Mauritania, 151st. The Sahel is facing rising temperatures, increased exposure to drought and declining water availability (see Figure 2). The region's vulnerability to climate change exacerbates competition for resources and land, resulting in tensions and deadly clashes, in particular between farmers and herders. However, some researchers caution against directly correlating climate change with conflict in the Sahel, in particular with armed group activity. Such approaches are sometimes based on inconclusive data and can result in inappropriate responses to the dual threats of conflict and climate change. In fact, rapid demographic growth also increases resource scarcity, while land degradation due to ill-managed practices and overexploitation can be underestimated by analysts.

Demographics, displacement and food insecurity

In addition to insecurity and climate change, the Sahel countries' demographics are an added burden on regional stability. High fertility rates and decreasing mortality have resulted in significant population growth, expected to increase dramatically in the next 30 years (see Figure 2). This trend, paired with increased scarcity and uneven sharing of resources, has resulted in severe food insecurity, with 8.7 million people across the Sahel expected to experience a state of crisis or famine between June and August 2021 alone. Waves of internal displacement caused by terrorist and intercommunal violence further exacerbate competition for resources and humanitarian aid. There are currently over 2 million internally displaced people in the Sahel, a number expected to increase in the years to come. The compounding threats of over-population, food insecurity and displacement have resulted in a complex regional humanitarian crisis that national governments are unable to address without foreign aid. Meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated humanitarian needs, particularly relating to health services, and restrictions on movement have complicated the provision of assistance to remote areas.

Figure 2 – Vulnerabilities in Sahel

Projected temperature increase by 2080	2-4.6°C
Internally displaced persons in January 2021	2 million
Population expected to suffer from food insecurity over June-August 2021	8.7 million
Projected demographic change 2020-2050	96-174 %

Data sources: Potsdam Institute for climate impact research, UNHCR, Cadre Harmonisé, Population Reference Bureau, accessed June 2021.

Fragile states: Human rights, rule of law and state legitimacy

The absence of stable and legitimate state structures, and unequal social relations within the Sahel countries, provide a further challenge to regional stabilisation. Recent political developments have shown the fragility of the central governments in the Sahel and their weak levels of democratic governance.[3] Following the successful military coup against Malian President Keïta in August 2020, the interim government has pledged to hold democratic elections in February 2022. However, the country's political situation remains highly unstable: army colonel Assimi Goïta demoted and replaced interim President Bah N'Daw and Vice-President Moctar Ouane in May 2021, despite strong condemnation by international actors.

In Chad, President Idriss Déby's sudden death in April 2021 resulted in the creation of an interim military council headed by his son, Abdelkrim Idriss Déby, a general in the Chadian military. The council has pledged to hold elections within 18 months, but authorities are simultaneously violently repressing opposition protests against the military takeover. These events point towards increased militarisation of the highest levels of government, a step away from democratic governance in the region. These developments could also have a significant impact on the fragile military cooperation between the G5 Sahel countries. Meanwhile, security and defence forces across the Sahel have been repeatedly accused of perpetrating abuses, both during counter-terrorism operations and other forms of interventions. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger government security forces have been accused of involvement in mass extrajudicial killings of suspected terrorists and civilians alike. Moreover, recent attacks against civilians in Burkina Faso raise questions about the use of civilian volunteers as surrogates for the armed forces. The Multi-national Joint Task Force to fight Boko Haram (MNJTF) is also strongly suspected to have carried out unlawful killings during counter-terrorism operations.

The fragility of national governments paired with their weak human rights records has affected their legitimacy in the eyes of their populations. Moreover, persisting social inequalities also contribute to instability. Experts believe that to address the long-standing security and humanitarian challenges in the region, government legitimacy must be improved through increased transparency and accountability.

Overview of the integrated strategy

Despite considerable military deployment, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, terrorist and intercommunal violence and political unrest persist, suggesting that the EU Sahel strategy has had less than the desired impact on the security situation in the region. For this reason, the new EU integrated strategy in the Sahel, approved by the Council in April 2021, attempts to increase the focus on state governance. This new emphasis includes promoting state legitimacy by reforming the security sector, addressing human rights grievances and focusing on sustainable and long-term development involving civil society and local authorities.

Previous strategy for the Sahel

Especially since the early 2010s, international actors including the EU have invested heavily in security, humanitarian and development areas in the Sahel. Indeed, involvement in the region is a strategic priority for the EU, not least because it wishes to lessen and control migration flows from the African continent and help reduce terrorist activity in the region. In response to the threats of irregular migration and terrorism, the Council adopted the first EU strategy for the Sahel in March 2011. The European strategy for security and development in the Sahel sought to improve regional security while simultaneously promoting development in Sahel countries. It outlined action in the key areas of (i) development, good governance and international conflict resolution; (ii) politics and diplomacy; (iii) security and rule of law; and (iv) the fight against extremist violence and radicalisation. Following the creation of the G5 Sahel partnership in February 2014, the strategy expanded its geographical scope to include Burkina Faso and Chad in March 2014, covering all the

G5 Sahel countries. The Foreign Affairs Council adopted the Sahel regional action plan for 2015-2020 in April 2015 as the strategy's implementation framework, strengthening its security aspect.

However, there is widespread agreement that the security-focused approach did not achieve the expected results, as regional terrorist groups continue to operate and proliferate in the region, even threatening further expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea. Analysts believe that weak state legitimacy and control over the Sahel territories are the reasons behind the failure to eradicate terrorism, while poverty and the lack of economic opportunities have also been associated with increased radicalisation and terrorist recruitment in some areas. Human rights abuses by state security and defence forces have led to increased popular resentment of government authorities in some areas. Persisting insecurity has slowed down progress in the development and governance sectors in the Sahel region; this has compelled the EU to change its approach to the Sahel conflict.

New strategic priorities

Promoting better governance

In light of the increasingly complex threats in the Sahel, the new EU strategy confirms the need for a more comprehensive approach focused on strengthening governance. This involves addressing human rights, rule of law and democratic governance issues in Sahel countries by ensuring greater transparency and accountability. The EU strategy also emphasises the need to expand state presence and services by supporting the deployment of state structures and the provision of basic public services. Security sector reform is also a key priority area and involves ensuring better respect for human rights and ending impunity in military and security circles. The Sahel strategy therefore aims to strengthen state legitimacy by ensuring that states respect their commitments towards the population and hold government actors accountable.

The strategy describes this as a 'civilian and political leap forward', in line with the priorities of the Sahel Coalition decided at the N'Djamena summit in February 2021. This involves the implementation of both short-term security responses and long-term approaches that promote sustainable economic, social and environmental development. Despite its strong emphasis on governance and sustainable development, the new strategy also incorporates the topic of migration, an issue central to EU foreign policy in the region. The document adopts an incentive approach to the issue, seeking to 'continue to promote fruitful cooperation on migration' with Sahel governments, but does not further specify the nature of this cooperation.

Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts

Alongside support on security and governance, the EU has pledged development assistance to the Sahel region with a focus on fighting the consequences of climate change. The EU will support efforts to protect natural habitat, preserve biodiversity, combat desertification and strengthen population resilience. This will also involve addressing the security implications and increasing job opportunities to counteract the adverse economic effects of climate change and environmental degradation. Moreover, development assistance will also be used to promote sustainable agriculture practices and help reduce food and water insecurity, to address the increasing competition over land and resources characteristic of the Sahel. Young people will also become a central focus of development assistance, which will be partly redirected towards education, employment and political participation.

Furthermore, the EU will continue to provide the Sahel countries with humanitarian assistance, with the specific aim of tackling the growing needs of displaced and conflict affected peoples. EU efforts have concentrated on protecting civilians in conflict, ensuring unimpeded humanitarian access, and increasing civil-military coordination. The EU will support peacebuilding and mediation efforts (see below 'Field action and collaboration') addressing both the immediate and the root causes of conflict and insecurity. The focus will be on the most vulnerable regions of the Sahel such as

Lake Chad and Liptako-Gourma. Linking humanitarian aid, support for sustainable development and support for peace will be an overarching aim of EU action in the Sahel.

A comprehensive approach to a complex region

The new strategy for the Sahel emphasises the need for a more comprehensive and contextual approach to addressing regional instability. While the main geographical focus remains on the G5 Sahel countries, the strategy also takes into account the expanding nature of regional challenges such as terrorist activity and population displacement. The wider regional context, including dynamics in the Gulf of Guinea and Libya, will therefore also be considered when supporting stabilisation processes in the Sahel. The EU recognises that persisting regional insecurity has much to do with dynamics outside of the Sahel itself.

In addition its wider geographical scope, the new strategy also aims to promote tailored responses at regional, national and local levels, to take specific needs and situations into account. The strategy also insists on consulting with a wider range of actors, including local level and decentralised authorities, and national civil society actors. The tools to be used to carry out this action have not yet been made public however.

Table 1 – EU strategies in the Sahel: previous and new priorities

Priority areas	European strategy for security and development in the Sahel (2011-2020)	EU integrated strategy in the Sahel (2021)
Security	'Strengthen the capacities of the security, law enforcement and rule of law sectors to fight threats and handle terrorism and organised crime in a more efficient and specialised manner'.	'The EU will remain active in the fight against terrorist and armed groups, cross-border trafficking and organised crime [and] continue to support security sector reform'.
Development	'To help create economic opportunities for local communities […] and to mitigate the impact of climate change effects'.	'[The EU] will encourage the countries of the Sahel in their efforts to achieve sustainable and inclusive development, including habitat protection, preserving biodiversity and combating desertification'.
Migration	*Not included in the strategic priority areas, but later added in the Sahel regional action plan 2015-2020:* 'The EU should focus on 1) […] irregular migration, smuggling and trafficking in human beings; and 2) […] maximising the development impact of migration and mobility 3) promoting international protection 4) organising mobility and legal migration'.	'The EU wishes to continue to promote fruitful cooperation in the area of migration'.
Governance	'To enhance transparent and locally accountable governance and re-establish an administrative presence of the state'.	'The EU is ready to step up its support for effective and fair management of all territories, responsible state presence and provision of basic public services'.

Data source: Council of the European Union, 2011 and 2021.

Actions, stakeholders and partnerships

Field action and collaboration

On the ground, EU support for G5 Sahel countries takes several forms, both military and civilian in nature. The EU has deployed three common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions on the ground in the Sahel, including the civilian capacity-building missions EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012-2022) and EUCAP Sahel Mali (2013-2023), and the military training mission EUTM Mali. In 2020, the Council extended EUTM Mali – which also has a regional mandate – for four years, increasing ground staff to 1 200. EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali were briefly suspended following the August 2020 military coup, but resumed activities in November 2020. The EU has also set up a regional advisory coordination cell (RACC), a network of European experts supporting security and defence cooperation between the G5 Sahel countries.

Individual EU Member States also offer military support. The military involvement of France in the region has been significant since 2012. French armed forces are currently operating under Operation Barkhane, with over 5 100 troops active in the region. However, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, announced in June 2021 that France would be withdrawing, while remaining involved in the region, notably through Takuba, a task force launched in 2020 by several EU Member States to fight terrorism in the Liptako-Gourma region. Member States also support joint task forces such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Multi-national Joint Task Force to fight Boko Haram (MNJTF), and the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (Minusma) (see Table 2). In January 2020, Macron and the G5 heads of state launched the Coalition for the Sahel at the G5 summit in Pau (France), to serve as an umbrella for several initiatives within the thematic areas of (i) the fight against terrorism, (ii) military capacity building, (iii) support for re-establishment of state structures and services, and (iv) development aid. In 2019, France and Germany, had already launched the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S), to widen the geographical scope of cross-border interventions against terrorism beyond the G5 countries. This initiative was integrated into the Coalition for the Sahel in 2020. Outside of military support, the EU has so far committed €2.6 billion in development assistance to the Sahel countries through the Sahel Alliance. This funding will support 85 ongoing development projects for the 2020-2022 period, in sectors including agriculture, basic public services and governance. In addition, the EU will continue to mobilise electoral observation missions to support and monitor national elections in Sahel countries.

Table 2 – Joint military forces (based on most recent estimates)

	Military personnel	Budget	Areas of operation	Contributing countries
G5 Sahel Joint Force	5 000	-	G5 Sahel	G5 countries
MNJTF	7 500	€50 million (2016-2020)	Lake Chad Basin	Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, France
Minusma (UN)	13 289	US$1 183 million (2020-2021)	Mali	61 countries including 18 EU Member States
EUTM Mali	730	€133.7 million (2020-2024)	G5 Sahel countries	22 EU Member States, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro
Takuba Task Force	-	-	Liptako-Gourma	10 EU MS, UK, Mali, Niger
Operation Barkhane	5 100	-	Chad, Mali, Niger	France

Data sources: France Diplomacy, Africa-EU Partnership, Minusma, UN, EUTM Mali, EPRS based on EEAS. data, Ministère des Armées (France), accessed June 2021

EU institutions

EU delegations in G5 countries provide a link between field operations and EU headquarters, notably the European External Action Service (EEAS). Delegations communicate needs and threats on the ground to headquarters and consult with local and state authorities to coordinate EU humanitarian action, development, trade cooperation and military missions. Diplomatic missions from EU Member States are also heavily involved in these processes. At institutional level, the **EEAS Sahel Task Force** coordinates the work of the relevant EEAS departments as well as the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), DG for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO), DG for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), and the Service Department for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI). The EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator is included in the task force. The EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Sahel, Emanuela Del Re, appointed in June 2021, coordinates EU action in the Sahel in collaboration with EU delegations, missions and regional authorities in the G5 Sahel countries.

Financing

While the implementation of the strategy is still being discussed, it will benefit from two main funding sources. Part of the 2021-2017 multiannual financial framework (MFF), the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (**Global Europe Instrument**) has allocated up to €29 181 million (in current prices) to sub-Saharan Africa; €6 358 million for the instrument's thematic component dedicated to (i) human rights and democracy, (ii) civil society, (iii) stability and peace, (iv) global challenges such as health, education and migration; €9 534 million for the 'emerging challenges and priorities cushion' and €3 182 million for the rapid response component dedicated notably to 'contribute to stability and conflict prevention in situations of urgency, in emerging crisis, in crisis and in post-crisis situations', 'to strengthening resilience of states, societies, communities and individuals, and to linking humanitarian aid and development action'. The Sahel strategy may benefit from all those components, however the breakdown was not available at the time of publishing.

The European Peace Facility (**EPF**), which came into force on 22 March 2021, could provide an alternative funding source for the military aspects of the Sahel strategy. The EPF is an off-budget fund financed through yearly contributions from Member States, up to a ceiling of €5 700 million (in current prices) for the 2021-2027 period, which will serve as a fund for common foreign and security policy (CFSP) external action with military and defence implications. The aim of the facility is to enhance the EU's capacity to respond rapidly to conflict and provide long-term capacity building support for EU partners, such as the Sahel countries. The EPF will also allow the EU, for the first time in its history, to supply military equipment to partners outside of the EU budget.

European Parliament position

Since the launch of the initial strategy, the European Parliament's resolutions have addressed challenges in the Sahel region regularly, including security, development and humanitarian assistance, migration, and governance and human rights (see Table 3). Parliament has generally supported the positions of the European Commission and the EEAS regarding the EU's approach to the Sahel. Nevertheless, Parliament has also scrutinised these positions and criticised lack of focus on human rights and governance. It has called for better oversight of EU action in the field, more cooperation with regional partners, and a shift in focus from security concerns to humanitarian and human rights issues. Parliament welcomed the regionalisation of EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali, but expressed concern about CSDP missions' shortfalls and regretted that the EEAS did not provide suitable indicators to monitor their achievements.

Table 3 – European Parliament resolutions on the Sahel

Main areas of concern / Resolutions	🔒 Security	🌐 Development and humanitarian issues	👣 Migration	⚖️ Governance and human rights
Common security and defence policy (2021)	✓			
Situation in Chad (2021)	✓			✓
EU-Africa security cooperation in the Sahel region (2020)	✓			
Common security and defence policy (2019)	✓			
Violations of human rights including religious freedoms in Burkina Faso (2019)				✓
Common security and defence policy (2018)	✓			
2019 budget – Trilogue mandate (2018)			✓	
Addressing refugee and migrant movements (2017)			✓	
Policy coherence for development (2016)		✓		
Report on peace support operations (2015)	✓			
Mauritania – the case of Biram Dah Abeid (2014)	✓			
Coherence of EU external action (2014)	✓			
Resilience and disaster risk reduction (2013)		✓		
Reconstruction and democratisation in Mali (2013)		✓		✓
Human rights and the security in the Sahel (2012)	✓			✓
Security situation in Mali (2012)	✓			

Data source: European Parliament.

In that respect, the new EU strategy aligns with previous Parliament positions. Indeed, Parliament's 2020 resolution on EU-Africa security cooperation highlighted the importance of strong and reliable

state institutions. Moreover, the recent debate on security in the Sahel, hosted by the Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE), highlighted that security responses still need to improve, to prevent human rights abuses by national and joint military forces. The resolution on the situation in Chad and the joint SEDE-AFET exchange of views on the second coup in Mali also show concern with the fragile politics of the Sahel countries. Parliament's recent resolution on the EU-Africa strategy criticised the strong focus on migration and called for fairer EU policies to tackle the root causes of migration. In an answer to a Parliamentary question in March 2021, the EU High Representative stated that 'accessible basic social services, the rule of law, strengthened institutions and respect for human rights and international humanitarian law remain central' to the new strategy's implementation. In June 2021, the Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) exchanged views on the strategy with Rita Laranjinha, director of the EEAS Africa service, who stated that the new strategy would not focus on military aspects but would take due account of human rights issues.

Outlook

Navigating additional EU-Africa frameworks

The new integrated strategy in the Sahel sits within the broader landscape of a variety of other EU frameworks. Firstly, the 2021 proposal for a comprehensive strategy with Africa addresses several topics that the Sahel strategy also mentions, including climate change and sustainable growth. It also lists cooperation on peace and governance as a strategic priority, in particular focusing on the most vulnerable regions of sub-Saharan Africa, including the Sahel countries. Finally, the proposal aims to 'ensure a balanced, coherent, and comprehensive approach to migration and mobility', echoing the Sahel strategy's perspective on cooperation on migration. However, this proposed strategy has not yet been discussed with the African Union.

While not yet ratified, the Post-Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) also outlines strategic priority areas. These include human rights and democracy promotion, peace and security, development, climate change, sustainable economic growth, and migration. Finally, the EU migration pact describes more specifically the EU's new goals in its migration policies with partner countries. Strategic priorities for migration are support for countries hosting refugees outside the EU, the creation of economic opportunities close to home, combating migrant smuggling, improving return and readmission, and developing orderly channels for legal migration. These objectives also concern Sahel countries.

Main challenges for the EU strategy

Analysts both inside and outside the EU institutions have argued that there needs to be a shift in the international approach to the Sahel conflicts, from military action to the promotion of better governance. Several researchers have linked the emergence and proliferation of jihadist and other armed groups with weak state structures and dysfunctional armed forces. The recent upsurge of attacks against international peacekeeping forces tragically highlights their being perceived as siding with contested national authorities. According to a Centre for European Reform policy brief, the EU must beware of supporting governments that lack legitimacy in order not to further alienate local populations – and potentially increase dangers of radicalisation. Possible paths to address this include increased dialogue with civil society and local authorities, both of which are central to the new strategy. While the political focus of the new strategy acknowledges the need for stabilisation, a Chatham House research paper points out that 'success depends first and foremost on the goodwill (much more than on the capacity) of political leaders to reform and renew their social contract with citizens'.

The new EPF has also been raised as a cause for concern. While it will allow the EU to equip its partners with arms, some researchers warn that this will require strong focus and oversight to avoid military equipment falling into the wrong hands. Others argue that the EPF risks fuelling rather than stabilising conflict, by strengthening repressive military forces. The fragile political environment and

known abuses by defence forces will make the Sahel countries a test case for the monitoring mechanism that will accompany the support that the EU provides through the EPF.

Ultimately, the EU is still working on the specifics of the strategy's implementation. While the strategy provides a comprehensive and balanced approach to redress instability in the Sahel by prioritising action on the political level, researchers and regional civil society actors suggest that the EU could also consider additional initiatives in the future, such as increasing support for dialogue and mediation between civilian and armed parties, that may help push forward the aim of regional stabilisation.

FURTHER READING

The European Union's integrated strategy in the Sahel, Legislative train schedule, European Parliament, EPRS.

Fardel T. and Pichon E., The G5 Sahel and the European Union: The challenges of security cooperation with a regional grouping, European Parliament, EPRS, September 2020.

International Crisis Group, A course correction for the Sahel stabilisation strategy, February 2021.

Ioannides I., Peace and security in 2020: Evaluating the EU approach to tackling the Sahel conflicts, European Parliament, EPRS, September 2020.

Pérouse de Montclos M.-A., Rethinking the response to jihadist groups across the Sahel, Chatham House, March 2021.

Pichon E., Understanding the EU strategy in the Sahel, European Parliament, EPRS, September 2020.

Pye K., The Sahel: Europe's forever war?, Centre for European Reform, March 2021.

ENDNOTES

[1] Normandy Index rankings for Sahel countries: of the 138 countries monitored, Chad ranks 128th, Niger 115th, Mali 109th, Mauritania 105th, and Burkina Faso 87th. The higher the number, the more vulnerable the country.

[2] There is no internationally recognised definition of terrorism; the terrorist groups mentioned in this briefing are those designated as such in the UN Security Council consolidated list, but are referred to as 'jihadist armed groups' for the purpose of using more neutral language. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Mourabitoun, Ansarul Islam, Ansar al-Din, Boko Haram (ISWAP), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) are all designated as terrorist organisations. Katibat Macina and Katibat Sèrma are both associated with JNIM. The groups mentioned have all pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda or the 'Islamic State' ISIL/Da'esh. The EU also has its own sanctions regime against al-Qaeda and ISIL/Da'esh with restrictive measures against both groups as well as any other entities associated with them.

[3] The Fragile States Index ranks the Sahel countries as highly vulnerable in the domain of state legitimacy: out of 10, Chad receives 9.4, Mauritania 7.9, Mali 7.5, Niger 7.1 and Burkina Faso 5.9, where a higher level indicates higher fragility.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT