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UK deployment and recent political challenges in Mali

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Summary

At the end of 2020, UK armed forces will join the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali; a reflection of the UK's growing interest in an increasingly unstable region of Sub-Saharan Africa. Mali faces considerable political, security and governance challenges, compounded by a military coup in August 2020.

Why is the UK interested in Mali?

In 2018 the Government laid out new strategic approach for Sub-Saharan Africa with a specific focus on the Sahel. The UK is increasing diplomatic representation across the region and attending Sahel-related conferences at Ministerial level. The Government says by working to stabilise states and tackle the root causes of conflict it is helping to prevent conflict spilling over to neighbouring states. And it is not just neighbouring states the UK is worried about. The UK defence secretary has commented: "[What happens over there has a reach over here](#)".

Joining the UN peacekeeping mission

In December 2020, 250 British soldiers will begin a three-year deployment with the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali. The UK will be filling a capability gap in the UN force by providing soldiers specialising in long-range reconnaissance.

However, commentators question the impact the UK can have, given the numbers of personnel involved. There are also security concerns; given the high number of attacks on French forces and UN peacekeepers in Mali, it is unlikely to be as benign as the UK's most recent major UN peacekeeping mission in Africa, in South Sudan.

What are regional countries doing?

The wider ramifications of insecurity in Mali drives much of the regional and international interest in Mali. Regionally, the growth of Islamist groups linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State across the Sahel has caused widespread concern. The Sahel countries have come together as a Group of Five to coordinate development and security policies, and have formed a joint force to improve security along their shared borders (in particular the tri-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger). ECOWAS, the grouping of West African countries, is leading international mediation efforts following the coup.

France, Mali's former colonial power, has had a counterterrorism military force in Mali since 2013, which now numbers 5,000 strong, and continues to lead European diplomatic efforts. However, Malians openly question France's motives and have frequently expressed their opposition to the French and wider international military presence.

What prompted the coup in summer 2020?

In June, a coalition of opposition forces rallied Malians, frustrated with President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta's leadership, to call for his resignation. Mediation efforts by ECOWAS and its envoy, the former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, failed to win over the coalition of opposition groups, whose name, M5-RFP, comes from the date of the first rally it organised on 5 June. On 18 August, the President resigned after being detained in the capital by soldiers.

What's next for Mali?

There is a clear divide between the condemnation of the coup by the international community, including the UK, and the majority of Malians, who have supported the President's forced removal from office.

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Mali's political future remains uncertain. The weeks immediately following the coup were taken up with talks over a transitional government. On 21 September the military junta named its own leader, Colonel Assimi Goïta, as vice-president of a transitional government led by a former defence minister, Bah Ndaw. Goodluck Jonathan said he is optimistic their inauguration on 25 September "[will signal the beginning of the return to normalcy in Mali](#)". The transition is expected to lead to fresh elections.

The CNSP promised to respect international agreements on fighting jihadists, meaning the continued presence of international forces.

Context: why is Mali so unstable?

The current crisis in Mali has its roots in the events of 2012, when northern separatists and Islamist armed groups forced government forces out of northern Mali, and the military overthrew the government. Fresh elections in 2013 and a peace accord in 2015 between the Government and two northern armed movements brought hope of stability. However, progress in implementing the peace agreement has been patchy, disputes over the results of legislative elections held in April 2020, and growing frustration with the Presidency of Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta since his re-election in 2018 resulted in opposition rallies and his removal from power this year.

The security situation remains precarious with a myriad of armed groups, including Islamists, northern separatists and newly formed community self-defence groups, among others. Long-standing regional tensions between herder and farmer communities have become deadly, with retaliatory attacks resulting in massacres of civilians and the destruction of villages and vital grain supplies.

The UN estimates about 12.9 million are affected by the crisis in Mali, with 6.8 million in need of humanitarian assistance.¹

About this paper

This paper was first published on 29 April 2020. This update looks first at the UK's new approach to the Sahel with a particular focus on the military deployment, then the role of regional and international actors, before surveying recent developments, including the coup, in Mali.

¹ "[Mali: Revision of the Humanitarian Response Plan January - December 2020 \(July 2020\)](#)", UN OCHA, 20 August 2020

1. The UK government's approach

Summary

In 2018 the Government laid out new strategic approach for Sub-Saharan Africa and its plans to pivot resources to the Sahel. The UK is increasing diplomatic representation across the region and attending Sahel-related conferences at Ministerial level. The government says by working to stabilise states and tackle the root causes of conflict it is helping to prevent conflict spilling over to neighbouring states.²

At the end of 2020, UK armed forces will join the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali; a visible indicator of the UK's interest in an increasingly unstable part of Sub-Saharan Africa.

The UK will be filling a capability gap in the UN force by providing long-range reconnaissance specialist soldiers. However, commentators question the impact the UK can have amid concerns about the number of deaths of French and UN peacekeepers in Mali.

1.1 A new strategic approach

In 2018 the Government agreed a new strategic approach for Sub-Saharan Africa with an increased focus on the Sahel.

The Government will pivot resources to Mali and the other countries of the Sahel: "an area of long-term instability and extreme poverty where we have traditionally had little representation".³

In practice, this means increasing diplomatic representation across the region, increased participation in Sahel-related conferences at Ministerial level.⁴

This shift is not to say the UK has not previously paid attention to developments in Mali and the Sahel. The Government appointed Stephen O'Brien MP as the UK's special envoy to the Sahel between 2012 and 2015 (the current Sahel envoy is Clem Naylor). In 2013 British military personnel provided logistical and technical support to the French military intervention. Having said that, until now, the UK has tended to leave the military effort to France and supporting regional forces.

Why is the UK pivoting to the Sahel? The Government says it is to help address increasing instability in the region. By working to stabilise states and tackle the root causes of conflict, the Government says it is helping prevent conflict spilling over to neighbouring states.⁵ The Government has also pointed to the reach of extremism and terrorism from Africa into Europe, and the links between instability and immigration across the Mediterranean. Defence Secretary Ben Wallace made this point in

² ["UK to deploy 250 troops to Mali on peacekeeping operations"](#), Ministry of Defence, 22 July 2019

³ ["Beyond aid: the UK's strategic engagement in Africa"](#) written evidence UKA0012, Foreign Affairs Committee, 22 October 2019. More detail is available on Gov.uk: [UK's partnerships for Africa](#)

⁴ [HL2087](#), 10 March 2020

⁵ ["UK to deploy 250 troops to Mali on peacekeeping operations"](#), Ministry of Defence, 22 July 2019

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discussions with his French and German counterparts about the coup: “what happens over there has a reach back to over here”.⁶

The Oxford Research Group, in [evidence submitted to the Foreign Affairs Committee](#), is sceptical about the impact the UK can have:

Despite aspirational policy documents and public statements, however, a strategic disconnect still appears to exist between the stated ambition of British contributions to security across the continent with the reality on the ground.⁷

The Foreign Affairs committee inquiry ended prematurely with the dissolution of Parliament on 6 November 2019. Written evidence is available on the [committee website](#).

The Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, in its 2020 report on the [UK and Sub-Saharan Africa](#), had this to say about the UK’s approach:

We welcome the UK’s increased attention to instability in the Sahel, as part of the ‘strategic approach’, but are concerned that the Government’s wider strategy in the Sahel is unclear, and the UK risks being unable to add value in a highly contested space.⁸

The UK is closely involved in discussions with the G5 Sahel countries and other interested international partners, with ministers attending several meetings this year.

International aid

The former Department for International Development (DFID) describes the Sahel as [one of the most unstable and poorest regions](#) in the world. 78 per cent of people in Niger, Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso live in poverty while 39 per cent of primary school-aged children in Mali are out of school.⁹

The UK provided £11.1 million in humanitarian aid to Mali in 2019 through the Sahel Humanitarian Emergency Response Programme (SHERP).¹⁰

1.2 UK response to the coup

The Government issued a statement opposing the removal of Mali’s elected government by force. Noticeably not calling for Kéïta’s reinstatement, the Minister for Africa called for the re-establishment of a civilian government as soon as possible.¹¹ On 17 September, In response to written question, Baroness Sugg said the Government supports ECOWAS’s mediation efforts and is looking for a transition

⁶ “[Defence Secretary’s speech at meeting of UK, German and French defence ministers](#)”, Ministry of Defence, 21 August 2020; [HC Deb 22 July 2020 c2182](#)

⁷ “[Beyond aid: the UK’s strategic engagement in Africa](#)” written evidence UKA0010, Foreign Affairs Committee, 22 October 2019

⁸ Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, “[The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa: prosperity, peace and development co-operation](#)”, 10 July 2020, HL Paper 88 2019-21

⁹ [DFID Sahel](#), accessed 13 March 2020

¹⁰ [PQ277199](#), 19 July 2019

¹¹ “[Mali: UK statement on military coup](#)”, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 19 August 2020

“that can deliver a legitimate, civilian government that meets the needs and aspirations of the Malian people”.¹²

1.3 UK military deployments

The UK military has supported the French counter-terrorism operation in Mali in a non-combat role since 2018. It provides training to regional forces and will shortly join MINUSMA.

Joining the UN mission

On 22 July 2019, the Government announced plans to send 250 troops to Mali to join the UN peacekeeping operation in 2020.¹³ A delay has pushed the deployment back to December 2020.¹⁴

The troops will:

- Join the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)
- Conduct long-range reconnaissance
- Fill a capability gap for the UN mission

The contribution will be for three years

The first six-month rotation will be led by the [Light Dragoons](#) and the [Royal Anglian Regiment](#), plus army UAV pilots (operating [Desert Hawk](#)), EOD specialists and medical support.¹⁵ The Light Dragoons are a cavalry regiment who specialise in reconnaissance using Jackal 2 fighting vehicles, which have been upgraded ahead of the deployment.¹⁶

The UN mission is one of the deadliest in the world. MINUSMA personnel are being targeted by a range of groups within Mali and over 200 peacekeepers have been killed since the deployment began in 2013.

The MOD says this deployment is unusual in that army medics are being deployed with equipment to enable them to create a “fully functioning operating theatre within an hour”.¹⁷ Pre-deployment training included a scenario involving an improvised explosive device, which have proved deadly to French and UN forces this year already.¹⁸

¹² [HL7799](#), 17 September 2020

¹³ [HCWS1779](#), 22 July 2019 and “[UK to deploy 250 troops to Mali on peacekeeping operations](#)”, Ministry of Defence, 22 July 2019

¹⁴ “UK Jackal gets upgrade for UN mission in Mali”, Jane’s Defence Weekly, 12 March 2020

¹⁵ “[UK troops reach training milestone ahead of UN peacekeeping deployment to Mali](#)”, Ministry of Defence 29 July 2020; “[British troops are soon deploying to Mali, meet their commanding officer](#)”, Ministry of Defence on Medium, 30 July 2020

¹⁶ “UK Jackal gets upgrade for UN mission in Mali”, Jane’s Defence Weekly, 12 March 2020; “Forces chiefs warn against peacekeeping role in Mali”, The Times, 3 March 2020

¹⁷ “[From Salisbury Plain to the deserts of Mali](#)”, Ministry of Defence on Medium, 29 July 2020

¹⁸ “[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)”, SC/2020/476, United Nations, 2 June 2020, para 22; “[Two French soldiers killed, one injured in IED blast in northern Mali](#)”, RFI, 6 September 2020

Future deployments are expected to include reconnaissance specialists the [Royal Scots Dragoon Guards](#) and [1st Queen's Dragoon Guards](#).¹⁹

Two UK military staff officers already work at MINUSMA HQ.

Separately, the UK ended its four-year contribution to the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan in early 2020.²⁰

Reaction to the UN deployment

A Times editorial said it will be “Britain’s most significant deployment to an active war zone since the end of a mission in Afghanistan five years ago”.²¹ The Times reports concerns about the role among senior British personnel because of the complexity of the situation on the ground and the number of deaths of French and UN peacekeepers in Mali.²²

General Sir Richard Barrons, a former Commander of Joint Forces Command (UK armed forces), described the deployment as tokenistic. In evidence to the Lords International Relations and Defence Committee in March 2020, he questioned the wider thinking within Government towards the Sahel: “these minor contributions to Mali are not in support of a strategy of any kind other than ‘we should do a bit more UN peacekeeping’”.²³

However, Dr Jack Watling, a land warfare specialist at RUSI, observed the UK will be filling a capability gap for MINUSMA. Namely, reconnaissance troops, mounted on light all-terrain vehicles, who are able to patrol long distances.²⁴

RAF chinooks deployed with French operation

Since 2018 the UK has provided three Chinook helicopters to provide logistical support the French counter-terrorism operation Barkane.²⁵ The MOD extended the non-combat mission in June 2020. Around 100 British personnel are involved, based in Gao.²⁶

Training regional forces

The UK is also training regional forces. This includes supporting a US-led training mission in Senegal²⁷ and the [EU training mission in Mali](#) (as a non-EU member). The UK is also loaning Estonia four Jackal armoured vehicles for their deployment to Mali.²⁸

¹⁹ “UK Jackal gets upgrade for UN mission in Mali”, Jane’s Defence Weekly, 12 March 2020

²⁰ “[UK’s largest mission UN mission draws to a close after four successful years](#)”, Ministry of Defence, 30 January 2020

²¹ “The Times view on Britain’s mission to Mali”, The Times, 9 March 2020

²² “Forces chiefs warn against peacekeeping role in Mali”, The Times, 3 March 2020

²³ “[The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa – oral evidence](#)”, Lords International Affairs and Defence Committee, 12 March 2020

²⁴ “[Building links and Local Security in Mali](#)”, RUSI commentary, 16 April 2020

²⁵ [HL2087](#), 10 March 2020

²⁶ “[RAF deployment in Mali has extended](#)”, RAF News, 12 June 2020

²⁷ “[UK military gears up for deployment in Mali](#)”, BBC News, 2 March 2020

²⁸ “[UK loans Estonia four Jackal vehicles to support counter-terrorism mission in Mali](#)”, Ministry of Defence, 9 July 2020. [Estonia forces](#) support the UN mission, the EU training mission and the French operation Barkhane. The vehicles are to fill the gap until the Estonian army receives its new Coyote armoured reconnaissance vehicles.

Box 1: The UN MINUSMA peacekeeping mission

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established by Security Council [resolution 2100](#) of 25 April 2013.

The mission's mandate has been broadened by successive resolutions, but broadly it is support the political process in the Mali, including the national political dialogue and reconciliation and implementation of the 2015 Algiers Accord, protect civilians, help stabilise and restore state authority in central Mali and other security related tasks. It also provides operational and logistical support to the G5 Sahel Joint Force. The mandate has been extended annually, most recently by Security Council resolution 2351 of 29 June 2020.²⁹ The force currently numbers over 15,000 personnel.

The UN Secretary General said the mission plays "a fundamental political and security role, and its support is instrumental in providing the space in which the peace process can unfold."³⁰

In resolution 2351, the Security Council asked the UN Secretary General to draw up a long-term road map that would lead to a possible exit strategy for MINUSMA and present this plan by the end of March 2021.

Over 200 fatalities

MINUSMA has been described as "one of the most dangerous peacekeeping missions in Africa".³¹

The mission has one of the highest fatality rates of the 13 UN peacekeeping missions currently operating around the world: 219 peacekeepers have died while serving in MINUSMA.³² Peacekeepers have been repeatedly targeted by armed groups. There were 48 attacks against the mission in the year up to 2 June 2020.³³ 3 peacekeepers [were killed by IEDs](#) in Kidal region on 10 May. A further two were [killed in an attack](#) on a logistics convoy near Gao on 14 June.

An unwelcome presence?

It is not just armed groups that oppose the UN's presence. Malians have held [signs at rallies](#) explicitly calling for MINUSMA (and French) forces to leave their country. The UN Secretary General explains:

Amid increasing frustration felt by the local population regarding the deteriorating security situation, radical elements and self-defence groups are believed to have mobilized groups, in particular youth groups, against the presence of international forces, including MINUSMA.³⁴

Resources

The Secretary General's quarterly reports on the mission and the situation in Mali can be found on the [Minusma website](#). Information on personnel, budget and contributing nations can be found in a [mission fact sheet](#).

²⁹ A list of [all relevant resolutions](#) is available on the MINUSMA website.

³⁰ "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)" SC/2019/983, United Nations, 30 December 2019

³¹ Dr Comford Ero, "[The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa – oral evidence](#)", Lords International Affairs and Defence Committee, 4 March 2020

³² [UN peacekeepers fatalities of current peacekeeping missions](#) as of 30 June 2020, accessed 8 September 2020. Only three peacekeeping missions have a higher fatality rate and the two still in operation have both been in existence for longer than MINUSMA. They are: UNIFIL in Lebanon and UNAMID in Sudan.

³³ "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)", SC/2020/476, United Nations, 2 June 2020, para 22

³⁴ "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)" SC/2019/983, United Nations, 30 December 2019

2. Role of regional and international actors

Summary

The wider ramifications of insecurity in Mali drives much of the regional and international interest in Mali. Regionally, the growth of Islamist groups linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State across the Sahel has caused widespread concern. The Sahel countries have come together as a Group of Five to coordinate development and security policies, and have formed a joint force to improve security along their shared borders (and in particular the tri-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger). International support for the Sahel is directed through the Sahel Alliance and the Coalition for the Sahel.

France, Mali's former colonial power, has had a counterterrorism military force in Mali since 2013, which now numbers 5,000 strong, and continues to lead European diplomatic efforts. However, Malians openly question France's motives and have frequently expressed their opposition to the international military presence, including the UN peace keeping mission, and the involvement of ECOWAS.

So far, coup leaders have signalled their continued support for the international military presence.

2.1 ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States been actively involved in Mali, and the wider Sahel, for some time.

Recognising the seriousness of the unrest in early summer, ECOWAS sent new envoy Goodluck Jonathan, a former President of Nigeria, followed swiftly by a joint delegation of the leaders of five countries (Nigeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Niger and Ghana) to Bamako in July.

Response to the coup

ECOWAS countries closed their borders with Mali, suspended financial flows and suspended Mali from its internal decision-making bodies. At a heads of summit meeting on 7 September, ECOWAS reaffirmed its position that the constitutional order in Mali should be quickly restored, with a political transition led by a civilian President and Prime Minister for twelve months.³⁵ ECOWAS envoy Goodluck Jonathan [held talks](#) in Bamako on 24 September with the proposed transitional leadership.

The UN Security Council has [endorsed](#) ECOWAS's mediation efforts and called for a return to constitutional order.

³⁵ [Final communique of the 57th ordinary session of the Heads of State](#), ECOWAS, 7 September 2020

2.2 France

Mali is a former French colony and France has a large Malian diaspora.

France has invested heavily militarily and diplomatically in Mali. The French Government explains:

France is engaged in the Sahel, to stop the area becoming a long-term hotbed of instability for terrorist groups and of various forms of trafficking in drugs, weapons or people, or migrant smuggling, for example, which could also threaten its own security.³⁶

France has taken an active diplomatic lead: sponsoring the UN Security Council resolution that created the G5 Sahel Joint Force, prioritising Mali during its presidencies of the UN Security Council, supporting EU civilian and military training missions, and hosting a summit in Pau in January 2020 to launch the International Coalition for the Sahel. French President Emmanuel Macron says he wants to strengthen national capacities “so that the states themselves can take charge of their own security”.³⁷

Militarily, France’s urgent operation to help push back Islamist and rebel forces in the north of the country in 2013 has evolved into a large, counterterrorist force numbering over 5,000 personnel. Paris is also spearheading a new multinational special forces counterterrorism force, focusing on the tri-border area. This military presence has come at some cost. 45 French soldiers have died while serving in the region.³⁸

However, Malians are distrustful of the French military presence and question France’s motives. One Dogon³⁹ leader interviewed by Al-Jazeera, Mamadou Togo, suggested France “wants to re-colonise again this country because of the wealth underground”. Mahmoud Dicko, an influential Imam, has expressed distrust towards “other invisible, obscure forces” intent on creating discord between ethnic groups.⁴⁰ Pape Samba Kane, a Senegalese journalist, suggests France is “deliberately creating the conditions” for Mali’s disintegration, for example by allowing the CMA to consolidate its control of Kidal in the north of the country.⁴¹ Long-time Mali watcher, Bruce Whitehouse, observes this “not some fringe conspiracy theory” but a long-standing view, French magazine Libération has documented anti-French sentiment.⁴²

France, in turn, has shown some frustration at the lack of public support in Mali for the French military effort. Ahead of hosting a G5 Sahel group

³⁶ [“France’s actions in the Sahel”](#), French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, April 2020

³⁷ [“G5 Joint Sahel Force”](#), Permanent mission of France to the United Nations, accessed 16 March 2020

³⁸ [“French soldiers killed in Mali armoured vehicle attack”](#) DW, 5 September 2020. [“Why France is focused on fighting jihadists in Mali”](#), BBC News, 27 November 2019

³⁹ Dogons are traditionally farmers and hunters.

⁴⁰ [“Mali in crisis”](#), Al-Jazeera, 24 August 2019

⁴¹ [“The French colonial designs on Mali”](#), Al Jazeera, 22 August 2019

⁴² [“Mali’s existential threat: Jihadism, or the French?”](#), Bridges from Bamako, 15 November 2019; [“In Mali, the rejection of neocolonialism”](#), Liberation, 19 December 2019

summit in Pau in January 2020, President Macron called for "clear political condemnation of anti-French feelings" saying: "I see opposition movements, groups, who denounce the French presence as a neo-colonial, imperialist". He warned France would not send its soldiers to countries where their presence was not "clearly wanted".⁴³

Response to the coup

Paris was quick to [condemn](#) the coup. Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French Foreign Minister, urged "all political and social forces to engage in dialogue in order to find a solution to the deep crisis in the country and calls for an immediate return to civilian rule".⁴⁴

Box 2: France's military presence in Mali

Operation Serval

At the request of the Mali's Government, France launched operation Serval in early 2013 to push back Islamist and rebel movements in northern Mali. The UK provided [logistical and tactical support](#) to that intervention.⁴⁵ Serval was replaced by operation Barkhane in August 2014.

Operation Barkhane

Barkhane is more focused on counterterrorism and supporting the forces of the G5 Sahel group across the Sahel. In February 2020 France announced an additional 600 troops, bringing the total number to 5,100. Over forty French troops have been [killed in Mali](#), including 13 French troops who were killed in a helicopter collision in northern Mali on 25 November 2019. The IISS describes it as "France's most important external military operation".⁴⁶ Since 2018 the UK has provided three Chinook helicopters for non-combat assistance to Barkhane.⁴⁷ The MOD says the UK deployment with MINUSMA in 2020 is [separate to the French mission](#).

Takuba Taskforce

France will lead a new special forces taskforce to work with regional armies to counter armed groups across the Sahel. This will complement Operation Barkhane and the regional G5 Sahel Joint Force. It will operate in the Liptako region, the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. It is expected to have an initial capability by summer 2020 and fully operational by early 2021.

Thirteen European countries, including the UK, were involved in initial discussions with the French.⁴⁸ Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, and Portugal have all committed troops while the Czech and Swedish governments are awaiting parliamentary approval. The taskforce will reportedly work under the command of Operation Barkhane but with a high level of autonomy.⁴⁹

⁴³ "[Macron meets with African leaders to boost fight against jihadists in Sahel](#)", France 24, 13 January 2020

⁴⁴ [Statement on Mali](#), French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, 20 August 2020

⁴⁵ At its peak in late January 2013 the UK had approximately 200 military personnel supporting a C17 military air transport aircraft a Sentinel airborne ground surveillance aircraft and in reconnaissance and liaison roles. [HC Deb 18 November c700W](#)

⁴⁶ "The Military Balance 2020", The International Institute for Strategic Studies, chapter

⁴⁷ [HL2087](#), 10 March 2020

⁴⁸ "[France and allies establish new task force in Sahel](#)", Al Jazeera, 28 March 2020

⁴⁹ "European task force Takuba to be deployed to the Sahel this summer", Jane's Defence Weekly, 2 April 2020

2.3 Sahel countries

In 2014 five Sahel countries - Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – formed the Group of Five for the Sahel ([G5 Sahel](#)) “whose main objective is coordination of development and security policies and strategies for the benefit of their populations”. It was founded in Noukchott, Mauritania, where it has a permanent secretariat. The G5 has drawn up a Priority Investment Programme (PIP) with a list of regional projects to support development, infrastructure, governance and access to resources.

International support for the Sahel is directed through the Sahel Alliance, created in 2017 to foster cooperation between the G5 countries and major development partners, and more recently via the Coalition for the Sahel.

G5 Sahel Joint Force

In 2017 the G5 formed a 5,000 strong effort called the G5 Sahel Joint Force. This was supported first by the African Union and then by the UN Security Council in Resolutions 2359 (2017) and 2391 (2017). The G5 Sahel Joint Force draws together military, police and border security personnel from the five member states. Their focus is countering terrorism, organised crime and human trafficking along border areas. A donor conference for the G5 Sahel Joint Force was held in Brussels in February 2018.

The G5 Joint Force is intended to complement MINUSMA, with the latter providing logistical and operational support when required.⁵⁰

The UN Secretary General provides reports on the Joint Force to the Security Council every six months (as required by UNSCR 2391).

Sahel Alliance

The Sahel Alliance was created in 2017 to foster cooperation between major development partners and the G5 countries. France, the UK and the EU are members of the Alliance. The French Government says the Alliance is a “mechanism for improving the coordination of partners” rather than a new structure. It has six key priorities: youth employability, education and training; agriculture, rural development and food security; energy and climate; governance; decentralization and support for rolling out basic services; and internal security.⁵¹

The International Coalition for the Sahel

At the January 2020 Pau summit, the G5 countries, together with the UN Secretary-General, EU representatives, the African Union and the Secretary General of La Francophonie agreed to establish a Coalition for the Sahel. It is not a decision-making body, as such, rather a way to

The G5 Sahel countries are:

Burkina Faso
Chad
Mali
Mauritania
Niger

⁵⁰ “[Security Council Outlines Modes of Support, Reimbursement for Joint Anti-Terrorism Force in Sahel, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2391 \(2017\)](#)”, UN, 8 December 2017

⁵¹ “[G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Sahel Alliance](#)”, French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, February 2019

“facilitate coordination and interaction between the various dimensions of international action to support the G5 countries”.⁵²

The Coalition will focus on counterterrorism, strengthening military capabilities of states in the region, development assistance and returning administrative and public services across the territories.⁵³

Tri-border area

The tri-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has become a focus of counter-terrorism operations. France has set up a multinational special forces counter-terrorism taskforce, while the G5 Joint Force conducted its first operation in the Liptako-Gourma region in March 2020.

2.4 European Union

The EU describes the Sahel as a “strategic priority” and the European Council discusses the region at regular intervals. On 20 January 2020 the EU Foreign Affairs Council (attended by the UK) discussed the Sahel. The Council noted the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation and expressed support for renewing and scaling up the existing [Sahel Strategy](#) (agreed in 2011).⁵⁴

The European Council and G5 leaders held a joint conference on [28 April 2020](#). Reaffirming their joint commitment to the security, stability and development of the Sahel, they also warned ongoing insecurity in the Sahel could begin to destabilise other parts of Africa, particularly the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea.

The EU has two CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy) missions in Mali:

- [EUCAP Sahel Mali](#): Since 2014, it has provided strategic advice and training to Malian police, gendarmerie and national guard. The [mandate](#) currently runs until May 2021
- [EUTM Mali](#): Since 2013, it has provided training to the Malian Armed Forces.

Response to the coup

The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borell, condemned the coup and supported the mediation efforts of ECOWAS.⁵⁵ Both CSDP missions were put on hold following the August 2020 coup although Mr Borell has said the EU wants to resume them as soon as possible, saying “the European Union has invested a lot in Mali and we do not want to waste this effort”.⁵⁶

⁵² “[International Coalition for the Sahel](#)”, French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 13 January 2020

⁵³ “[G5 Sahel – Pau Summit – Statement by the Heads of State \(13 Jan. 2020\)](#)”, France Diplomatie, 13 January 2020

⁵⁴ “[Foreign Affairs Council: 20 January 2020](#)”, European Council, 20 January 2020

⁵⁵ “[Mali: Statement by High Representative / Vice-President Josep Borrell on the ongoing coup attempt](#)”, European Union, 18 August 2020

⁵⁶ “[Informal meeting of EU Defence Ministers: Remarks by the High Representative](#)”, European Union, 26 August 2020

Further analysis of the EU approach can be found in a European Parliamentary research service report "[The G5 Sahel and the European Union](#)" (September 2020).

Other responses

The **Trump administration** condemned what it described as a mutiny. The word was carefully chosen because legislation restricts US foreign assistance following a coup d'état.⁵⁷

The **African Union** suspended Mali following the coup, saying it rejected any attempt at the constitutional change of government.

⁵⁷ "[Coup-related restrictions in US Foreign Aid appropriations](#)", Congressional Research Service, 20 August 2020. Further information on US relations with Mali can be found in "[Conflict in Mali](#)", CRS, 17 January 2020

3. Political and security overview

Summary

Mali's political future remains unclear after the military forcibly removed the elected President from office in August 2020. The UK is among a number of regional and European countries who have condemned the coup and are calling for a quick transition to civilian rule.

The current crisis in Mali has its roots in the events of 2012, when northern separatists and Islamist armed groups forced government forces out of northern Mali and the military overthrew the government. Fresh elections in 2013 and a peace accord between the government and two northern armed movements brought hope of stability. However, progress in implementing the peace agreement has been patchy, and growing frustration with the Presidency of Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta since his re-election in 2018 resulted in calls for his resignation in June and his eventual removal from power in summer 2020.

The security situation remains precarious with a myriad of armed groups, ranging from community self-defence forces to northern separatists to Islamists. Long-standing tensions between herder and farmer communities have become deadly, with retaliatory attacks resulting in massacres of civilians and the destruction of villages and grain supplies. Communities have formed self-defence forces, adding to the multiplicity of active armed groups.

Beyond the rise of Islamist and other armed groups, there are also concerns about the impact of climate change, developmental challenges and a worsening humanitarian crisis.

3.1 Political background

In March 2012 the military overthrew the government of Amadou Toumani Touré in Mali. Within weeks of the coup, a coalition of northern separatist Tuareg rebels and militant Islamist armed groups with links to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) pushed the national army out of the north of the country. The coalition split up quickly, leaving the militant Islamists largely in control.

Political negotiations began to try and draw parts of the rebel coalition into a political process. However, in January 2013, a sudden military push southward by rebels appeared to open-up the possibility that the entire country might fall to them in the near future. This provoked an urgent French military intervention (Operation Serval) to stop the rebel advance and, indeed, roll it back. This was achieved.

However, the rebels regrouped and turned to insurgency. With the heavy involvement of the international community, a ceasefire agreement with the main Tuareg nationalist group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was achieved in June 2013 and a presidential election was held in August, resulting in a

victory for [Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta](#).⁵⁸ In July 2013, the UN Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) began operating on the ground.

A comprehensive peace agreement (the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, or the [Algiers Accord](#)) was signed in June 2015. The signatories were the Malian Government and two coalitions of armed groups: the Coordination of Azawad Movements (former Tuareg separatists) and the Platform of armed groups (the Platform, a pro-government alliance of militias in northern Mali).⁵⁹

The Carter Centre, an independent observer of the implementation of the agreement, said in its assessment of 2019:

At the close of 2019, the implementation of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali is at its lowest point since the Independent Observer began its mandate in January 2018.⁶⁰

National dialogue and elections

A national dialogue was opened in October 2019 but rifts within the various alliances and divisions over objectives and timeframes has stalled progress. The UN Secretary General expressed concern about the continued delays in the implementation of the agreement in his 30 December 2019 report.⁶¹

Two rounds of legislative elections were held on 29 March and 19 April 2020 despite concerns about insecurity and the coronavirus. The elections had been repeatedly postponed from October 2018.⁶²

Acts of intimidation and allegations of vote buying were reported.⁶³ The leader of the main opposition party, Soumaila Cissé, was kidnapped while campaigning in late March and his bodyguard killed. Al Jazeera reported "despite a years-long conflict raging in the country, Cisse's abduction was the first of a politician of his rank".⁶⁴ The UN Security Council on 8 April [called for his Cissé's release](#). ECOWAS [repeated that demand](#) in July. At the time of writing he remains missing.

June 2020 protests

Mass rallies and protests began in June after the Constitutional Court threw out 31 results from the April parliamentary elections. The court's ruling benefited President Kéïta's party.

Major demonstrations were held on 5 June, giving name to the coalition of opposition political parties, religions leaders and civil society

"The implementation of the Peace Agreement remains the only viable path to address the complex crisis in Mali"
UN Secretary General
30 December 2019

⁵⁸ "[Mali President Keita wins landslide election; faces uphill struggle](#)", Reuters, 16 August 2018

⁵⁹ A more detailed account of the 2012/13 crisis can be found in Commons Library paper CBP7614, [Mali: June 2016 update](#), 8 June 2016 and an explanation of the different groups and actors in Paul Melly, "[Why France is focused on fighting jihadists in Mali](#)", BBC News, 27 November 2019

⁶⁰ "[Report of the Independent Observer](#)", Carter Center, January 2020

⁶¹ "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)" SC/2019/983, United Nations, 30 December 2019

⁶² "[Mali: adoption of a bill extending the mandate of deputies until 2020](#)", JeunAfrique, 8 June 2019

⁶³ "[Mali election runoff tarnished by intimidation and allegations of vote rigging](#)", France 24, 20 March 2020

⁶⁴ "[Mali: abducted Soumaila Cisse 'doing well', release talks on](#)", Al Jazeera, 3 April 2020

organisations: the June 5 – Rally of Patriotic Forces Movement (shortened to M5-RFP to reflect its French name Mouvement du 5 juin Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques).⁶⁵ At least 11 people were killed at protests held in over the weekend of 10 to 12 July, during which government buildings were also attacked. Protestors called for President Kéïta to resign.

Although the immediate prompt was the court ruling, opposition to Kéïta has been building for some time. Paul Melly, the BBC's West Africa analyst, explains why:

Corruption and cronyism, weak public services and national leadership, electoral malpractice and the government's inability to bring an end to inter-communal and jihadist violence have fuelled popular frustration.⁶⁶

Mahmoud Dicko, an Imam, has been a leading voice for those demanding Kéïta's resignation. He previously organised rallies in 2019 that led to the sacking of the then Prime Minister.

Regional attempts to resolve tension

ECOWAS appointed former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan to act as its envoy in July to try to resolve the political crisis. His efforts were supported in person by a joint delegation of the leaders of five ECOWAS nations (Nigeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Niger and Ghana). However, their intervention failed to resolve the crisis, and Mali's opposition rejected Jonathan's [proposals](#) for failing to demand Kéïta's resignation.

Nonetheless, ECOWAS endorsed Jonathan's recommendations at an extraordinary summit on Mali held on 27 July. ECOWAS called for:

- The immediate resignation of the 31 deputies whose election is contested and hold by-elections
- A rapid reconstitution of the Constitutional Court
- Formation of a government of national unity with the participation of the opposition and civil society
- A commission of inquiry to determine responsibility for the deaths during protests over the weekend of 10 to 12 July.⁶⁷

M5-RFP rejected the proposals:

The M5-RFP states with regret that the conclusions of the Heads of State Summit do not take into account the depth and gravity of the socio-political crisis that has Mali's future hanging in the balance.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ "[Mali: Security forces use excessive force at protests](#)", Human Rights Watch, 12 August 2020

⁶⁶ "[Mahmoud Dicko: Mali imam challenges President Keita](#)", BBC News, 27 June 2020

⁶⁷ [Statement by President Issoufou Mahamadou](#), President of ECOWAS, 27 July 2020

⁶⁸ "[Mali's opposition once more rejects ECOWAS crisis resolution plan](#)", RFI, 28 July 2020

3.2 August 2020 coup

Events came to a head on 18 August when soldiers detained and then forced the resignation of President Kéïta.⁶⁹ The removal of the President was largely welcomed by Malians.⁷⁰ A Malian polling institute found 88 percent had a favourable view of the coup leaders and supported Kéïta's resignation.⁷¹ See section 4 for post-coup developments.

3.3 A deteriorating security situation

The UN Secretary General has described the deterioration of the security situation in Mali and the wider Sahel region as "alarming". He notes terrorists are gaining ground while attacks against national and international security forces "continue unabated".⁷²

In his December 2019 report, the Secretary General said that the security situation in northern and central Mali became more volatile and complex in the latter half of 2019. Over 200 civilians were killed between October and December 2019 with 85 percent of those attacks against civilians in the Mopti region. In the first three months of 2020, 247 civilians were killed and more than 60 percent of attacks against civilians also took place in the Mopti region.⁷³

Communal violence

Intracommunal clashes, including between Arab and Taureg communities and Fulani groups, and an expansion of extremist groups are also sources of violence in the north.

There have been repeated clashes in central Mali over resources including land, grazing rights and water between the Fulani, a largely Muslim ethnic group of semi-nomadic herders and the Dogon, another Muslim ethnic group.⁷⁴

There have been some particularly devastating attacks on civilians. In March 2019 over 170 Fulani, including 85 children, were killed in the village of Ogossagou by Dogon militiamen. The Prime Minister and the entire Government resigned in the aftermath.⁷⁵ In June the killing of more than 35 Dogon civilians, mostly children, drew widespread condemnation.⁷⁶ The BBC's West Africa correspondent discussed "[what is behind Mali's massacres](#)" in a June 2019 video report.

"The UK is deeply concerned about the deteriorating security situation across the Sahel, including in Mali", [HL7169](#), 22 July 2020

⁶⁹ "[Soldiers seize Mali President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita](#)", BBC News, 18 August 2020

⁷⁰ "[Mali coup: thousands take to Bamako streets to celebrate](#)", BBC News, 21 August 2020

⁷¹ "[After military coup, uncertainty hangs over Mali's future](#)", The World, 1 September 2020

⁷² "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)" SC/2019/983, United Nations, 30 December 2019

⁷³ "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)", SC/2020/223, United Nations, 20 March 2020

⁷⁴ "[Why France is focused on fighting jihadists in Mali](#)", BBC News, 27 November 2019

⁷⁵ "[Mali's PM Maiga, government resign over Ogossagou massacre](#)", Al-Jazeera, 19 April 2019; "[Mali appoints new PM days after government resigns](#)", Al-Jazeera, 22 April 2019

⁷⁶ "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary General](#)", SC/2019/782, United Nations, 1 October 2019; "[Scores killed in 'barbaric' attack on Mali village, UN chief urges restraint, calls for 'dialogue' to resolve tensions](#)", UN News, 10 June 2019

Self-defence militias have become more active in response to the proliferation of terrorist groups and the absence of state authority. The UN Secretary General reports “increasingly, the groups have challenged and mobilized the local population against the presence of international forces, including MINUSMA, whom they perceive as competitors”.⁷⁷

Islamist groups

The presence of Islamist groups in Mali and the wider Sahel prompted the French intervention in 2013. The main ones are the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), affiliated to IS, and [Jama’ a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin](#) (JNIM) (also known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, GSIM), led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, which has a number of affiliates including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Clashes between ISGS and JNIM “added a new layer of complexity to the security situation in northern and central Mali” and most of the terror attacks in northern Mali in the first quarter of 2020 were attributed to or claimed by either JNIM or ISGS.⁷⁸

Malian security forces

Malian security forces are increasingly being targeted. 193 soldiers were killed and 126 injured in a series of attacks between October and December 2019.⁷⁹ 25 soldiers were killed in an attack on a military base in early April 2020.⁸⁰ Malian security forces have also been accused of human rights violations.⁸¹

The EU has supported a [training mission](#) for the Malian armed forces since 2013. Its purpose is to support the restoration of state control and the rule of law throughout Mali, and the implementation of the Peace Agreement and to improve the capabilities of the Malian armed forces under the control of the political authorities. Collectively, 28 European countries contribute almost 700 soldiers.

Understanding the different groups

A BBC News report from January 2020 provides [graphs of the security and humanitarian situation](#) across the Sahel, drawing on data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). Hilary Matfess from ACLED has compiled analysis of violence, by group and violent type, from 2012 to mid-2019.⁸² The European Council on Foreign Relations also produced a map and guide to the various Jihadist, non-Jihadist and foreign actors in Mali in May 2019: [Mapping armed groups in Mali and the Sahel](#).

⁷⁷ “[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)” SC/2019/983, United Nations, 30 December 2019

⁷⁸ “[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)”, SC/2020/223, United Nations, 20 March 2020.

⁷⁹ “[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)” SC/2019/983, United Nations, 30 December 2019

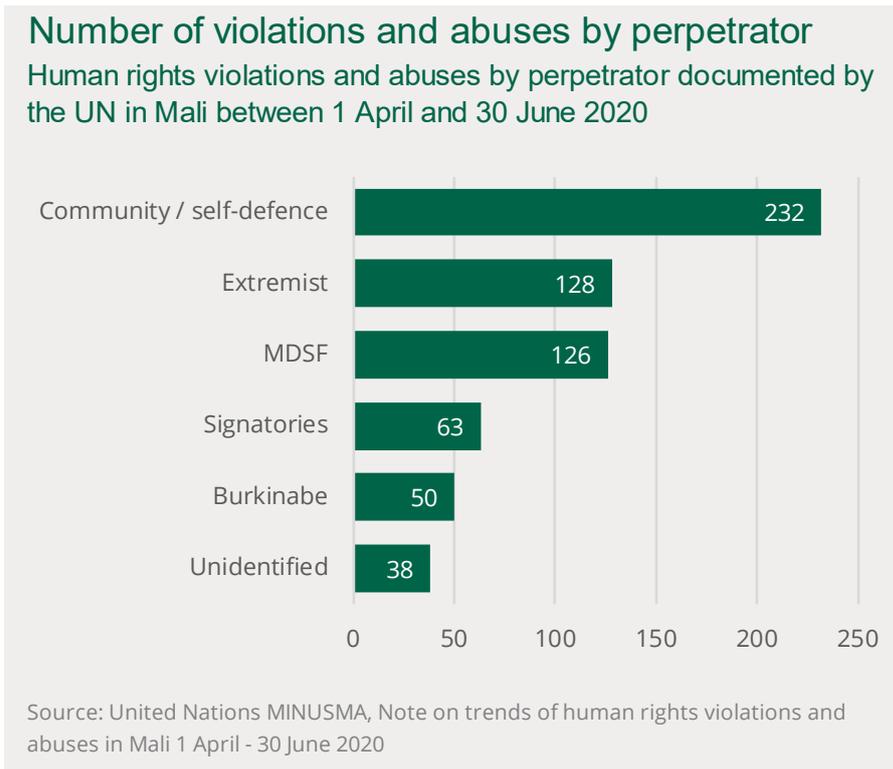
⁸⁰ “[Mali gunmen kill 25 soldiers killed in suspected Jihadist attack](#)”, France 24, 7 April 2020

⁸¹ “[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)”, SC/2020/223, United Nations, 20 March 2020

⁸² “[Democracy delayed: parliamentary elections and insecurity in Mali](#)”, ACLED, 6 June 2019

3.4 Human rights violations

MINUSMA is tasked with monitoring human rights violations and abuses in Mali (by Security Council Resolution 2480). MINUSMA have recorded human rights violations by community-based and other armed self-defence groups; extremist groups such as AQIM and JNIM; Malian Defence and Security Forces, the signatory armed groups (a reference to the groups who signed the 2015 Algiers Accord); and Burkina Faso forces (Burkinabe forces):⁸³



During the period 1 April to 30 June 2020, MINUSMA notes:⁸⁴

- Islamist groups such as Islamic State and JNIM regularly targeted civilians, Malian security forces, MINUSMA and each other. Schools and health centres have been targeted and in certain areas women have been forced to wear the veil.
- JNIM have increasingly attacked police stations in the south.
- Malian Defence and Security forces carried out extrajudicial executions and enforced or involuntary disappearances, which MINUSMA described as sometimes akin to reprisal operations against the civilian population. MINUSMA expressed particular concern about operations conducted with Dozo hunters (traditional hunters) in which civilians were burnt to death when their homes were intentionally set on fire.
- Communal violence between Fulani and Dogon militias and self-defence groups continues in the Mopti region. There was an

⁸³ The report states that MINUSMA sent a communication to the Government of Burkina Faso concerning the allegations of summary executions involving Burkinabe troops on Malian territory as part of military and counterterrorism operations

⁸⁴ ["Note on trends of human rights violations and abuses in Mali 1 April – 30 June 2020"](#), UN MINUSMA, August 2020

increase in attacks by Fulani militia and self-defence groups against the Dogon community. Altogether MINUSMA documented 172 deaths in 63 armed attacks. 145 of those killed were members of the Dogon community, and MINUSMA reports that during these attacks, militias intentionally executed civilians, set fire to dwellings, granaries and food storage sheds, and looted property. Dozos⁸⁵ were responsible for killing 27 members of the Fulani community, including one attack on a village in which 18 civilians were killed.

- The forces of Burkina Faso Defence and Security Forces are also accused of carrying out human rights violations, including 50 arbitrary executions around the village of Boulkessi between 26 to 28 May.
- Attacks against humanitarian organisations have increased, with at least 1,000 attacks against humanitarian NGOs documented.

MINUSMA says the Malian Government's response to human rights abuses and violations remains largely inefficient. It notes the judicial system is minimally functional in certain regions of the centre and north, compounded by the absence of the state in some localities (it particularly highlights how the CMA, one of the signatories to the 2015 Algiers Accord, "has been gradually substituting the state as a *de facto* authority" in the Kidal region).

MINUSMA does however note that UN Security Council [resolution 2531](#) (29 June 2020) explicitly urges the Malian authorities to "bring to justice the individuals accused of perpetrating massacres of hundreds of civilians" in 2019 and 2020.

Human rights bodies have similarly chronicled violations.

[Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW) said that Mali's human rights situation deteriorated in 2019. In a report on the situation in central Mali, HRW said armed groups have "escalated their attacks on civilians, massacring people in their villages and executing men...based on their ethnicity". They report villagers being burned alive. HRW states 2019 "was the deadliest for civilians since the advent of Mali's 2012 political and military crisis".⁸⁶

A Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission was set up after the 2015 Peace Agreement to examine human rights violations committed in Mali between 1960 and 2019. The first public hearing was held in December 2019 and it has a mandate to run until 2021.⁸⁷

3.5 Humanitarian and development issues

The humanitarian situation is "extremely fragile and complex".⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Dozos are a hunters linked to the Dogon ethnic group. "Mali: dozens of civilians killed as farmers and herders clash over land", France 24, 25 June 2018

⁸⁶ "[Mali: militias, armed Islamists ravage central Mali](#)", Human Rights Watch, 10 February 2020

⁸⁷ "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)" SC/2019/983, United Nations, 30 December 2019

⁸⁸ "[UNICEF Mali Humanitarian situation report no. 1](#)", January 2020, UNICEF, 12 March 2020

The UN estimates about 12.9 million are affected by the crisis in Mali, with 6.8 million in need of humanitarian assistance.⁸⁹ There are over [quarter of million](#) internally displaced persons and Mali hosts nearly 30,000 refugees from Burkina Faso and Niger. Insecurity in neighbouring Burkina Faso is forcing Malian refugees to return home.⁹⁰ Humanitarian access remains a challenge in certain areas because of insecurity.

There have been 126 deaths and 2,773 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Mali, as of 30 August 2020.⁹¹

Developmental issues

Mali faces a myriad of challenges. Lyse Doucet, the BBC's chief international correspondent, on a visit to northern Mali said: "every story we heard in northern Mali was a tale of multiple threats, all terribly tangled".⁹²

Climate change is one major challenge. The UN has warned that urgent attention is needed to mitigate the effects of climate change in the Sahel, where temperature increases are projected to be 1.5 times higher than the global average.⁹³ Droughts and floods can devastate crops and livestock herds creating tension between farmers and nomadic herders from different ethnic groups, who must then compete for shrinking resources.⁹⁴ Crisis Group in a report on climate change in the Sahel, suggests land management and regulation is also an issue:

Local conflicts affecting central Mali are less the result of dwindling resources – in reality, resource production has increased overall in central Mali – than of increasing tensions surrounding land use.⁹⁵

Lack of governance is another issue. As part of the peace agreement, the Government is in the process of transferring state services to local authorities but such efforts are hampered by insecurity: local mayors have been targeted and only 23 percent of civil administrators were at their duty stations in northern Mali in the latter half of 2019.⁹⁶

Mali ranks 184 out of 188 countries on the United Nations [Human Development Index](#). 78 percent of the population are living in poverty. It also has a very young population: the median age of its 19 million population is 16.3 years. Mali's young lack access to education⁹⁷

⁸⁹ "[Mali: Revision of the Humanitarian Response Plan January - December 2020 \(July 2020\)](#)", UN OCHA, 20 August 2020

⁹⁰ "[Violence in Burkina Faso forces Malian refugees to return home](#)", UNHCR, 13 March 2020

⁹¹ "[Mali: covid-19 – situation report #11](#)", UN OCHA, 2 September 2020

⁹² "[The battle on the frontline of climate change in Mali](#)", BBC News, 22 January 2019

⁹³ "[Building climate resilience and peace, go hand in hand for Africa's Sahel – UN forum](#)", UN, 13 November 2018

⁹⁴ "[The battle on the frontline of climate change in Mali](#)", BBC News, 22 January 2019

⁹⁵ "[The Central Sahel: Scene of new climate wars?](#)", International Crisis Group, 24 April 2020. Crisis Group examines the changes in agro-pastoral systems and levels of violence in Central Mali in the report.

⁹⁶ "[Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#)" SC/2019/983, United Nations, 30 December 2019

⁹⁷ [UN Human Development Report 2019: Mali](#), UN Development Programme, accessed 16 March 2020

4. Commentary: future outlook

Summary

At the time of writing Mali's political future remains uncertain. The weeks immediately following the coup were taken up with talks over a transitional government. A civilian president, Bah Ndaw, was named by the military junta on 21 September, with the junta's leader, Colonel Assimi Goïta, named as vice-president. Goodluck Jonathan said he is optimistic the inauguration of Ndaw and Goïta on 25 September "[will signal the beginning of the return to normalcy in Mali](#)".

And as the UK takes a more active interest in Mali, there are clear concerns about the multitude of regional and international actors in Mali and the Sahel.

4.1 What next: a transitional government?

While broadly in agreement that a transitional government is needed to pave the way for fresh elections, the military leadership – the National Committee Salvation of the People (CNSP), led by Colonel Assimi Goïta – and opposition forces, including the M5-RFP coalition, have been divided over the duration and leadership of it. ECOWAS has also been heavily involved, imposing economic sanctions, laying deadlines for the formation of a transition and hosting talks.

On 21 September the CNSP announced it had selected former defence minister Bah Ndaw to lead a transitional government. However, it is the vice-president who is likely to be the more significant figure: Colonel Assimi Goïta.

That the transition should be led by a civilian rather than a soldier was a key demand of ECOWAS and Malians. In a poll taken after the coup, Malians expressed a preference for a mixed military/civilian transition, with only a quarter in favour of a military transition.⁹⁸

A national consultation was held on 10-12 September to agree a way forward. However, one signatory group to the peace accord, the CMA, did not attend, and M5-RFP rejected the [CNSP's proposal](#) (for an 18 month transition led by a president, to be chosen by a college set up by the CNSP, and a vice president with the power to succeed the president). The M5-RFP said:

The final document read at the closing ceremony was not consistent with the deliberations of the various groups, including the majority choice of a transition led by a civilian.⁹⁹

ECOWAS has remained involved throughout, including hosting Goïta in Ghana for talks on 15 September.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ "[After military coup, uncertainty hangs over Mali's future](#)", The World, 1 September 2020

⁹⁹ "[Mali opposition rejects junta proposal on transition period](#)", France 24, 13 September 2020

¹⁰⁰ "[West African leaders press Mali's junta over transition to civilian rule](#)", France 24, 15 September 2020

On 21 September Goïta announced that he would serve as vice-president in a transition led by Bah Ndaw, who briefly served as Defence Minister.¹⁰¹ Goïta also announced the inauguration would take place on Friday 25 September. ECOWAS envoy Goodluck Jonathan indicated happiness with the direction of travel during a visit to Bamako on 23 September.¹⁰² During the visit, Jonathan said he is optimistic the inauguration of Ndaw and Goïta on 25 September "[will signal the beginning of the return to normalcy in Mali](#)".

However, Alex Thurston of the Sahel Blog, has pointed out several conditions, highlighted by a Malian news site, remain unmet. These include naming a civilian prime minister, dissolving the CNSP and modifying the transition charter so the vice-president (Goïta) doesn't replace the President if he resigns. Thurston suggests the delay in choosing a Prime Minister may reflect the perception that it is this position that is the "real prize" ahead of expected elections in late 2021 or early 2022.¹⁰³ Malian newspapers are already speculating about the choice of prime minister and allocation of ministerial posts, with one suggesting it could be a stumbling block.¹⁰⁴

Some commentators, the immediate aftermath of the coup, had warned against rushing to quickly on the transition.

Ibrahim Maïga, a Sahel specialist at the Institute for Security Studies, says the transition should resist calls for urgent actions and address the root causes of the crisis rather than just the consequences. He suggests the transition should focus on developing a new constitution, overhauling the electoral system and reforming of the security sector. Doing so, Maïga argues, will lay the foundations for the overhaul of Mali.¹⁰⁵

Gregory Mann, a historian of West Africa, similarly argues in favour of addressing deep-rooted problems. He argues the rapid restoration of civilian rule after the 2012 coup "privileged a quick repair of the Malian state over a longer-term restoration".¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ "[Bah Ndaw named Mali's interim president, colonel named VP](#)", Al Jazeera, 21 September 2020

¹⁰² "[West African bloc may lift Mali sanctions soon, says envoy](#)", Reuters, 23 September 2020

¹⁰³ "[Mali: an ambiguous week in Bamako politics](#)", Sahel Blog, 23 September 2020

¹⁰⁴ "[Africa press review: in the spotlight: will ECOWAS lift its sanctions against Mali?](#)", RFI, 24 September 2020

¹⁰⁵ "[Ibrahim Maïga: 'The problem of Mali goes beyond IBK'](#)" L'Essor, 25 August 2020

¹⁰⁶ Gregory Mann, "[After the coup, Mali needs a change of direction, not just a change of leadership](#)", Jacobin mag, 25 August 2020

4.2 Too many actors?

The multitude of regional and international actors in Mali and the Sahel has prompted some concerns about the UK deployment.

The Oxford Research group suggests the Sahel is not an easy region for the UK to provide added value, saying:

The reality is that the Sahel is already a complicated space of disparate efforts by international and regional contributors, many of which are facing serious difficulties¹⁰⁷

Zoe Gorman, writing for SIPRI, has raised concerns that the objectives of international players can diverge at state and local levels and distract from longer term initiatives. She gives as an example a ban on motorbikes in the Mopti region of central Mali, aimed at curtailing militia activity, but which has impeded farmers from accessing remote lands and contributed to food insecurity.¹⁰⁸

Eloise Bertrand and Nic Cheeseman, at the Universities of Warwick and Birmingham respectively, worry that international actors have tended to focus more on security issues, particularly since the creation of the G5 Joint Force:

This tendency to overlook development and government issues... threats to undermine the prospects for political stability, and to fuel long-term regional insecurity.¹⁰⁹

Bertrand and Cheeseman's paper analyses the key actors in the Sahel, discussing their different priorities and levels of engagement which, they say, results in the G5's mission becoming entangled in a complex web of relationships.

Dr Comfort Ero, the Africa programme director for the Crisis Group, discussed Mali (pre-coup) in oral evidence with the Lords International Affairs and Defence Committee in March 2020. Dr Ero said the Sahel was top of the list of challenges in Africa this year, pointing out there has been little progress on the ground in Mali despite a peace agreement and the presence of French and UN forces. She said that Crisis Group was calling for a strategic shift in the "thinking and the posture of international commitments vis-à-vis the Sahel", warning against the increase in military diplomacy.¹¹⁰

Alex Thurston, author of a forthcoming book on the Sahel, has questioned France's approach to Mali. He argues that France should pull back on its counter-terrorism operations to give space to a dialogue between the Malian authorities and JNIM. Thurston suggests France

¹⁰⁷ "[Beyond aid: the UK's strategic engagement in Africa](#)" written evidence UKA0010, Foreign Affairs Committee, 22 October 2019

¹⁰⁸ "Pursuing elusive stability in the Sahel", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute", 26 March 2019

¹⁰⁹ "Understanding the G5: Governance, development and security in the Sahel", NATO Act, Open publications vol 3 no. 2, spring 2019

¹¹⁰ "[The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa – oral evidence](#)", Lords International Affairs and Defence Committee, 9 March 2020

lacks an exit strategy and that the handing of counter-terrorism responsibilities to Malian authorities remains a “distant prospect”.¹¹¹

Dr Jack Watling, of RUSI, argues Mali is testing the UN’s credibility. He suggests Mali should be a UN success story; it has unanimous Security Council support and there is strong regional cooperation. And yet it is “failing to deliver even the prospect of peace, prosperity or progress”. The UK has a vested interest in making Mali a success, given the UK’s status as a major contributor to the UN and advocate for the rules-based international system. And yet, Watling warns:

If the Malian state is unable to re-establish control over its northern territory, if the government remains weak and if the levels of violence appear undiminished, the campaign may see the UN and its methods haemorrhage credibility at a time when it is highly vulnerable.¹¹²

Box 3: Further reading

- [“How Mali’s coup affects the fight against Jihadists”](#), BBC News, 22 September 2020
- [“At 60 and with new rulers, Mali is once again at a crossroads”](#), Al-Jazeera, 22 September 2020
- [“The G5 Sahel and the European Union: The challenges of security cooperation with a regional grouping”](#), European Union Parliamentary research service, 15 September 2020
- Judd Devenport, [“The Malian military ousts a wayward government”](#), CSIS, 19 August 2020
- Jack Watling, [“The coup in Mali tests the UN’s credibility”](#), RUSI, 2 September 2020
- [The Central Sahel: Scene of new climate wars?](#), Crisis Group, 24 April 2020
- Alex Thurston, [“France should give Mali space to negotiate with Jihadists”](#), War on the Rocks, 16 April 2020
- Paul Melly, [“Why France is focused on fighting jihadists in Mali”](#), BBC News, 27 November 2019
- Eloise Bertrand and Nic Cheeseman, [“Understanding the G5: Governance, development and security in the Sahel”](#), NATO Act, Open publications vol 3 no. 2, spring 2019
- [“Speaking with the “bad guys”: toward dialogue with Central Mali’s Jihadists”](#), Crisis Group, 28 May 2019
- [“Pursuing elusive stability in the Sahel”](#), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 26 March 2019
- [“The war in the desert: Why the Sahara is terror’s new frontline”](#), BBC News (long-read), 21 June 2018
- [“Militancy and the Arc of Instability: violent extremism in the Sahel”](#), CSIS, September 2016
- [“Mali: June 2016 update”](#), Commons Library briefing paper CBP07614, 8 June 2016
- [“Mali in crisis: a political and security overview”](#), Commons Library briefing paper SN06457, 31 October 2012

¹¹¹ [“France should give Mali space to negotiate with Jihadists”](#), War on the Rocks, 16 April 2020

¹¹² Jack Watling [“The coup in Mali tests the UN’s credibility”](#), RUSI, 2 September 2020

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