

G5 Sahel Joint Force: European Strategy Should Go Beyond Counter-terrorism

Mali and the wider Sahel region should be provided with more support, but is the new counter-terrorist force what is needed?

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On the 2 July 2017 the leaders of five Sahelian nations, joined the French president Macron, [officially inaugurated](#) a new regional military operation. The latest initiative is supposed to bring stability to the region struggling with the aftermath of the collapse of Malian state in 2012. The 5000 troops of the G5 Sahel joint force (JF-G5S) are to be composed primarily from the nations of the G5 Sahel bloc (Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger) supported with funds, training and equipment provided by the EU, France and potentially other Western states. The force [will be tasked](#) with enhancing government control of the border areas in Sahel, strengthening the authority of the respective states and facilitating humanitarian and development operations. The first deployment (of a planned three) is expected to take place in the tri-border region of central Mali, western Niger and eastern Burkina Faso, where Jihadist and criminal armed groups [recently stepped up](#) their activities. The creation of the new counter-terrorist operation provides an opportunity to curb the activity of non-state actors in the sensitive border regions, yet it needs international support and wider perspective on the roots of the local conflicts to ensure sustainable stabilization.

Analysis: Counter-terrorism in Crowded and Complex Theatre

Mali and other countries in the region (in particular Niger) already host a wide range of international operations ranging from [three CSDP training and assistance missions](#) (EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali and Niger), and [US counter-terrorist initiatives](#), to MINUSMA – a [UN peacekeeping mission](#) deployed in Mali, and Operation Barkhane – a region-wide French-led counter-terrorist mission. Following the concerns over the presence of Al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahelian desert and recently also increased international securitisation of the trans-Saharan [smuggling and migration routes](#), the region has witnessed unprecedented international attention. The JF-G5S is intended to respond to both of the main internationally-perceived security concerns, which has been its main selling points for donors, and potentially to [provide an exit-strategy](#) for the French forces in Sahel in the longer run. In this respect, the force will also need to navigate the [competing priorities](#) of [national elites](#) and international actors involved in the country.

The choice of the tri-border region of Liptako-Gourma seems to reflect also the need to support MINUSMA, which has in the past two years come under growing attack from militant Jihadist groups. Even though MINUSMA has [European units](#) with experience of counter-terrorist operations from Iraq and Afghanistan and it was in 2016 provided with a [‘proactive’ and ‘robust’ mandate](#), it has struggled with its own [logistical and operational issues](#). Moreover, MINUSMA is a

peacekeeping operation and some of its assertive actions beyond what could be perceived as immediate protection of civilians have already [led to questioning](#) of its impartiality in the conflict. As such, outright involvement in 'robust' counter-terrorist operations [might hamper](#) its [crucial peacebuilding](#) and mediation role. In this respect, the troops JF-G5S could help to provide in future the military means to tackle the local insecurity.

However, the drivers of the conflict in central Mali and the tri-border region stem primarily from the [dissatisfaction with the central government](#), the [development and public services](#), and the exploitation of these grievances by radical Islamist groups. The need is for political outreach and gradual extension of state authority, rather than assertive counter-terrorism. The cooperation of MINUSMA and other actors with the JF-G5S in the border areas is thus necessary in order to support the local reconciliation and peacebuilding processes, but it will require a delicate balancing between civilian, political and military engagement.

Outlook: The need to look beyond military support

The deployment of the JF-G5S will hardly represent an immediate game-changer in the complex conflict in Mali and wider Sahel. The countries of G5 Sahel are among the poorest on the continent and their small and under-equipped armed forces (with the exception of Chad's) [are overstretched](#) on their national territories, as well as in multinational operations. However, if the joint force is provided with appropriate international funding, coordination with other international actors and especially if it engages with the root causes of local discontent beyond mere counter-terrorism, it might represent one of the steps towards the stabilization of the region.

As evident from the [mixed results](#) of [EUTM Mali](#) (and many other cases), security sector reform is a [deeply political, long and frustrating process](#), but is [necessary](#) if the Malian state is to retake control of its territory. Continued international assistance beyond the necessary funds and equipment will be needed to make the joint force work. This will have to comprise not only training and equipment, [also specialized intelligence](#) and other forms of operational support. However, international engagement needs to go beyond military assistance. France has already announced that [it will enhance](#) its development support to Mali and its border regions in particular, but more, beyond the emphasis on [control of the borders by military means](#), should be done also by other European agencies and states. This means development assistance and delivering on promises made to MINUSMA, and political engagement which stresses not one-sided support for the government and armed forces, but reconciliation and [sustainable political solution](#) of local conflicts.

Recommendations: The Need for Cool-Minded Observation and Alliance-Building

- ◆ The European Union and France should reassess its prioritization of counter-terrorism and border control and treat the JF-G5S rather as a statebuilding instrument.
- ◆ European states should increase their development assistance to Mali and ensure that it supports the broader strategic goal of reconstruction of legitimate state authority.
- ◆ MINUSMA should strengthen its role in mediation and reconciliation support beyond the northern regions of Mali also to the central parts of the country and the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region.

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