



# The Sahel Will Define the Next Decade of Counterterrorism Operations

Jack Duffield

*Over the next 10 years the Sahel region will present an increasingly dangerous and complex terrorist threat. Managing this threat will require a combination of constant regional presence and focused interventions.*

The recent [Nigerien coup](#) has brought the Sahel region sharply into focus. Huge, populous and often overlooked, [the region](#) includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan and Eritrea, among others. These countries often come to global attention only during times of crisis, such as the coup in Niger and the ongoing [civil war in Sudan](#). However, these crises are symptoms of far deeper issues, which will have important consequences for counterterrorism strategy.

Some of these issues are millions of years in the making. Huge natural resource deposits including [lithium and uranium](#) can be found throughout the region. These [increasingly important resources](#) make running a Sahel government a [personally lucrative prospect](#) for political leaders. Natural resources also attract states such as Russia, which seeks mining rights in the region, and China, which has made the Sahel part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Neither is acting in the best interests of the region: Russia oversees a [complex and exploitative trade](#) in arms and minerals, while China is piling [more than \\$2 billion of loans a year](#) onto Sahel governments, further weakening states with heavy debt loads.

The power of national governments is also a factor. Ungoverned spaces are most evident in larger states such as Mali, but across the region, traditional ethnic groups [subvert – or completely ignore](#) – central government, weakening its control over the day-to-day lives of the population. This population is facing some of the worst humanitarian conditions on the planet, [with staggering infant mortality, illiteracy and food poverty](#) driving further instability. And the size of this population is [set to more than double](#) over the next 20 years, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. These systemic issues – abundant strategic resources, malign influence, ungoverned spaces, weak central governments, humanitarian calamity and rapid population growth – combine to create a volatile human security situation. Their net effect is a breeding ground for violent instability. The most pressing consequence of this instability is that terrorist organisations are now thriving.

The Sahel is now the [greatest area of concern for terrorism](#) in the world. Alongside being a fertile recruiting ground for young, disaffected men, the Sahel also offers safe havens for terrorist organisations to plan and launch international attacks. [Al-Qa'ida and Islamic State](#) are violently expanding in the region, and both groups have designs on large-scale attacks to rival 9/11, as well as less complex but equally devastating attacks such as the Manchester Arena bombing. There is a domestic angle to this as well: the Sahel suffered [43% of all deaths from terrorism worldwide](#) last year. Both global and local actors have an interest in preventing the spread of terrorism in the region.

To meet this challenge, a two-part strategy is required. The first part of this is regional poise. A coherent intelligence picture is vital to understanding and tracking the terrorist threat in the Sahel. With such a wide area spanning huge empty deserts and dense forest canopies, surveillance technologies such as [ground moving target indication](#), [natural gas emission lidar](#) and [coherent change detection](#) will be more important than ever. Equally important to regional poise is comprehensive engagement. Strong relationships with national governments, built through a robust [Defence Diplomacy](#) network and [short-term training teams](#), must be combined with recognition of non-state actors who are an important part of the security mix in the Sahel. The G5 Sahel is a good prototype for this approach, although France's presence is now mired in [post-colonial controversy](#). Intelligence and engagement can also be mutually reinforcing: information gathered from national and regional partners is a vital component of the intelligence picture, and [the growth of open source intelligence](#) makes it easier than ever to share valuable intelligence reports with these partners. Together, these components will provide the necessary poise to find and fix terrorist threats across the Sahel as they appear.

The second part of this strategy is to defeat these threats once they are identified. Fortunately, long-distance force projection is something that the UK excels at. Rapid, focused interventions have been the foundation of [hostage rescues](#) and [non-combatant evacuations](#) for decades. This skillset can be adapted to shorter, sharper counterterrorism interventions which would disrupt specific threats and prevent terrorist organisations from reaching a critical mass. Though this will not eliminate terrorism in the Sahel completely, such a goal is unrealistic – the systemic problems highlighted above cannot be rectified quickly, and enduring military operations will not solve the full spectrum of challenges required to prevent terrorism from re-emerging. Instead, the threat can be kept at bay by pouncing on organisations and disrupting plots as they emerge. A doctrine of focused interventions, supported by regional poise, is therefore the most realistic option for preventing future terrorist attacks from the Sahel.

The Sahel, with its underlying instability and manifesting insecurity, will set the agenda for counterterrorism in the next decade by focusing security resources in the region and shaping both procurement priorities and operational activities. With a combination of strong regional poise to detect threats and enable response, and the capability to pounce on these threats as they emerge, the challenge of terrorism in the Sahel may not be eliminated, but it can at least be managed.

*The views expressed in this Commentary are the author's, and do not represent those of His Majesty's Government, RUSI or any other institution.*