



## The Sahel: Europe's forever war?

by Katherine Pye

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Despite Europe's long-term involvement, conflict in the Sahel has continued to escalate and spread southwards. The Sahel includes the five states of the 'G5 Sahel', a regional security grouping: Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Chad. Migrants crossing the Mediterranean often originate from or pass through the region, and groups affiliated with al-Qaida and Islamic State have a notable presence there. Europe's current military-focused approach, pioneered by France, has achieved little more than tactical victories against jihadists. By supporting governments that are feared and mistrusted by many of their citizens, Europe may be undermining its own aim of curbing violence, argues Katherine Pye in a new Centre for European Reform [policy brief](#).

The author analyses Europe's involvement in the Sahel and its strategic importance. While France leads military engagement with Opération Barkhane, the EU has longstanding commitments there and other member-states are playing a more active role. The UK recently sent 300 soldiers to the UN's peacekeeping mission in Mali.

Europe's approach so far has focused on bolstering the Sahel's state security forces and governments to fight terrorist groups. However these same forces are carrying out illegal killings among certain communities which is driving recruitment to jihadist groups. In 2020, more civilians were killed by national security forces than jihadists in Mali and Burkina Faso. Corruption scandals and a lack of government accountability are also causing civil unrest in the region, which was exemplified by last year's mass protests and military coup in Mali, Katherine Pye argues.

The policy brief recommends that Europe should:

- ★ Make continued financial and military support conditional on an end to abuse by armed forces against civilians.
- ★ Make aid more conditional on anti-corruption measures, including better public audits and transparency to avoid European complicity with corrupt practices.
- ★ Prioritise engagement with civil society to help build trust between Sahelian states and their citizens and strengthen democratic accountability.

*"Europe's track record in the Sahel suggests that its approach of bolstering state security forces and reinforcing state institutions has not only failed to stop a catastrophic escalation in the violence – 2020 was the deadliest year since the violence began in 2012 – but also that backing regimes that commit atrocities against their civilians undermines stability. Abuses and corruption by governments are driving recruitment to jihadist groups, causing civil unrest and perpetuating the conflict"* said Katherine Pye, author of the report and Clara Marina O'Donnell fellow at the Centre for European Reform.

### Note for editors:

For further information on the new research and to request an interview with Katherine Pye [@katherine\\_pye](#), please contact Rosie Giorgi in the CER press office on [pressoffice@cer.eu](mailto:pressoffice@cer.eu) or +44 (207) 233 1199.

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