

# French-sponsored G5 force may not offer stability on Maghreb's border

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Tunis

French President Emmanuel Macron is sending signals that Paris is looking for a way out of its costly military campaign in Mali after failing to stem the spread of violent jihadism south of the Maghreb.

Jihadists came to the fore in Mali with the flow of armed fighters from Libya after the 2011 fall of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi and the resurgence of the militant group Boko Haram south in Nigeria.

Macron has visited Mali twice since his election in May and talked on the phone at least three times with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Macron warned countries in the region against any laxity towards radical Islamists. The French government sees such terrorist activity as possibly threatening France's interests in the sub-Saharan region, including uranium mines for nuclear power plants – a key source of electricity in France.

Algeria, however, has been wary of France's military campaign in the region, arguing that it could worsen the situation.

Algeria fears that militarily squeezed jihadists could move north at a time when seasoned jihadists from the region are expected to return from war zones in the Middle East.

Nigeria has not linked up with the French military strategy in the Sahel, although it has been fighting Boko Haram extremists at home.

Macron's fallback option seems to rely on a loose military grouping of five poor West African countries to form a multinational force to

help uproot "terrorists, thugs and assassins" in the vast region.

"We cannot hide behind words and must take actions," Macron told a gathering of the leaders of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad that form the G5 group on July 2. The G5 was created in late 2014 but remained a nominal military force as it lacked financing, equipment and trained officers to turn it into a combat-ready corps.

France has pledged 70 tactical vehicles as well as communications gear, operations and protective equipment to the 5,000-strong G5 force, which is to be deployed in September when its funding comes through.

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The multi-African national force will conduct military operations along with a 12,000-person UN peacekeeping mission and France's 5,000-troop Operation Barkhane in the Sahel, its largest military operation abroad.

Analysts interpreted the French move as a possible exit strategy that could allow it to withdraw its troops from one of the deadliest conflict areas in the world. Macron has insisted that France has no plans to leave Mali.

The operational handicaps faced by the African military force could push France to intensify its operations against extremist Islamists in the region so as not to be eventually forced to beat a hasty retreat from Mali that could be branded a failure.

"Concerned about France's eco-

nomic and political recovery to regain its stature in Europe and the world, Macron is seeking a solution to the stalemate of the Barkhane force in the Sahel," said former UN Special Representative of the Secretary General Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, a Mauritanian diplomat.

"He has embraced the best approach: Fight to win," he said. "Withdrawing in the middle of a failure is not an option for Macron."

Macron, however, may not be able to count the G5 force among his decisive weapons in the near future.

There is no strong mandate from the United Nations for the African force and Washington has balked at providing support to Paris while the strongest armies of the G5 bloc – Chad and Niger – have other issues to deal with.

Chad is deploying forces in Mali while it struggles to control its own long border with Libya and fight Boko Haram. Niger faces the threat of jihadists from Libya and the presence of al-Qaeda at home.

Military experts said it could take up to three years for the G5 to be transformed into a viable force able to replace Barkhane.

The European Union has promised nearly \$57 million but experts said the force needs ten times that amount.

Algeria and its Maghreb neighbours stand to feel the effects of France's military strategy with the additional contribution of the G5 military wing.

"Put under more military pressures by the 5,000 soldiers of the G5 whose number will rise to 10,000 men, the terrorists will re-deploy north, which means Algerian borders," said Brussels-based Algerian Sahel security specialist



**Diplomatic push.** Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (L) walks with French President Emmanuel Macron at the G5 Sahel summit at the Koulouba presidential palace in Bamako, on July 2.

(Reuters)

M'hammed Bouzina.

"Without strong involvement of Algeria and Nigeria, the main military powers in the region, there is no sustainable solution to terrorism in the Sahel," said Algerian security specialist Yassine Ramdane.

Algeria sees the creation of the G5 as indirectly aimed at sidelining its role in the Sahel and preventing it from competing with France, a traditional rival in terms of regional influence. Algeria advocates a more comprehensive approach to tackling terrorism and instability in

the Sahel, including economic development and inclusive political dialogue.

"More than 5,000 Africans from several nationalities are operating with terrorist groups in the continent and other zones of conflicts," Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmajid Tebboune told an African Union summit on July 3.

"The African continent faces more challenges because of the threat of these individuals when they return home or to other African countries."

## Uphill battle to counter radicalisation of Muslims in Europe

Viewpoint



Dunia El-Zobaidi

Things may not be spinning out of control in the United Kingdom but a spate of terrorist attacks in recent months has shown that radicalisation is a growing problem. While the government has tried to counter the problem, more measures should be taken to address its root causes.

First, the government should extend its monitoring of hate preaching at Muslim institutions and monitor attempts by extremists to approach people in the workplace, where Muslims are also vulnerable to radicalisation.

Second, the UK government should address the lack of economic integration of the Muslim community. As other European countries have realised, economic disenfranchisement is a key factor in radicalisation.

A 2015 Muslim Council of Britain report indicated that Muslims are behind Sikhs and Hindus in terms of educational attainment. Only 24% of Muslims have a university degree, compared to 45% of Hindus and 30% of Sikhs. Muslim students are less likely to attend universities in the Russell Group, an association of

Britain's top public research schools.

This gap extends into the workforce. Nuffield College's Centre for Social Investigation said British Pakistanis and Bangladeshis earn two-thirds less than white people.

A British House of Commons committee warned that Muslims were far more likely to be unemployed than people from other faiths in the country. Nearly 13% of Muslims are unemployed, compared to 5.4% of the overall population.

This problem disproportionately affects Muslim women, as many European employers worry they will put family duties before their profession. A 2016 report released by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee showed that 65% of Muslims who are not employed are women. Almost half – 44% – of these women said they cannot work because they look after their home, compared to 16% of women who are not employed in the general British population.

A similar hurdle to Muslims' economic integration in ultra-secular France is resentment over what is perceived to be conspicuous religious behaviour at work. A 2016 poll by the Randstad Institute and the Observatory for Religion in Companies (OFRE) indicated that 65% of French employers asked said they noticed an "alarming" rise in religious "demands" at work. In 2015, 50% of employers reported this trend, compared to 44% in 2014. Mus-

lims were said to have made the most such demands.

The poll noted that tension and conflict most often occur when "religious employees (refuse) to work alongside a female colleague or (ask) to work with people who share their faith and no one else."

OFRE Director Lionel Honoré said Muslim employees have threatened to accuse their bosses of Islamophobia if their demands – such as being given the time and place for prayer – are not met.

However, the poll results indicated that 80% of French respondents said they were aware of their colleagues' religion and that 82% "didn't mind" them.

Still, Muslims need to reassess their demands of employers. The Quran does not state that Muslim men cannot work with women or non-Muslims. These unreasonable demands are making everyday life in the workplace more difficult for everyone.

In Britain, the likelihood of radicalisation goes up the longer migrants or their family have resided in the country. A University of London study stated that young Muslims whose families have lived in the United Kingdom for generations are more susceptible to radicalisation than recent migrants to Britain.

Professor of cultural psychiatry and epidemiology at Queen Mary University of London Kamaldeep Bhui, who was the lead author of the study, said: "Migrant groups are much stronger in condemning terrorism. I think the most compelling argument for this is

**In the UK, the government should address the lack of economic integration of the Muslim community.**

that recent migrants are dealing with a hard struggle and they have invested in coming here.

"They have got adversity to deal with and are not in a position where they can indulge some of the ideas of grievance. Whereas people born and brought up here probably take for granted the security and safety where they live and the education and support."

However, even the most detailed analysis cannot capture every case of radicalisation. Khalid Masood, the perpetrator of the 2017 Westminster attack was 52 years old, for example, and Darren Osborne, charged with carrying out the Finsbury Park van attack, is 47. Salman Ramadan Abedi, who set off a bomb outside of Manchester Arena on May 22, killing 22 people and injuring more than 250, was born to migrant parents. These exceptions to the rule, however, do not mean we should disregard the general trends analysts have pointed out.

Government officials and the public must work to counter the scourge of extremism. Authorities should be cognisant of the specific needs and vulnerabilities in the Muslim community and Muslims should make every attempt to pursue higher education and advance in the workforce.

This may not counter radicalisation completely but it will reduce the threat and better integrate the community into society.

Dunia El-Zobaidi is a regular Arab Weekly contributor in London.

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