



Back from the Brink: How the UN is Stabilizing, Securing, and Strengthening Mali

The United Nations Foundation team traveled to Bamako, Gao, and Timbuktu from September 16-26, 2018, to learn more about the United Nations Integrated Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). During our visit, we met with more than 50 UN officials, civil society groups, Western diplomats, and international forces including leadership in MINUSMA, Barkhane, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Below you will find our observations.

Background

The landlocked country of Mali, once a French colony and a cultural hub of West Africa, was overrun in January 2012 by a coalition of Tuareg and terrorist groups moving south towards the capital of Bamako. At the time, the Tuareg movement (MNLA) in northern Mali held legitimate grievances against the government and aligned itself with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine (Defenders of Faith), the Islamic militants and jihadists in the region. Simultaneously, a mutiny of soldiers launched a military coup d'etat led by Captain Amadou Sonogo, who took power from then President Amadou Toumani Touré and dissolved government institutions, consequently leading to a complete collapse of institutions in the northern part of the country. This Tuareg movement declared Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu an Independent State of Azawad by April 2012. However, soon after, the Tuareg movement was pushed out by the jihadists, Ansar Dine and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).¹

In the early days of the conflict, the UN and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) put together a power-sharing framework which led to the resignation of President Toure. Dioncounda Traoré was subsequently appointed interim President and a transitional government was established. In December 2012, the UN Security Council authorized an ECOWAS force called the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) and a UN political mission to support the transitional government during the initial conflict. However, due to the rapid deterioration of the political situation in the country, the Malian government requested France's support in addressing the extremist elements in northern Mali. The French forces launched Operation Serval which worked with AFISMA to push back extremist groups that captured Konna and Diabaly, cities less than 400 miles from Bamako. The French, African forces, and Malian government were able to push terrorist elements northwards regaining state authority to Diabaly, Douentza, Gao, Konna, and Timbuktu in the west and north of the country.²

Despite these gains, the terrorist threats and security situation were still fragile. In 2012, the Malian government requested a UN Peacekeeping Operation to deploy to prevent further destabilization of the region. The Security Council voted on Security Council Resolution 2100 to formally establish MINUSMA in April 2013. This resolution called for 12,600 forces: many of the AFISMA troops were re-assigned to the UN force and additional troops were deployed in July 2013.³

¹ "History." MINUSMA, 23 July 2018, minusma.unmissions.org/en/history.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

Algiers Peace Agreement

In August 2015, a new peace accord was agreed to by the Malian government and two coalitions of armed groups, the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and the Platform of Armed Groups (the Platform). The major differences between the coalition of armed groups is that CMA has pursued a goal of self-determination, where Platform would like to resolve issues within a united Mali. The Peace agreement, *Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation au Mali issu du processus d'Alger*—also known as the Algiers Process—supports local elections, peace consolidation, and improved local governance. The goal of the agreement was to create a more inclusive government, address ongoing conflicts, and end the perpetuating cycles of violence.⁴ Three years into this peace agreement, the government is lagging in addressing the constituents in the north and its efforts to expand its authority.⁵

Positive steps in the peace agreement, however, include the appointment of the Carter Center as an Independent Observer of the peace agreement in October 2017. Their work was requested by the parties to hold them accountable to the peace agreement. Their recent report lays out recommendations for the parties and the government to better implement the agreement. More generally the Carter Center highlights that people in the north have not seen the “peace dividends” promised by the agreement.⁶

On the sidelines of the General Assembly in September 2018, the UN and the government recommitted its support to the peace agreement through the Pact for Peace, which called for benchmarks to implement the peace agreement. With these two new mechanisms, there is momentum to move the peace agreement forward.

International Presence in Mali

There are three international forces in Mali: Barkhane; Group of Five Joint Forces in Sahel (G5 Sahel); and MINUS-MA. In addition, the European Union has training missions on the ground supporting security sector reform. These forces have differing mandates, capabilities, and interests but all share the common goal of strengthening stability in Mali. These forces operate independently, in partnership, and simultaneously.

Barkhane: The French have continued their military presence through Operation Barkhane. Barkhane has 4,000 forces operating across the Sahel with a focus in the Menaka region of northern Mali. Operation Barkhane is supported by Malian forces as well as by regional militaries including Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania. Barkhane has a clear counter-terrorism mandate, targeting the Islamic State of the Greater Sahel (ISGS). In August, Barkhane identified a leader of ISGS, Mohamed Ag Almouner, who claimed responsibility for the deaths of the four American forces that were ambushed in Niger in October 2017.⁷ Barkhane is paving the way for the government and MINUS-MA to maintain stability and support much-needed development. However, the government’s slow response makes it challenging to sustain their gains.⁸

The G5 Sahel: The Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) consists of 5,000 troops from Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad, Niger, and Mali. It is the only force to have a mandate that addresses both terrorism and trafficking in the Sahel. The G5 Sahel is a regional force, with respective militaries operating on their side of the border with the right to pursue threats 50 kms across the border. In December 2017, the UN Security Council authorized

4 Nyirabikali, Dr Gaudence. “Mali Peace Accord: Actors, Issues and Their Representation.” SIPRI, 27 Aug. 2015, www.sipri.org/node/385.

5 Ibid

6 “Mali Independent Observer Releases First Report.” The Carter Center, May 2018, www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/mali-052918.html.

7 Pickrell, Ryan. “Airstrike Kills Terrorist Leader Tied to Deadly 2017 Ambush on US Troops in Niger.” Business Insider, Business Insider, 28 Aug. 2018, www.businessinsider.com/airstrike-kills-terrorist-leader-tied-to-niger-ambush-on-us-troops-2018-8.

8 Taylor, Alan. “Operation Barkhane: France’s Counterterrorism Forces in Africa.” The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 24 Oct. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/10/operation-barkhane-frances-counter-terrorism-forces-in-africa/543834/.

technical support from MINUSMA that would be reimbursed by the European Union, who is managing funding for the G5 Sahel.⁹ The G5 Sahel has conducted several operations with the support of Barkhane and ongoing operations on the border of Mali and Mauritania, Chad and Niger, and Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to “neutralize terrorists.”¹⁰ The U.S. pledged 60 million in 2017 and recently promised additional funding.

Leadership within the G5 Sahel said, “what happens in the Sahel, doesn’t stay in the Sahel...to the terrorists, we are all the same.”¹¹ The G5 Sahel has had major setbacks this year including the reports of summary executions committed by dedicated G5 Sahel forces in Boulikessi, a town near the Burkina Faso border in Mali, as retaliation for killing one of their own forces.¹² Furthermore, the G5 Sahel headquarters in Sévaré was destroyed in June when AQIM detonated a car filled with explosives, launched rockets, and initiated a gun battle, killing two soldiers and injuring four.¹³

European Union Security Sector Support: In 2012, the Malian government requested the European Union provide coordinated assistance and expertise to the security sector. Over the past five years, the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) has provided basic training to 12,523 Malian soldiers.¹⁴ They are also professionalizing the specialized Malian forces that are part of the G5 Sahel. In 2015, the EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP), in partnership with MINUSMA, began professionalizing the National Police Force, Gendarmerie, and the National Guard as part of the government’s security sector reform.¹⁵ The significant European presence and support in Mali is strategic. Leadership at the EUTM stated that the Sahel region in general and Mali in particular remains in the national security interest of the EU. An EUTM representative said that “everything that happens in Mali will affect Europe, and maybe beyond Europe. Weapons, arms, drug trafficking will find its way to the U.S.”¹⁶

UN Integrated Mission in Mali (MINUSMA): MINUSMA is the UN’s third largest peacekeeping mission with 15,476 UN personnel including 12,213 military, 1,713 police, and 1,180 civilians. MINUSMA’s mandate was reauthorized again to address some new concerns in the center of Mali in June 2018. The mandate states that MINUSMA “use all necessary means” in supporting:

- the implementation of the peace agreement;
- restoration of state authority including in the center of the country;
- reconciliation;
- protect civilians and stabilization including against asymmetric threats;
- promotion and protection of human rights;
- humanitarian assistance;
- support efforts to rebuild the Malian security sector.¹⁷

9 “Security Council Outlines Modes of Support, Reimbursement for Joint Anti-Terrorism Force in Sahel, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2391 (2017) | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” United Nations, United Nations, 8 Dec. 2017, www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13112.doc.htm.

10 Kelly, Fergus. “G5 Sahel Joint Counter-Terrorism Force to Launch Three Operations ‘in Coming Weeks.’” The Defense Post, 8 Oct. 2018, thedefensepost.com/2018/10/08/g5-sahel-launch-3-military-operations-parly/.

11 Das, Chandrima, et al. “Meeting with G5Sahel.” 20 Sept. 2018.

12 Kelly, Fergus. “UN Investigation Concludes Mali Soldiers ‘Executed’ 12 Civilians in Boulikessi.” The Defense Post, 26 June 2018, thedefensepost.com/2018/06/26/mali-soldiers-executed-12-civilians-boulikessi-un-investigation/.

13 Ag Anara, Souleymane, et al. “Islamist Militants Attack African Military Base in Mali, at Least...” Reuters, Thomson Reuters, 30 June 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-violence/islamist-militants-attack-african-military-base-in-mali-at-least-six-dead-idUSKBN1JP23F

14 “About Us.” EUTM Mali, eutmmali.eu/en/about-us/.

15 “À Propos - Commission Européenne.” EEAS, 2018, eeas.europa.eu/csdp-missions-operations/eucap-sahel-mali/40878/%C3%A0-propos_fr.

16 Das, Chandrima, et al. “Meeting with EUTM in Bamako.” 18 Sept. 2018.

17 “Security Council Resolution 2423.” UN Security Council, 28 June 2018, minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/n1820250_0.pdf.

MINUSMA is deployed in the north of Mali in three sectors (east, west, and north). 56 countries contribute to MINUSMA and the mission has received one of the largest amounts of Western support.

Observations

MINUSMA is widely referred to as “the UN’s most dangerous peacekeeping mission.” Over the last five years, MINUSMA has unfortunately lost 173 peacekeepers and more than 350 have been seriously wounded from hostile attacks.¹⁸ In Mali, peacekeepers have to contend with roadside improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers – asymmetric threats that are more in line with what the US military encountered in Iraq or Afghanistan than anything a typical peacekeeping mission usually handles. The UN’s leadership is very aware of these realities and are committed to preventing Mali to succumb to the hands of terrorists.

Ambassador Samantha Power once said: “This is not your mother’s, or your grandmother’s peacekeeping.” Those words could not have rung any truer. The conflict and the peacekeeping mission is removed from the capitol, where normalcy remains despite attacks by AQIM on the Radisson Blu in 2015 and the Le Campement in 2017. However, traveling to Gao and Timbuktu, with their heavily fortified super-camps and armored vehicles, told a very different story of the security threats in northern part of the country.

The asymmetric threats and persistent attacks on peacekeepers in the region is vastly different from any other peacekeeping mission deployed. Northern Mali has a long history of traders, nomads, and sedentary cultures living together with cyclical conflicts which are now hijacked by extremists and empowered by Kalashnikovs. MINUSMA leadership highlighted that northern Mali “is a safe haven for any kind of terrorist – no border, no guard, no control, no administration. The jihadists in the region are trying to teach a radicalized fundamental version of Islam. If MINUSMA is not successful, this will be a problem.” A similar sentiment was echoed by a civil society leader, who despite criticisms of the mission said that, “MINUSMA is essential...if MINUSMA was not here, jihadists would take the land.”¹⁹

Over the last five years, MINUSMA has been successful in pushing extremists out of Gao and Timbuktu, preventing further gains by extremists, and supporting the government. Although there have been continued attacks on MINUSMA and UN agencies, this work has resulted in stability in the region. An ongoing challenge has been the lack of employment and development in the region which have caused high criminality and organized crime that continues to fuel the extremists and terrorism. MINUSMA plays a key role here by supporting local authorities through joint patrols in population centers. Even though the terrorists left Gao proper, Barkhane was attacked in July 2018, killing eight French soldiers and 31 civilians, just 3 miles outside of the city.²⁰

MINUSMA assisted in two rounds of presidential elections which were relatively stable and peaceful. This recent round of elections was hotly contested by opposition leader Soumaila Cisse, who alleged massive fraud by Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the incumbent president. However, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita emerged as the winner of the second round of elections with 67 percent of the vote. Despite poll closures in the center of the country due to threats of violence, the north was quiet due to MINUSMA’s security presence. In addition, MINUSMA provided technical and logistical support to the government, including the transportation of election materials and 1,840 electoral personnel—including some candidates—to the center and northern regions of Mali.²¹ The UN also trained poll workers, worked on voter outreach and public education campaigns, and facilitated town halls with a focus on increasing

18 “Fatalities Peacekeeping.” United Nations, United Nations, 30 Sept. 2018, peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities.

19 Das, Chandrima, et al. “Meeting with the civil society leaders in Gao.” 18 Sept. 2018.

20 “Civilians Killed in Attack on French Anti-Terror Force in Northern Mali.” France 24, France 24, 2 July 2018, www.france24.com/en/20180701-mali-french-soldiers-barkhane-killed-deadly-attack-counter-terror-force-gao-car-bomb.

21 “Situation Mali: Report of the Secretary General.” <https://minusma.unmissions.org/Sites/Default/Files/n1829038.Pdf>, UN Security Council, Sept. 2018, minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/n1829038.pdf.

women's participation in the electoral process. MINUSMA also trained Malian Forces on electoral security in the center and Bamako and deployed to secure polling stations in the north.

The UN has been essential in moving the peace agreement forward, especially in supporting the appointment of local authorities in the north. The first step toward a sustainable peace is to have local authorities bring back basic government services to these communities. The UN supported the government rehabilitating water supplies in Kidal.²² Also, MINUSMA urged the government to implement Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC) which works to integrate former ex-combatants. As the government decides on the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process, this is a way to begin have former combatants move from an illegitimate existence into a basic training and professional force. The MOC is an important confidence building measure and significant to the signatories of the peace agreement.

Traveling to Gao, it was impressive to see the significant Western forces, including the Canadians, Swedish, and Germans. Due to the huge loss of peacekeepers since the inception of the MINUSMA, the Canadians have played a critical role in providing medivac/casavac for the forces. Since their deployment in August, they have had to deploy twice on the same day, September 11, 2018, to evacuate peacekeepers injured in the north of Gao. Their commitment to be deployed within 30 minutes to the call can be challenging because decisions for take-off reside in Bamako.

The Canadians are eager to support operations across the region and have already provided humanitarian aid and met with marginalized communities in the north. Recent operations included deploying their doctors to provide basic examinations for local populations. The German and Swedish forces also deployed to Gao and have advanced capabilities for peacekeeping including unarmed aerial vehicles which have been critical to see beyond the gates of camp. The Canadians, Germans, and Dutch live and operate on a separate base within the super-camp called Camp Castor, with a different entrance and security. The Canadians report directly to the Force Commander in Bamako, versus the Sector Commander in Gao. This deliberate divide seems stark and emphasizes the inequality of troops deployed to the mission. UN Peacekeeping continues to be led by South Asian and African troops and the separate camp does not allow an opportunity for contingents to interact and learn from one another. It was promising to hear that the Canadians were planning a joint operation with the Senegalese forces. In addition, the separate camps and reporting lines prevents trust from forming across the force. And recent casualties by certain non-western forces within MINUSMA has led to a reluctance to project force and risk averse tendencies which are concerning especially in this threat environment.²³

MINUSMA has some excellent Intelligence gathering tools from some of the Western forces. Our team was able to view UAV photographs of potential IEDs being planted, which successfully deterred the terrorists from moving forward. This low risk tool could provide useful intelligence across MINUSMA and its partners. Intelligence gathered does not seem to be shared systematically across force and or with the civilian sections. From numerous interviews across the UN, there is concern of how this intelligence is being used for planning operations and general threat analysis on the ground. Due to delineations between Barkhane and G5 Sahel who are "hunting terrorists" and MINUSMA, a stability operation, intelligence is not always shared even though they are facing the same threat in the same area of operation.

Why MINUSMA is in U.S. Interests

Above all, it was readily apparent that MINUSMA serves a number of vital U.S. national security objectives. During our time in Bamako, Gao, and Timbuktu, we heard again and again that Mali is simply too important to ignore—that

²² Ibid

²³ Das, Chandrima, et al. "Meeting with the Canadian Contingent in Gao." 19 Sept. 2018.

if terrorism was allowed a reprieve in the Sahel, it would inevitably make its way to Europe and most likely the United States.

It is easy to forget now, but just five years ago or so, Mali's vast north had been transformed into a safe haven for a number of jihadist groups that had clear intentions to destabilize the region and bring harm to Americans. That's a sad truth that we experienced in early 2013, when three Americans working at an Algerian oil refinery were killed when the facility was attacked by a band of jihadists. The attack, which took place a week before French forces officially intervened in the conflict, was orchestrated in part by militants that entered Algeria via Mali and that demanded safe passage back to the remote and ungoverned northern portion of the country during an ensuing four-day hostage crisis.²⁴ AQIM in Mali supported Boko Haram in kidnapping hundreds of girls in Nigeria to make them into servants and sex slaves horrifying Americans.²⁵ We also witnessed recently when four U.S. soldiers were killed in Tongo Tongo, Niger just 17 miles from the Malian border by armed militants from the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

Today, while Mali is by no means completely secure, the very real danger that jihadists would exploit mass instability in Mali to secure a foothold in the region and further develop their operational capabilities—much like ISIS did in Syria and Iraq—has been minimized. This is an accomplishment, it must be noted, that was achieved largely without putting Americans in harm's way.

Additionally, while the U.S. is not known for contributing a large number of servicemembers to UN peacekeeping missions (there are only some 50 U.S. troops currently deployed across 14 different missions), approximately half of those 50 are attached to MINUSMA. The presence of that many U.S. servicemembers delivers a strong message about the importance the U.S. places on stabilizing Mali and preventing a return to the widespread chaos that necessitated the establishment of the mission.

Conclusion

Achieving MINUSMA's stabilization and development objectives has policy and security implications is critical to U.S. national interests. Among its achievements, the UN has helped Mali broker a peace deal between the armed groups that kickstarted the crisis, successfully organized two free and fair presidential elections, and steadily expanded state authority, paving the way for the country to govern itself once again.

But much is left to do—and it cannot be done strictly by MINUSMA alone. During our visit we heard a similar refrain many times over from representatives of Western governments, "I can't imagine MINUSMA could be doing any better a job than it currently is."²⁶ That is to say, the limitations that the UN has encountered in Mali—its inability to fully protect civilians, foster a sense of national cohesion, and fully stabilize the rapidly deteriorating center, are not a result of flaws in MINUSMA itself or its leadership, there are inherent structural limitations in UN peacekeeping as a whole. These are limitations that the Secretary-General is hard at work addressing through the newly released Action for Peacekeeping Initiative. While those reforms are pursued, we can unabashedly say that failure in Mali would mean a return to rampant instability in a country straddling a critical geographic nexus and compromise

U.S. national security interests in Africa and beyond. This kind of failure would create a dark magnet of insecurity, attracting a wide array of militant Islamists, drug smugglers, and every variety of transnational criminal. These are failures that the international community cannot tolerate and it is why success in Mali is so imperative.

24 Bhatti, Janeen. "Americans Killed in Algerian Attack Are Identified." USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 22 Jan. 2013, www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/01/21/algeria-hostages-militants-gas-plant/1850707/

25 Duthiers, Vladimir. "Boko Haram: Why Terror Group Kidnaps Schoolgirls, and What Happens." CNN, Cable News Network, 2 May 2014, www.cnn.com/2014/04/24/world/africa/nigeria-kidnapping-answers/index.html.

26 Das, Chandrima, et al. "Meeting with British Military Personnel Serving in MINUSMA." 22 Sept. 2018.

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