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UN MINUSMA MISSION: EUROPEAN WITHDRAWAL AND THE FUTURE OF MALI



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Abstract

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established to address the instability caused by jihadist and separatist groups in Mali and tackle long-standing structural issues. The mission's objectives include stabilising population centres, rebuilding the security sector, implementing disarmament programs, facilitating national dialogue and ensuring fair elections. MINUSMA faces challenges due to limited resources and critical capabilities; the withdrawal of European contingents, such as French and German forces, which declared to withdraw their troops by May 2024, resulted from the complex situation and the Malian government's restrictions on the UN mission. Today, Mali is experiencing a deteriorating security scenario with escalating violence, intercommunal clashes, and jihadist attacks. In this context, Mali has turned to Russia for support through the presence of Wagner Group mercenaries, increasing security risks which further influenced the decision to withdraw European contingents. This raises more questions about the country's future and of the MINUSMA mission. This InfoFlash examines the motives behind the withdrawal of German and French forces from MINUSMA and analyses the reasons behind Mali's strengthened cooperation with Russia. Finally, recommendations are provided to enhance the MINUSMA mission's effectiveness and improve Mali's security situation.

The MINUSMA Mission

On 25 April 2013, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100 established the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to assist in stabilising the country following an insurgency led by jihadist and separatist groups (MINUSMA, n.d.). The mission also aimed to tackle Mali's significant crisis characterised by long-standing structural factors, including weak state institutions, ineffective governance, fragile social cohesion and a prevailing sense of neglect, marginalisation and unfair treatment among communities in the northern regions by the central government (MINUSMA, n.d.). The mission has several key objectives, including stabilising essential population centres, especially in the north, and re-establishing state administration throughout the country (Laessing, 2023). It also aims to support rebuilding the Malian security sector, implement disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programs, facilitate national dialogue and reconciliation, and ensure free and fair elections (Laessing, 2023).

Furthermore, MINUSMA is tasked with protecting civilians under imminent threat of violence, providing humanitarian assistance, preserving Malian culture, supporting justice efforts and ensuring safety (Bergamaschi, 2023). The mission's mandate allows it to use all necessary means to address obstacles to implementing its objectives, such as protecting civilians and UN personnel from residual threats (Bergamaschi, 2013). The international strategy in Mali consists of three critical pillars to address Mali's complex challenges. The first cornerstone is the counter-terrorism effort which seeks to maintain a manageable security situation and counter the terrorist threat (Tull, 2022). The second pillar focuses on rebuilding the Malian army to enable it to take charge of security independently, with support from various bilateral and multilateral partners, including initiatives like the European Union Training Mechanism in Mali (EUTM) (Tull, 2022). The third aspect involves the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement between the Malian government in Bamako and the Tuareg rebellion, seeking to foster stability and reconciliation (Tull, 2022).

However, significant advancements have yet to materialise in the three focus areas. Violence and insecurity have rapidly expanded, extending towards the central and southern regions of the country, creating a tangled web of jihadist activities, civil strife, and inter-ethnic clashes (Laessing, 2023). Moreover, MINUSMA lacks the resources to fulfil its mission in this challenging environment effectively (Der Lijn, 2019). The United Nations also prohibits its troops from engaging militants offensively, but simultaneously expects them to anticipate, deter and effectively respond to threats against civilians (MINUSMA, n.d.). While updates have gradually strengthened MINUSMA's mandate, it has never explicitly included an offensive counter-insurgency component. Initially, MINUSMA was intended to work alongside Malian and French Operation Barkhane forces, with the latter responsible for counter-terrorism operations (Jezequel et al., 2022). This left MINUSMA in the somewhat awkward position of containing the jihadist threat without the ability to suppress it actively (Jezequel et al., 2022). The withdrawal of Barkhane forces and Mali's increasing reluctance to coordinate with the UN mission have further complicated this task (Jezequel et al., 2022).

MINUSMA also faces challenges in its deployment due to the absence of crucial operational capabilities and intelligence networks. Its military resources have been dedicated to safeguarding its facilities, resulting in limited support for other mission objectives (Francis, 2013). Finally, due to the

longstanding insecurity in Mali, reinforced after another coup d'état in 2021, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, and despite its deep connection to the country, Paris withdrew its forces from Mali, alongside Germany, which will withdraw its troops by May 2024 (ICG, 2023).

Current Security Scenario in Mali

Despite the mission's efforts, the stability in central Mali has significantly deteriorated. The presence and attacks of jihadist groups, combined with retaliatory actions from government forces, have fuelled the emergence of self-defence militias and escalated intercommunal violence to unprecedented levels (Shankar, 2023). Tensions continue to mount between the transitional government and the coalition of northern armed groups signatory to the 2015 Algiers peace accord, while the Islamic State gained further ground in the Ménaka region by taking control of the town of Tidermène on 11 April 2023, effectively surrounding the regional capital and displacing locals (Shankar, 2023). This followed weeks of fighting with the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM) (Rinaldi, 2022). Moreover, in the central Mopti region, government forces and elements of Russia's paramilitary Wagner Group reportedly killed nine civilians in the Kourkanda-Peulh village on 1 April 2023. The military claimed that eight of those killed were jihadists (Shankar, 2023). Later, on 22 April, suspected JNIM fighters launched suicide attacks in the town of Sévaré, also in the Mopti region, resulting in the death of 10 civilians and over 60 wounded (Shankar, 2023)).

Also in 2023, tensions resurfaced between the UN and Malian authorities before the renewal of MINUSMA's mandate in Mali. During a meeting on 12 April, members of the UN Security Council expressed concerns about the stalled peace process with northern armed groups and the potential delay of the presidential elections (Rinaldi, 2022). These concerns followed Malian authorities' indefinite postponement of a constitutional referendum in March (Rinaldi, 2022). In this context, El-Ghassim Wane, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Mali, urged the authorities in Bamako to lift restrictions on MINUSMA's operations (Shankar, 2023). Nonetheless, a disinformation campaign orchestrated by the military junta attempted to attribute the 22 April attack to MINUSMA, leading to an angry mob assaulting and injuring two MINUSMA staff members in Sévaré on 23 April (Rinaldi, 2022).

The reasons behind the French and German withdrawal

Behind the decision of various European contingents to withdraw from the MINUSMA mission is the activity of Wagner Group mercenaries in Mali. The Wagner Group has fought jihadists in Mali since December 2021; it also has established ties with the military junta, increasing its power and access to resources (Rinaldi, 2022). The European contingents fear accidental confrontations with Wagner employees and the potential reputational damage that they could take, being seen working alongside the mercenary group in the fight against the jihadist threat (Jezequel et al., 2022). The arrival of the Wagner Group played a role in France's decision to withdraw from Operation Barkhane (Jezequel et al., 2022).

The lack of cooperation from the Malian government has emerged as another significant factor influencing the decision to withdraw troops. The relations between MINUSMA and the transitional authorities have oscillated; the government has, for some months, denied the UN team access to sites

in the country's centre to investigate claims of crimes against civilians (ICG, 2023). In this line, since the arrival of Russian forces, Mali has imposed increasing restrictions on flights and land patrols, resulting in the closure of entire regions in the country's north to MINUSMA (ICG, 2023). This action is believed to be driven by the Wagner mercenaries and the Malian army's desire to avoid scrutiny amid allegations of human rights violations and civilian killings (ICG, 2023). Thus, according to Denis Tull (cited by Gridneff, 2022, para. 11) the Malian government's "numerous restrictions on the U.N. mission over the past few months made it "next to impossible" to operate."

This situation has led to the isolation of the Bundeswehr, the most significant troop contributor with up to 1,300 soldiers (MINUSMA, n.d.). The decision to withdraw by May 2024 was made after Mali halted the flights of the critical Heron reconnaissance drone, a core asset for the Bundeswehr (Rinaldi, 2022). The withdrawal of the Bundeswehr will pose significant challenges for MINUSMA, resulting in the scaling down of operations and abandonment of smaller bases (Rinaldi, 2022). Previously, the Bundeswehr played a crucial role in securing mission supply convoys with rescue helicopters, ensuring the delivery of food and equipment to bases such as that in Gao. The withdrawal of Bundeswehr helicopters will make it difficult for MINUSMA to continue supplying more remote locations like Tessalit or Kidal (BBC, 2022).

Furthermore, the Bamako government has been critical of its Western partners, taking a hard-line confrontation with France and Europe. This is partly explained by the number of terror activities in the country, which have steadily increased, as has the number of Malians joining insurgent groups (ICG, 2023). In the past ten years, the Islamist threat has spread to other countries, such as Burkina Faso and Niger, with insurgents raiding the region from their bases in the Sahara (ICG, 2023). In this situation, many Malians feel that France, as an advanced military power, should have been able to solve the terror problem and that it should withdraw if it is not able to do so (BBC, 2022). Moreover, the Malian public showcases resentment towards the presence of its former colonial master (Al Jazeera, 2023). In the end, significant disagreements with the military junta led to the French withdrawal from Mali; for example, Paris believed that the current transitional government lacked suitability as a counterterrorism collaborator that showed reluctance or incapacity in tackling the expanding network of security and governance challenges within the nation (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2022).

Lastly, due to Mali's increasingly risky security situation, European contingents are reluctant to continue their deployment. Troop contributors are becoming frustrated with the recurring loss of soldiers in jihadist attacks while perceiving minimal progress in stabilising the country (Jezequel et al., 2022). The unwillingness to put their soldiers at further risk is understandable, given that 174 blue helmets have already been killed in hostile acts (CSIS, 2022). That the mission's focus seems to be more on ensuring the safety of its convoys and facilities rather than prioritising the protection of civilians puts into question its commitment to the Malian people. This shift in priorities has also contributed to the diminished willingness of troop contributors to maintain their presence in Mali.

This situation creates a dangerous scenario where Mali could become a replication of the Afghanistan conflict (or aspects of it) in the Sahel and Sahara regions, with potentially devastating consequences for French and Western nationals and their strategic interests in the area (Francis, 2013). The fear of the "Afghanisation" of the security situation in Mali among Western powers stems from the existing

challenges within the country (Francis, 2013, p. 14). As discussed, Mali is already characterised by dysfunction and poor governance, with an ill-equipped and ineffective army incapable of providing adequate security for its people. In this line, the concern is that if Islamist insurgents are not ultimately defeated, and their bases and terrorist infrastructure are not destroyed, they will use the civilian population as cover to regroup and launch new insurgent attacks, similar to how the Taliban operated in Afghanistan against the United States and its allies (Francis, 2013). In Mali, Islamist groups experienced in guerrilla warfare and familiar with the country's geography view the crisis as a new jihadist adventure where they can harass, humiliate, kill and entangle the French "infidels" in an unwinnable war (CSIS, 2022). Accordingly, Mali's terrain, with its remote mountains, caves and vast deserts, provides an ideal setting for guerrilla warfare and thus increases previously-mentioned concerns about the conflict's potential "Afghanisation" (Francis, 2013, p. 14).

The Turn to Russia

Mali has recently been redirecting its attention towards Russia as a potential ally in the fight against jihadism and as a strategic partner in stabilising the security situation in the country. The Malian government believes that France has been unable to address the issue of instability in the Sahel region effectively. However, transnational authorities view Russia as a reliable and pragmatic partner, offering assistance that aligns more closely with Mali's needs (CSIS, 2022). The current leaders of Mali see tangible advantages in receiving Russian support, as they gain immediate access to military hardware, particularly aerial equipment, and receive direct assistance for ground combat operations involving Malian troops (ICG, 2023). In contrast, Western nations are perceived as slower or hesitant in providing military equipment (ICG, 2023).

Overall, Mali's embrace of Russia has been met with enthusiasm by a population weary of the persistent instability that the presence of thousands of French soldiers has failed to alleviate (ICG, 2023). This shift has revived hope among Malians who had lost trust in the government and ruling elites (ICG, 2023). The collaboration with Russia has also served as a potent means for the transitional authorities to rally popular backing (ICG, 2023). Finally, concluding with this discussion on the context of the conflict in Mali, its dynamics, its actors and their roles, a series of actionable policy recommendations to European Land Force Commanders and military policymakers will follow.

Recommendations

- The UNSC must provide sufficient resources to the MINUSMA mission, especially following the withdrawal of the Barkhane mission from Mali (ICG, 2023). The gap between the mission's objectives and the available resources to achieve them must be addressed. Additionally, there is a need to enhance the contingents' self-protection capacities; this can be done through training and equipment for troop and police force-contributing countries (International Peace Institute [IPI], 2016).
- Additionally, the mission should establish a connection between the security and political aspects of the peace agreement (IPI, 2016). This entails implementing the mission's security and defence components and initiating institutional reforms within the country. Furthermore, MINUSMA should prioritise its efforts by balancing counterterrorism strategies and initiatives to stabilise population centres and restore state administration throughout the nation (IPI, 2016).
- Instead of overly relying on military solutions with its Russian ally, Bamako should seek ways to restore a balanced approach in its relationships with various partners. It is essential to recognise that Russia's emphasis on military interventions alone will not address Mali's multifaceted challenges, which extend beyond the scope of the jihadist threat. The Malian government should reduce its dependence on the Wagner Group and align military operations with a comprehensive, long-term political strategy (Der Lijn, 2019). Furthermore, Bamako should remove the highly obstructive restrictions imposed on the UN's stabilisation mission to facilitate its work effectively (ICG, 2023).

Conclusion

The withdrawal of international forces has introduced uncertainty regarding the prospects for peace and security in Mali in the upcoming year. While there are proponents of increased local involvement in safeguarding the country, the Malian transitional government is actively exploring alternative avenues for collaboration with foreign troops to combat terrorism effectively (Shankar, 2023). Moreover, the spillover of violence into neighbouring coastal nations like Togo, Ghana, and Ivory Coast indicates the widening impact of the conflict. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that Bamako's reliance on Russia and the Wagner group is unlikely to address Mali's long-standing instability. Finally, to address the ongoing violence and political impasse, allocating sufficient resources to the MINUSMA mission is crucial, as well as bolstering its self-protection capabilities and developing a comprehensive long-term political strategy.

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