

Tull, Denis

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SWP Comment

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UN Peacekeeping in Mali

Time to Adjust Minusma's Mandate

Denis M. Tull

The mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (Minusma) ends on 30 June 2019. There is little doubt that the UN Security Council will extend the mission. Less clear is how Minusma contributes to Mali's stabilisation and how the mandate could be altered to increase the mission's effectiveness. In light of changing conditions in Mali, the Security Council should consider a stronger Minusma engagement in central Mali. But for this to happen, cuts must be made in the north.

Operating since 2013, Minusma currently counts 15,365 personnel and a budget of around \$1 billion. Its strategic priority is to support the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement, signed in 2015 between the Malian government and the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), an umbrella of northern rebel groups. At a practical level, Minusma is assisting the restoration of state authority in northern Mali, the establishment of a new institutional architecture for the Malian state, security-sector reform, the demobilisation of combatants, and national reconciliation. Other objectives include the protection of civilians as well as facilitating national and local dialogue. Counter-terrorism is not part of the mandate. However, incessant terrorist attacks have severely limited Minusma's ability to carry out its mission effectively.

The renewal of the mandate will not be straightforward, nor should it be. Whilst the US has exerted significant pressure to

reduce the overall budget for UN peace operations, worrying developments in Mali make an in-depth review of Minusma's mandate necessary, particularly its contribution to the peace process and its response to the country's deteriorating situation, especially central Mali.

Context and Current Challenges

The implementation of the Algiers Agreement has made little progress since 2015, although some headway was made in recent months in demobilising combatants and establishing transitional administrations in northern Mali at the district level. On the positive side, over the past two years or so, no fighting has occurred between the parties to the Algiers Agreement, that is, the government, its allied forces (Plateform), and the CMA. Violence in the north is exerted by jihadist forces operating under



the Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans (GSIM), which constantly targets both the Algiers signatories and Minusma. On 20 January 2019, for example, 10 blue helmets lost their lives in an attack on the Minusma camp in Aguelhok.

The peace process – understood as the political integration of northern elites into the state – is fragile and reversible, though peace dividends in the guise of financial and material incentives contribute to stabilising the situation at a low level. Moreover, the cooperation between the CMA and the government during the 2018 presidential elections made clear that the conflict is primarily elite-based and that mutual accommodation of these actors' interests is possible.

Arguably more alarming than the situation in the north are current trends in the regions of Mopti and Ségou in central Mali, where violence is increasingly spreading towards the south-west (Koulikoro) and across borders towards Niger and Burkina Faso. Two closely intertwined drivers of violence can be distinguished: interethnic violence and jihadist violence against the state and its supporters (Minusma).

The first and most important type is violence against civilians, mainly by militias associated with ethnic groups (Dogon and Peul). Their motives range from self-protection and score-settling to simple criminality, though competition over scarce local resources provides the structural background for conflict. For the past two years, a string of attacks on villages has taken place across the Mopti region. In the last 12 months alone, 600 civilians have been massacred and thousands have been newly displaced, according to the UN. In January and February 2019, 70 per cent of all human rights violations in the country took place in the central part of Mali. On 23 March, 160 Peul were slaughtered in the village of Ogossagou (Mopti), allegedly by a Dogon militia.

The second driver of violence is the jihadist Katiba Macina, which is part of the GSIM. It directs violence primarily towards the Malian security forces and Minusma. The number of improvised explosive de-

vices in central Mali more than tripled between 2017 and 2018. In addition, the Katiba exerts violence against representatives of the state (administrators, teachers, village chiefs, etc.) as part of its strategy to further thin out the feeble and ineffective state presence. In the Mopti region, only 30 to 40 per cent of the territorial administration personnel is present, and only 1,300 security forces are stationed across the vast region (spanning 79,000 km²).

Jihadists instrumentalise local inter-ethnic conflicts to gain sympathizers and recruits. The ethnicisation of quite different conflicts reinforces the stigmatisation of the Peul as “terrorists”. Meanwhile, the state does not assume its responsibilities and is strongly suspected of bias against the Peul. Several observers have alleged that the army has tolerated – and even cooperated with – the very Dogon militia supposedly responsible for the Ogossagou massacre. The “Plan de Sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre” (PSIRC), proclaimed by the government in 2017 and supported by the European Union, has so far failed to produce tangible results. The Joint Force of the G5-Sahel States, which has no headquarters since the attack on Sévaré in June 2018, is unlikely to contribute meaningfully to stabilisation in the foreseeable future.

The Limits of Minusma

In this multi-layered context, the benefits and effectiveness of Minusma are uncertain. Last year, a “Strategic Review” of the mission commissioned by the UN Secretary-General was a lost opportunity to shed light on the role of the mission. The review was neither published nor did it affect the mandate.

Public opinion in Mali is very critical of the mission. Malians have accused Minusma of passivity, in particular denouncing that the blue helmets place their own security above that of civilians. The government, for its part, occasionally succumbs to the temptation to use the mission as a scapegoat for its own failures. However, it appears more

recently that it has recognised that the mission brings more advantages than inconveniences. If anything Minusma's presence is an important factor in mobilising and sustaining international aid.

Many Western diplomats in Bamako are generally supportive of Minusma. They stress that the mission and its chief, Mahamat Saleh Annadif, play an important role as mediators both in Bamako politics and with respect to the peace agreement. Moreover, the mission is credited with contributing to Mali's stabilisation, though this assertion remains diffuse and uncertain. It is plausible to maintain, as is often the case, that the situation would be much worse without Minusma. Yet, this only says that Minusma is able to slow rather than stop the universally acknowledged deterioration of the security situation, much less redress it.

There is no doubt that Minusma operates within a difficult and hostile environment. Around half of all blue helmets killed worldwide through malign acts since 2013 have lost their lives in Mali, most of them in the north. Moreover, Minusma has to expend enormous military and logistical efforts to be present in northern Mali. The situation imposes security precautions that tie up scarce resources which are no longer available for carrying out the mandate. Around 80 per cent of its military resources are devoted to securing its own infrastructure and the convoys on which the mission depends to supply its bases.

Furthermore, the caveats of the various national contingents — including those of the German army — and a lack of mobility in the form of helicopters and armoured carriers make it impossible for the mission to expand its scope beyond the vicinity of its bases. By and large, Minusma is more a target than an anchor of stability. At best, it stabilises places where it is physically present (Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, etc.). The mission is struggling to adapt to its environment. Its military force is in the process of establishing a dedicated sector for central Mali, and it has intensified the launch of military operations to temporarily control some of Mali's vast zones. More recently,

the integration of civilian and military components has received much needed attention.

Options for the New Mandate

Adjustments to Minusma's mandate must be based on the premise that the mission will be asked to do more without benefiting from increased resources. To begin with, the mission should continue to provide support to the implementation of the peace accord. However, this does not necessarily require a comprehensive military presence, especially in the northern sector (Tessalit, Aguelhok, and Kidal), where Minusma has deployed more than 2,000 troops that play a very limited role as a security provider. The effectiveness and efficiency of these already scarce military resources are relatively low there, especially since the mission cannot engage in counter-insurgency. From a political, geographical, and demographic point of view, central Mali is as much of a challenge to the stabilisation of the country today as the north. Though the mission should continue its support of the peace process, it would make sense to reduce its military footprint in the northern sector in favour of increased engagement in the Mopti region, where it could bring greater added value.

So far, the UN military force has hardly been present in central Mali. Three priorities could be envisaged: first, the protection of civilians; second, and upon Malian request, support for regional and local conflict mediation; third, stabilisation based on a much more ambitious cooperation between the civilian and military pillars of the mission, the UN country team, and the Malian government. This last point is key: If Bamako and the UN do not act together, based on a compatible analysis and vision with respect to stabilisation efforts in central Mali, greater UN involvement in the region will be futile. This firstly requires that the Malian government express an explicit demand for an enhanced presence of Minusma in central Mali, including its

military force. Until recently, the government was opposed to this.

An enhanced military presence of Minusma aims not only at improving the security situation. It should also provide civilian sections, humanitarian organisations, and the Malian authorities with the space to become involved in the Mopti region, assisting the state's return in terms of police, justice, administration, and teachers. At the same time, Minusma should avoid the trap of state substitution. Surely the state is part of the problem, but there will be no durable solutions in its absence either. Joint Minusma operations with the Malian army should be envisaged, aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of the army while concurrently serving as a way to monitor the behaviour of Malian troops and prevent abuses and exactions. This would also enable Minusma to provide the EU Training Mission and other partners with key information about the skills and needs of the Malian army. A mentoring approach would be another possible option for these purposes. The UN Security Council had mandated Minusma in 2018 to embark on this approach with respect to northern Mali, though the idea was never implemented.

The question remains as to what incentives international partners can provide to persuade the government to assume responsibility in central Mali. A first step would be to condition international support on the implementation of concrete measures and timetables within the framework of an improved PSIRC.

It would be an illusion to think that the proposed adjustments to the Minusma mandate will solve all problems. Minusma will continue to be a target for jihadist attacks. With more personnel and a stronger presence in central Mali, hostile attacks are more likely to increase. Also, a partial relocation of Minusma troops from the northern to the central sector will not enable it to establish a presence in all areas of concern;

increased mobility and a focus on selected districts is inevitable and necessary.

Outlook

Current developments in central Mali underline what some observers and diplomats in Bamako have been arguing for some time: It is of little help to look at the multiple layers of conflict in Mali primarily through the lenses of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Nonetheless, terrorism, along with migration, remains the primary reason for the large-scale international and European involvement in Mali and the wider Sahel. Terms like social revolt, insurrection, and civil war are arguably more apt to describe the situation in central Mali. Jihadist violence is a challenge, certainly for the Malian state, its army, and Minusma. But it is not the primary threat to the civilian population, neither in central nor northern Mali.

Indeed, to focus squarely on terrorism is to overlook the contours of the political causes of Mali's predicament, such as the blatant lack of state authority and legitimacy, the rule of law, and human security. With its fixation on terrorism, the Malian government not only feeds the worst fears of Western partners, but also uses this fixation to conceal its own mistakes and omissions, so far with great success.

The long shadow of the fight against terrorism creates spaces that local and national Malian actors ably use to sit out the recurrent problems of the country, and even use these to their own advantage. The Ogossagou massacre should give Mali's international partners an opportunity to take a closer look at these interrelationships and the incentives that determine the behaviour of Mali's diverse actors.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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Dr Denis M. Tull, Senior Associate in the Middle East and Africa Division at SWP, is currently working as a researcher at the Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire (IRSEM) in Paris.