

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Assessing the Effectiveness

of the United Nations Mission
in Mali / MINUSMA

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Visiting address: C.J. Hambros plass 2d

Address: P.O. Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway

Internet: effectivepeaceops.net | www.nupi.no

E-mail: info@nupi.no

Fax: [+ 47] 22 99 40 50

Tel: [+ 47] 22 99 40 00

Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali

(MINUSMA)

Lead Author

Dr. Jaïr van der Lijn, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI),
Sweden

Co-authors

Natasja Rupesinghe, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Norway

Dr. John Karlsrud, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Norway

Dr. Linda Darkwa, Training for Peace Project, Ethiopia

Tobias von Gienanth, International Peace Operations Center (ZIF), Germany

Dr. Fiifi Edu-Afful, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center
(KAIPTC), Ghana

Noura Abouelnasr, Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution,
Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCPA), Egypt

Brig. Gen. Md Tofayel Ahmed, Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation
Training (BIPSOT), Bangladesh

EPON Series Editor

Dr Cedric de Coning, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Norway





Executive Summary

Until 2016, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was a relatively successful peace operation. It managed to strengthen stability in northern Mali, decreased the number of civilians killed in the conflict, and allowed large numbers of displaced persons to return home. MINUSMA also supported the organisation of the 2013 elections and assisted the peace process culminating in the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, also known as the Algiers Agreement. Many of these achievements are still standing and are particularly impressive considering the size of the country, the logistical challenges, the hostile security environment, and, in spite of a \$1 billion budget, the relatively limited resources for implementing its mandate. However, since 2016, MINUSMA's effectiveness in terms of stabilisation and the protection of civilians has decreased.

In the North, fighting between the signatories of the Algiers Agreement – the government, its allies in the *Plateform*, and the Coordination of Azawad Movements – has been absent, and reportedly these parties cooperated during the 2018 elections. This indicates that it is to a large extent an elite conflict that can be resolved. Moreover, in recent months, the signatory parties have been making some progress in the implementation of the Algiers Agreement and the 2018 Pact for Peace, in part due to pressure from the Security Council. Reconciliation processes are tenuous as trust among the parties is not easily built. Progress in the Malian peace process is thus slow. However, violence has increased as jihadist groups have been attacking MINUSMA, the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMA), and the Algiers Agreement signatories. As a consequence, MINUSMA has sustained an extraordinary number of fatalities compared to other recent UN peace operations. On 20 January 2019, in Aguelhok, it lost ten personnel members in one attack alone.

It is this security environment that is the biggest operational challenge to MINUSMA's effectiveness.

In addition to the challenging situation in the North, central Mali has destabilised significantly, particularly since 2016. In the regions of Mopti and Segou, the growing presence of and attacks carried out by jihadist groups have triggered the further retreat of an already relatively absent state. Jihadist activities have stoked the proliferation of self-defence

militias and a vicious cycle of inter-communal violence that has reached unprecedented levels. MINUSMA has only been mandated to help the Malian government address the situation since June 2018. At the end of 2018 and during 2019, mass killings have occurred on all sides. Violence reached an unprecedented scale with the 23 March Ogossagou massacre in which some 160 Peul were killed. The government has been implementing a plan to re-establish state presence in the central regions (Plan de sécurisation in-

tégrée des régions du Centre — PSIRC), but results so far have been limited. At worst, the redeployment of the military is aggravating insecurity in some localities. MINUSMA's presence is mainly in larger towns. It is very limited in the central regions and rural areas where non-state armed actors are active, and it does not have the required capabilities to protect civilians.

The EPON research team conducted 66 interviews with MINUSMA and other international officials, Malian officials, civil society representatives, and researchers; organised focus group meetings with civil society in Bamako, Gao and Mopti; and conducted literature and document research. It is very grateful for the generous support received in the process from MINUSMA and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

The team found that MINUSMA is facing much criticism. Interviewees and focus group meeting participants feel the Mission is no longer able to improve peace and stability in Mali, and they readily described MINUSMA's shortcomings. At the same time, there is consensus that, in the absence of MINUSMA, the security situation in Mali, and perhaps even the whole region, would likely deteriorate significantly. Only a few interviewees and focus group meeting participants said there would be no difference, or a chance of improvement, if MINUSMA were to leave.

In addition to the challenging situation in the North, central Mali has destabilised significantly, particularly since 2016.

Effectiveness explained in dimensions

People-Centred Approach

MINUSMA's response to the asymmetric threats it faces has often been bunkerisation in 'supercamps' and in military bases and allocating significant resources to convoy protection. As civilian staff members rely on military escorts to conduct their field missions, the Mission's ability to reach out to local populations in a people-centred approach has been constrained. In spite of this, MINUSMA is trying to have an impact on the lives of local populations. The Mission tries to engage with a broad range of civilian stakeholders, mainly at the operational level and through quick impact projects, stabilisation and recovery projects, etc.

However, since the majority of its mandated tasks are 'in support of the Malian government', it is the Malian state that in many respects sets the agenda and not the ordinary Malian citizenry. This is a challenge because MINUSMA's principal interlocutor does not always act in the interests of 'the people'. More importantly, the state, the government, and its agents are viewed as illegitimate and outright predatory in some localities in central and northern Mali. This limits the Mission's broad inclusivity at the strategic level.

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Legitimacy and Credibility

In terms of legitimacy and credibility, formally MINUSMA's presence is upon request of the Government of Mali. From the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Mali Metre surveys, and the focus groups conducted, it appears that about half of the population is generally satisfied with MINUSMA's performance. The Mission is more positively perceived in the North, particularly because of the development projects it implements within the context of its stabilisation efforts.

In the central regions, the main complaint is over MINUSMA's absence. Focus group participants want the Mission to play a more active role. Among the population in the southern regions, and among many government officials, the Mission has lost a large measure of goodwill. This is partly due to misunderstandings since the beginning, as they expected the Mission to fight rebels and be involved in counter-terrorism. Instead, they now see the Mission as an infringement upon Mali's national sovereignty.



UN Photo/Sylvain Liechi

At the same time, in localities where the government and its agents do not have support from the population, MINUSMA's legitimacy is negatively affected by its association with the FAMA, and the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (JF-G5S), to which it provides operational and logistical support, as well as with the French counter-terrorism operation Barkhane, which it co-locates with in some locations.

Moreover, ordinary citizens do not easily distinguish between the mandates of international operations, and a common assumption is that they do work together. Recently, MINUSMA and other missions have even been accused of complicity with the state, including in allegations that it is arming self-defence militias that have committed atrocities. In spite of measures such as the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy and Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Compliance Frameworks, this clearly illustrates the challenges of supporting a state with a poor governance and human rights track record.

Primacy of Politics

MINUSMA struggles with the primacy of politics in its efforts. The implementation of the Algiers Agreement is the fulcrum for its engagement. However, this agreement only covers the North-South relationship. Under international pressure, Mission leadership



has thus far excluded so-called ‘Terrorist Armed Groups.’ These are the jihadist groups, some of whom wield significant influence in the conflict, and who pose a considerable threat to the future stability of Mali and the security of its people. Moreover, the reality on the ground demonstrates that boundaries between signatory or ‘Compliant Armed Groups’ and terrorist and criminal actors are fluid and cannot be easily separated into rudimentary categories. Furthermore, MINUSMA has been on the back foot in devising a political strategy to address the rapidly increasing violence in central Mali. While early warnings were sounded, the response has been slow, partially because of the Malian government’s reluctance to permit international involvement.

For MINUSMA to prioritise a political solution in all its activities, its engagement would have to move beyond its current counterparts, the government, and the Compliant Armed Groups. Giving way to the growing domestic opinion, which supports the Malian government entering into dialogue with key jihadist leaders, would need to be seriously considered. With regard to the Centre, the Malian government would have to lead a political process that the Mission can support. MINUSMA would need to deal with not only the North or even the central regions, but with the entire country and, to some extent, the Sahel region as a whole. It would also need to engage beyond the current themes – including issues such as exclusion, criminality, and the governance aspects of natural resources and climate-related challenges. This would, however, risk overstretch.

National and Local Ownership

Although not always supported by their rhetoric, the current parties to the Algiers Agreement have by and large taken ownership over the work of MINUSMA. To some extent, they depend on the Mission. However, that does not mean they invest in it. This is also evident in the limited progress made so far. Rather, parties, like the government,

often use the Mission as a scapegoat for their own failure to deliver. Moreover, related to the legitimacy of the Mission described above, local ownership of MINUSMA's efforts is limited by a lack of understanding of or dissatisfaction with the Mission's mandate among large sections of the Malian population. In order to strengthen national and local ownership, the discourse on a political settlement would need to be broadened, and the parties would need to explain to their population what agreement they have signed.

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the substance, effectiveness, and success of the Mission. MINUSMA ensured the inclusion of gender issues in the Algiers Agreement and its subsequent monitoring. It has also become a promoter of gender equality and responsiveness in the political, civil, judicial and economic reconstruction process of Mali, in part by supporting projects and training and aiming to have a more gender-sensitive approach in its efforts.

Women, Peace and Security

Initially, the topic of women, peace and security did not receive the attention it requires. However, this has given way to a more integrated approach in which women's lived experiences, understanding, and capabilities are factored into

International Support

There is international support for MINUSMA, including general support from the Security Council for the time being. However, much work remains to be done to overcome the distrust, rivalry and competition between individual neighbouring states, (sub-) regional organisations, and outside actors before a coherent and joint international strategy for the long-term stabilisation of Mali can be developed and implemented. Governments in the Sahel regions support MINUSMA and the peace process. At the same time, Mali's neighbours are keen to keep their own jihadi extremists on the other side of the border.

African actors mistrust the role of France, and the US pressure to cut costs may have increasingly negative implications. Cracks in international support are starting to appear.

Coherence and Partnerships

Apart from MINUSMA, Mali hosts a range of multilateral peace operations and interventions: the AU Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL), the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali), the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), Operation Barkhane, and the JF-G5S. Although this has been described in the past as a ‘security traffic jam’, most of the time, these missions are complementary, as there is enough to be done. The main challenge in terms of coherence and partnerships is that the different operations each focus mainly on their own areas or niches, and do not coordinate their efforts enough to speak of an international ‘strategy’. Coordination means more than having coordination meetings. As such, the missions operate as islands in the sea of the Malian conflict, rarely conflicting with one another, but also rarely working together in an international joint strategy.

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Strategic Policy Dilemmas

Currently, MINUSMA finds itself at a crossroads. It needs time to succeed, but this is also valuable time Mali does not have at this moment. In the meantime, civilians suffer from attacks, while the US particularly is losing interest in supporting a costly UN peace operation that is not able to deliver quick results. MINUSMA might regain momentum for the stabilisation of Mali, and the broader Sahel region, if strategic choices are made on a number of policy dilemmas. On the other hand, if the Security Council makes budget-driven choices, the results may be disastrous. Some of the main strategic policy dilemmas the Mission faces are described below.

To decentralise the Mission, or not?

Although originally large parts of MINUSMA’s civilian component were meant to be deployed in the field, logistical and security reasons have prevented this from happening. Currently, large parts of the civilian component are concentrated in Bamako. This has as an advantage easier communication with the central government, and it facilitates the

institution-building side of the mandate. Moreover, a decentralised mission runs the risk of being spread too thinly. At the same time, one of the main problems is that the majority of the Malian population, who live in the southern regions, see many white UN cars, but do not see major benefits of MINUSMA operations. In their view, the Mission does not undertake counter-terrorism, and it also does not bring them the stabilisation projects received by other areas where MINUSMA is deployed. However, the Mission might not be able to completely decentralise, as that could exacerbate negative public perceptions in the South of the Mission being partial, in favour of rebel forces, and unwilling to deal with terrorism.

To concentrate on the North, the Centre, or both?

Originally, MINUSMA was set up to deal with the conflict in the North. Over the past two years, the conflict has intensified in the central regions of the country. For several reasons, the Centre requires attention. First and foremost, the protection of civilians

requires the Mission to deploy there actively. MINUSMA could conduct patrols in rural hard-to-access areas where civilians are in dire need of security guarantees, and more could be done to ensure the FAMA can deploy a more permanent but non-predatory presence in these areas that are difficult to access. Central Mali is a melting pot of ethnic groups, and it is densely populated, so a further escalation of violence risks fuelling

ethnically-motivated atrocities, and completely destabilising the territorial integrity of the country, as well as neighbouring countries.

On the other hand, attention to the central regions requires resources. For security reasons, troop-contributing countries hesitate to send their troops to the Centre. Moreover, given the current budgetary and resource limitations, if more attention is paid to the central regions, gains made in the North may be lost. Although some progress has been made in the North, it is likely too early to drawdown. There is still a continued need for a strong MINUSMA presence to sustain its thus far successful contribution to building confidence between the Algiers Agreement signatory parties.

To link with the government, or not?

MINUSMA's current strategic aim is to restore and extend state authority throughout Mali's national territory. This task, like MINUSMA's supportive role for the JF-G5S, is at times at odds with the Mission's good offices, confidence-building and facilitation tasks that are required to support dialogue, reconciliation and social cohesion within the

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context of the implementation of the Algiers Agreement. The latter tasks require impartiality, which is lost by linking the Mission with the current government. In the central and northern regions, the state is mostly absent beyond larger towns, and in some localities it is perceived as abusive, predatory and illegitimate. There is also a lack of confidence in its ability to protect the local populations and in its willingness to fight jihadist groups. The challenge is that support for the national government and its security sector is required to overcome one structural cause of instability in Mali – state weakness. However, in the absence of sufficient human rights due diligence, legitimacy and inclusivity, it may further contribute to another cause of instability.

To support counter-terrorism and stabilisation, or go back to basics?

Given the destabilisation of Mali since 2016, the question has arisen as to what extent the current counter-terrorism and stabilisation efforts by the Malian armed forces, Barkhane, the JF-G5S, and MINUSMA are still effective. In fact, current counter-terrorism conducted in Mali is highly problematic as it has further fuelled local conflict dynamics. The limited support for the government, its poor human rights and governance record, and its reported use of ethnic proxy militias who are responsible for committing atrocities against the civilian population make it an awkward partner for MINUSMA.

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The Malian government and, by proxy, international counter-terrorism support, insufficiently distinguishes between jihadism and the legitimate concerns of sections of the Malian population. These grievances are, in turn, exploited by ‘terrorist’ actors. This has amplified inter-communal violence, further radicalised parts of the population, and led to mass internal displacement. The complex Malian situation places the Mission in difficult situations in which the choices that have to be made are not binary or clear cut. At the same time, returning to political tasks alone may risk further destabilisation of the country and potentially the whole Sahel-West African region.

Strategic policy options

As a result of these strategic policy dilemmas, a number of strategic policy options are conceivable. The Brahimi report states that the Secretariat ‘must tell the Security Council what it needs to know, not what it wants to hear.’ This responsibility extends to analysts. The section below endeavours to do this.

1. Drawdown and possible continuation as a political mission

Drawing down the military force and concentrating on the civilian component appears to be the most cost-effective solution in the short run. However, the risk and serious consequences of the North breaking away, or of a collapse of the Malian state affecting the broader region, should be enough to drop this option. In the absence of its military presence,

MINUSMA is probably less able to continue its military and civilian confidence-building role, particularly in the North, and with regard to the peace process. Moreover, a military drawdown would signal a lack of interest from the international community in the developments in Mali, would give momentum to those forces that want to continue the conflict, and would undo the current peace dividend.

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2. Continuation as a peacekeeping and stabilisation operation

This is the most likely option, and there are several variations of this scenario, depending on the regional focus of the Mission, the resources available, and the extent of decentralisation of the civilian component.

a) Focus on the North

The Mission might be considered unsuitable to deal with the local and diversified problems of the Centre, and could focus on its original mandate of supporting the political process and stability in the North. Resources would not be increased, and attention would not be further shifted to the central regions. This option risks effectively allowing the Centre of the country to collapse, which in turn might lead to the breakup of the country, as the connection between the South and the North would be lost.

b) Focus on the Centre

Considering the above-mentioned risks for the territorial integrity of Mali, the serious need for the protection of civilians in the central regions, and the likelihood that the available resources will remain the same, a strategic refocus for MINUSMA might be to deal with the most urgent and current issues. Shifting existing military and civilian capabilities south would enhance MINUSMA's outreach and representation, and might prevent the central regions from collapsing. In the short term, it would have to focus on the protection of civilians and advocate strongly for the disarmament of ethnic militias operating in central Mali. Having a riverine and a designated helicopter unit could enable



the protection of civilians in areas that are currently inaccessible. MINUSMA could deploy a Quick Reaction Force to hotspots where inter-communal violence is rife, such as in Bankass or Koro. However, to have the most impact, patrols must be conducted in rural areas affected by insecurity. At the same time, solutions need to be found to ensure stability in the long term. Furthermore, political engagement could continue on the peace process in the North, and a military presence in the hotspots Kidal and Menaka is advisable. However, in the absence of the Mission's confidence-building presence in other areas in the North, the stability of the whole region might be at further risk and, depending on the level of success in the central regions, it might eventually break away again.

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c) Struggling on with the current resources and focusing on the Centre and the North

The deployment would stay *grosso modo* (i.e., relatively) the same, with some redeployments within existing resources from the North to the Centre. For example, MINUSMA could reconfigure its troops for a short-to-medium time period so that a fully-fledged military and UNPOL contingent can be deployed to hotspots in central Mali, with the possibility of functioning as an inter-positional force when inter-communal conflicts flare up. This might not directly further destabilise the situation in the North, but it may not be enough to help stabilise the Centre. Most likely, it would continue Mali's slow process of destabilisation, but prevent the immediate collapse or break-up of the country.

d) Expansion and focus on the Centre and the North

Expanding the Mission to the central regions without affecting the current deployment in the North and, therefore, not risking the stability of that region, would require the Mission to have additional resources for the central regions (as described above). This would clearly be the best option for Mali. However, in addition to the higher costs, which would be a challenge for the UN under the current budget constraints, this would also allow certain parties to dodge their responsibilities further, as the UN would be taking care of them.

3) Readjustment to a counter-terrorism mission

Although this is a less likely and more a problematic option, it is clearly the preferred option of the Malian government, many Malian stakeholders, particularly in Bamako, and key regional players. Currently, MINUSMA is only meant to provide logistical support to the JF-G5S, but the military counter-terrorism efforts of JF-G5S on the Malian side



UN Photo/Marco Dormino

of the border could be integrated into MINUSMA. In fact, the Malian government and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) initially hoped that, upon deployment, MINUSMA would continue the counter-terrorism role of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Since MINUSMA as a whole is unlikely to receive such a counter-terrorism mandate, the JF-G5S could be deployed as a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) comparable to that of MONUSCO, as was originally foreseen by ECOWAS. Alternatively, a model could be envisioned, like the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), in which MINUSMA is replaced with a regional counter-terrorism force that is supported by UN logistics. The benefits of both models are that the military counter-terrorism strategy would be better integrated into the international approach for the region and it would be better resourced, more accountable in terms of human rights obligations, and more legitimate as it would be part of the UN system, among other benefits. Two major disadvantages are that the JF-G5S in Mali is essentially the FAMA, which is not yet reconstituted, and Mali's problem is mainly a breakdown of its social contract, which cannot be solved militarily.





About EPON

Peace operations are among the most important international mechanisms for contemporary conflict management. However, their effectiveness remains the subject of confusion and debate in both the policy and academic communities. Various international organizations conducting peace operations, including the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the European Union (EU), have come under increasing pressure to justify their effectiveness and impact. Although various initiatives are underway to improve the ability to assess the performance of peace operations, there remains a distinct lack of independent, research-based information about the effectiveness of such operations.

To address this gap, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), together with over 40 partners from across the globe, have established an international network to jointly undertake research into the effectiveness of peace operations. This network has developed a shared methodology to enable the members to undertake research on this topic. This will ensure coherence across cases and facilitate comparative research. The network will produce a series of reports that will be shared with stakeholders including the UN, AU, and EU, interested national government representatives, researchers, and the general public. Over time, this project will produce a substantial amount of mission-specific assessments, which can be used to identify the key factors that influence the effectiveness of peace operations. This data will be made available via a dedicated web-based dataset that will be a publicly available repository of knowledge on this topic.

In 2018, four pilot case studies were undertaken – in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), Mali (MINUSMA), Somalia (AMISOM) and South Sudan (UNMISS). The results of these initial research studies are being shared at international



UN Photo/Blagoje Grujic

seminars in Addis Ababa (African Union HQ), Brussels (European Union HQ) and in New York (United Nations HQ). The network partners have reviewed the pilot experiences and refined their research methodology, and the missions identified for the 2019 studies are: the UN mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the joint AU-UN hybrid mission in Darfur (UNAMID), the UN Verification Mission in Colombia and the EU and OSCE missions in Ukraine.

The network is coordinated by NUPI. Many of the partners fund their own participation. NUPI has also received funding from the Norwegian Research Council and the



Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support the Network and its research, including via the UN Peace Operations project (UNPOP) and the Training for Peace (TfP) programme.

For more information, please contact:

Dr. Cedric de Coning
NUPI Center for UN and Global Governance
cdc@nupi.no | [@CedricdeConing](https://www.instagram.com/CedricdeConing) | +4794249168

This report assesses the extent to which the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is achieving its current strategic objectives, and the impact the Mission has had on the political and security situation in Mali.

Until 2016 MINUSMA managed to strengthen stability in northern Mali, decreasing the number of civilians killed in the conflict, and allowing large numbers of displaced persons to return home. MINUSMA also assisted the peace process, culminating in the 2015 Algiers Agreement. Many of these achievements are still standing. However, since 2016 MINUSMA's effectiveness in terms of stabilisation and the protection of civilians has decreased. In the North, the signatory parties have been making slow progress in the implementation of the Algiers Agreement and the 2018 Pact for Peace. In addition, central Mali has destabilised significantly, as Jihadist activities have stoked a vicious cycle of inter-communal violence that has reached unprecedented levels. MINUSMA has only been mandated to help the Malian government address the situation since June 2018.

As one of the largest multidimensional peacekeeping operations – currently including nearly 13,000 soldiers and 1,800 police officers from 57 contributing countries, and almost 750 civilians – MINUSMA has been provided with significant resources and an extraordinarily ambitious mandate. However, the Mission finds itself at a crossroads. It needs time to succeed, but this is valuable time Mali does not have. Civilians have come under increasing attack, and the US, in particular, is losing interest in supporting a costly UN peace operation that is not able to deliver quick results.

This report considers the degree to which there is an alignment between the mission's resources and its mandate. It also makes an assessment of the options available to the Mission to increase its effectiveness in the face of extremely challenging circumstances.