

# **Assessing MINUSMA's action (2013–2021): A literature review**

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*Final Version*

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## Abbreviations

AFISMA—African-led International Support Mission to Mali

APR—(*Accord pour la Paix et la Reconciliation*) Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation

AQIM—Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

ASIFU—All Source Information Fusion Unit

ATT—President Amadou Toumani Toure

DDR—Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration

ECOWAS—Economic Community of West African States

EUCAP—European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali

EUTM—European Union Training Mission

FAMa—(*Forces Armées Maliennes*) Malian Armed Forces

GATIA—(*Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés*) Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies

IBK—Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (president of Mali 2013–2020)

ISGS—Islamic State in the Grand Sahara

FC-G5S—G5 Sahel Joint Force

JMAC—Joint Mission Analysis Centre

JNIM—(*Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin*) Support Group for Islam and the Muslims

MDSF (FAMAs in French)—Malian Defence and Security Forces

MINUSMA—United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MNLA—(*Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad*) National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad

MSF—(*Médecins Sans Frontières*) Doctors without Borders

MUAJO—Movement for Oneness and the Jihad in West Africa

NATO—North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PCCs—Police-contributing countries

PoC—Protection of civilians

PSIRC—(*Plan de sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre*) Integrated Plan for the Security of Central Regions

QIPs—Quick impact projects

TCCs—Troop-contributing countries

UNODC—United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

UNOWAS—UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel

UNPOL—United Nations Police

UNSC—United Nations Security Council

UNSC Res—United Nations Security Council Resolution

# 1. Report's structure and summary of findings

## 1.1. The report's structure

This report offers a review of the literature published on the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) since its inception in 2013 until mid-2021. This report comprises seven sections.

Section 2 details the method of selection of the literature considered in this review. It also indicates the broad themes structuring the bibliographical database on which this review is constructed, and notes which themes have remained relatively neglected in the literature, producing knowledge gaps on MINUSMA. Section 3 provides an overview of the political situation in Mali and the factors shaping it. Section 4 discusses the broad considerations framing contemporary peacekeeping and forming the background of MINUSMA's design and transformation, possibly causing some of the mission's limitations on the ground. Section 5 details MINUSMA's mandate and assesses the mission's effectiveness in delivering its mandate, as portrayed in the literature. Section 6 discusses MINUSMA's organisation, operational challenges and successes, as well as its interactions with its institutional environment. Section 7 presents concluding remarks of the authors of this review. It tentatively discusses the future of MINUSMA and proposes areas where MINUSMA's action and organisation can be improved.

## 1.2. Summary of findings

- MINUSMA was created in 2013 after the collapse of Malian institutions a year earlier. The crisis manifested in two ways: the takeover of northern Mali by a jihadist coalition, which was preceded by the outbreak of a separatist rebellion and the concomitant meltdown of central authorities. These events have demonstrated the fragility of security governance arrangements in the north and state institutions in Mali's capital, Bamako, located in the south. This dual crisis was the primary reason France intervened militarily in 2013, followed by a wider stabilisation effort pursued by various international actors. It forms a complicated context in which MINUSMA must navigate.

- MINUSMA displays some doctrinal ambiguity. It belongs to the generation of peacekeeping missions whose mandate is to 'stabilise' a politically violent setting. However, 'stabilisation' is subject to a wide range of interpretations and does not offer a clear guide for action, notably when it comes to the use of force. Some of the concrete challenges and limitations faced by MINUSMA (such as which course of action to follow to better protect civilians) arguably stem from the absence of an actionable interpretation of the term 'stabilisation'.

- MINUSMA's specific mandate contains some inherent contradictions. Its goals are to stabilise Mali's political situation, restore state authority, and support the peace process between the government and the separatists. A key tergiversation of the mandate is to support state authority while supposedly being a neutral mediator in the peace process involving the state and its armed

challengers. Importantly, the priorities of MINUSMA have changed over time. The protection of civilians is now considered more important, following the increasing victimisation of civilians over the years. The available literature hardly assesses all aspects of MINUSMA's mandate delivery. Therefore, the assessment we offer is partial. The peace process progresses slowly. Stabilisation, measured simply through de-escalation of overall violence and including the protection of civilians, is not achieved at all, while little evidence exists to rigorously measure the restoration of state authority in a context marred by chronic instability in Bamako's power circles.

- MINUSMA faces challenges emanating from its internal organisation as well as its institutional and political environment made of multiple international and domestic actors forming a confusing 'stabilisation complex'. Internally, MINUSMA's challenges are technical, logistical, or pertaining to human resources. The literature review identifies these challenges yet does not allow to assess whether 'fixes' are progressively applied as, typically, no literature offers a longitudinal perspective on MINUSMA and most references consulted are singletons on the subject they treat.<sup>1</sup> A structural concern is the inequality in several dimensions that prevails between Western and non-Western staff within MINUSMA. MINUSMA acts more or less cooperatively with its different external interlocutors. A synergy on multiple levels is entertained with France's Operation Barkhane. It is marriage by necessity, as MINUSMA needs to protect its own forces. Relationships with the Malian government and the G5 Sahel—a regional body coordinating the security efforts carried out by Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—could be more harmonious as G5 Sahel members see their grouping as a more effective security instrument than MINUSMA, and demand access to UN funding to create a dedicated counter-terrorism brigade. Some humanitarian actors have complained that the actions of MINUSMA undermine the impartiality of humanitarian space. Among the Malian public, hostility against MINUSMA frequently flares up and then dissipates, suggesting that MINUSMA uses diplomatic resources to fine-tune its relationships with adversarial actors. Unfortunately, the underlying scene diplomacy of MINUSMA remains under-researched.

In conclusion, technical fixes may be needed at many levels to improve MINUSMA's logistical and bureaucratic processes, to deploy forces that are better prepared to combat or refine, analyse, and use the intelligence it collects, which is decisive to both its safety and to the efficacy of its mission. Some deeper thinking may also be given to its internal division of labour, characterised by systemic inequalities between European and non-European (African) staff. Another important finding from this report stems immediately from hard doctrinal questions. MINUSMA's mandate is to stabilise Mali and work with other agencies to achieve this goal. A dilemma emphasised in the literature is whether MINUSMA's stabilisation agenda should be 'cool' (stressing development and governance) or 'hot' (stressing enemy fighting). MINUSMA has seemingly opted for a cool approach. However, any distance taken from a hot stabilisation agenda centred on counter-terrorism efforts demands that lines be clearly drawn to differentiate MINUSMA's actions from what other institutional actors are doing. In the case of Mali, paramount priorities could be established in the following areas: 1) the protection of civilians; 2) the active defence of the currently threatened peace process as an indispensable framework for dialogue with the coalition of former separatists; 3) clear condemnations of army abuses against civilians; and 4) the opening of discussion channels—at least for violence de-escalation purposes—with the jihadist insurgents, who are not (yet) considered valid political interlocutors.

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is Gorur (2020), who captures concisely the evolution of MINUSMA's political priorities and shows how changes in strategies have led to disparate actions lacking a consistent direction. The chronological narrative is powerful yet relatively shallow.

## 2. Methodology: Research questions and literature selection strategy

This report answers two main research questions. First, it explores the origins and unfolding of the political crisis in Mali since 2012. Second, it assesses the effectiveness of MINUSMA, introduced in 2013—one of the most significant and ambitious instruments designed by international actors to address the crisis. The two research questions are addressed through a comprehensive review of the existing literature concentrating on Mali and foreign intervention in the Sahel.

This approach is interdisciplinary. The works we have consulted are produced primarily by political scientists, but also by anthropologists, practitioners, and military strategists. The review is considered comprehensive in the sense that its authors have cast the net widely to retrieve most of the publicly accessible written material on MINUSMA. It may not be considered systematic in the sense that assessing the quality of the material is not an objective of this review. The scholarly literature included has already been peer-reviewed and is therefore considered decent enough to feature in this report. The non-peer-reviewed material is eventually selected in a more *ad hoc* fashion, as detailed below.

The literature review, as a strategy to assess the effectiveness of a policy or institutional arrangement, cannot be equated with a rigorously conducted impact evaluation process.<sup>2</sup> Scholars and analysts who have authored the works we review have naturally focused on what *has* happened rather than what *would have* happened. We do not know how Mali would look like in the absence of MINUSMA. Scholars and analysts tend to focus on what is problematic, rather than what looks normal. The consequence is that problems are over-represented in the literature, and thus in this review as well. Achievements that are part of the regular mandate of the mission simply go unnoticed, unless they are spectacularly outstanding (such as the signature of a major peace agreement). We know for certain when a massacre of civilians has taken place—where MINUSMA has failed to protect civilians—but we do not necessarily know when a massacre has been *avoided* due to some specific action being taken. This bias is the logical consequence of single-case study approaches and the preference for data collection through qualitative tools. However, despite the inherent biases of the literature we have consulted, the present review sheds light on the important mechanisms behind the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of MINUSMA.

The literature we review can be categorised into four main types: academic, peer-reviewed articles, think-tank reports, op-eds or blog posts, and UN or UN-related sources. We referenced this material in a [database](#), whose tabs reflect this typology. The database lists about 30 scholarly articles, 62 think-tank pieces, 44 meaningful op-eds, blog posts or news pieces, and a considerable amount of UN and UN-related material,<sup>3</sup> consulted on an *ad hoc* basis. The material reviewed is written in French or

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<sup>2</sup> Since MINUSMA's mission is by design multidimensional, a proper impact evaluation strategy would require disaggregating MINUSMA's action into a series of areas where it claims to have an impact. But this would prove difficult as MINUSMA portrays itself more like an enabler and a promoter than a doer, rightly leaving to the Malian authorities the role of delivering the policies. The literature we have consulted tends to adopt a holistic approach but still allows to get a sense of the progresses accomplished in MINUSMA's achievements or failures.

<sup>3</sup> This includes reports from the Carter Center, the body officially in charge of independently monitoring the progress of the implementation of Mali's 2015 peace agreement.

English, which are the two main languages in which scholarship and analyses of the Sahel are produced. Some materials produced by jihadist groups (in Arabic) have also been considered (such as statements against elections), but were not included systematically. Written media pieces from Mali were ordinarily written in French. Our linguistic choices (and personal limitations) may not result in profound selection biases in the literature, as we are not aware of any scholarship published in multiple Malian languages, while German, Spanish, Dutch, or Italian authors and think tanks publish in English.

The strategies adopted to select this material vary depending on the type of material used. The scholarly literature has been selected through a systematic exploration of available journals, first via Google Scholar,<sup>4</sup> then via searches in tables of contents of specific journals dedicated to international security or peacekeeping such as *International Peacekeeping*, then via a snowballing method consisting of verifying bibliographies of the initial articles found to identify additional material to be included in the database. We believe that this strategy regarding scholarly publications is ‘omission-proof’. It also allows a look at the literature not studying MINUSMA as a whole but researching some aspects of MINUSMA’s intervention (such as intelligence gathering and processing).

The strategy to select the think-tank material was more restrictive. It is informed by the authors’ prior knowledge of the Sahel and who publishes rigorous analyses on it.<sup>5</sup> It only includes the intellectual production of big organisations known for their focus on the Sahel and MINUSMA and familiar to the authors of this report, one of whom has been working on security in the Sahel since 2007. The think tanks selected include the International Crisis Group, the International Peace Institute, the Clingendael Institute, the Institute for Security Studies, and the *Institut français des relations internationales*, etc. For each organisation, a systematic search of publications containing the keyword MINUSMA was conducted. Blog posts and news pieces have been retrieved on an *ad hoc* basis for the specific topics they cover or the reputation of their author in the Sahel security microcosm.

A topic of interest guiding the selection of news pieces was the perception of MINUSMA among Malian public opinion and MINUSMA’s responses in times of vocal discontent against its presence or action in Mali. Such incidents have occurred frequently in recent years. The *Mali-mètre* initiative, sponsored by the *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, carries out opinion polls in Mali on a regular basis, including the perception of MINUSMA, so we have consulted their reports as well. We did so cautiously, as detailed in Section 5. The UN literature itself, including the regular reports of the UN secretary general, does not *per se* enter the scope of our research. It is used to double-check the validity of the empirical findings produced by non-UN literature.

The selected literature was read and processed in two steps. The first step consisted of a superficial scan to identify the key themes covered in the literature. One or more ‘tags’ were associated with each item to organise the material and structure of the present report. The plan that the report follows stems from the recurring themes identified in the literature. The second step consisted of a more in-depth analytical reading of the selected items to extract their key findings.

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<sup>4</sup> Google Scholar is automated, unlike classic academic portals such as JSTOR, yet it is fairly comprehensive. Its eventual limitations are compensated by the snowballing method we also adopt.

<sup>5</sup> By ‘rigorous’, we mean at least based on some original primary data collection effort on the subject covered rather than recycling of ideas and material produced by others.

The report does not cite all the material entered in the database, as some references overlap, while others have been considered as not particularly useful to the research questions. The report mentions the most significant contributions to the literature and synthesises their core messages.

Two caveats must be considered. First, while abundant, the literature on MINUSMA does not cover all the topics that a curious mind would be keen to read about. Academic research and political science, in particular, privilege the big questions illustrated by case studies. MINUSMA is often treated as a case study (sometimes mixed with a few others such as Somalia, the Central African Republic, or the Congo), illustrating a larger point. As a result, the academic literature investigating MINUSMA exaggeratedly concentrates on the doctrinal debate opposing stabilisation and peacekeeping at the expense of more empirical MINUSMA-specific questions, which would be worth exploring further.<sup>6</sup>

Topics of interest not covered by the literature abound. For instance, the hidden yet certainly fascinating diplomacy between MINUSMA and its multiple interlocutors both within Bamako or outside it, in different critical circumstances, has received little attention. MINUSMA has been caught in several controversies and disputes and has visibly managed to overcome them skilfully. How exactly MINUSMA's local diplomacy and 'good offices' mechanism remains a blind spot in the literature.<sup>7</sup> Another unexplored area is the political economy of MINUSMA's presence: who benefits from it? Who are MINUSMA's main contractors, and how do they obtain contracts? Is MINUSMA transforming the structure of Malian business networks? In addition, we lack evidence on the impact of MINUSMA's economic interventions, such as Quick Impacts Projects, beyond what MINUSMA itself communicates as part of its public relations strategy.<sup>8</sup> In a totally different area, we did not find anything on MINUSMA's efficacy as an institutional communicator and shaper of collective preferences through its media branch, notably through its radio station, Mikado FM.

Second, the typical scholarly piece featured in our review is based on a general research question (not necessarily MINUSMA-specific), followed by findings based on a brief field trip carried out by the authors. The consequence is that the findings published very much reflect a situation captured by the researchers at the time of their visit. Hence, the durability of the problems that they point to is unknown. Some difficulties faced by MINUSMA in a certain year (such as shortages of air assets) may have been addressed, but we have no way to verify this. MINUSMA is an institutional creature that keeps mutating, and this process of organisational transformation has hardly been treated by scholars or think tank analysts.

As a final methodological note, let us mention that one of the authors of this review has a record of academic and policy-oriented research in the Sahel and Mali in particular. We occasionally build on this past research and refer to it explicitly.

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of stabilisation was introduced in peace studies and the practice of peacekeeping to make sense of the evolution of peacekeeping towards robust mandates, extending the possibilities for the peacekeepers to use force. MINUSMA has the word 'stabilisation' in its name but, concretely, does not behave aggressively toward any belligerent in Mali (see Section 4). Therefore, the stabilisation debate sounds a bit hollow when applied to Mali. A typical illustration of how abstract the discussion remains is the claim that a stabilisation mandate may clash with the humanitarian role the mission plays. The danger is very plausible but hardly measured empirically in the material we have consulted.

<sup>7</sup> Through their research, the authors of the report have gathered anecdotal evidence that investigations of abuses by armed actors conducted by the Human Rights Division of the MINUSMA may serve as leverage in negotiations with armed groups. This would be a fascinating topic to research further.

<sup>8</sup> An example of such communication can be found [here](#).

### 3. Mali's dual crisis and its consequences: multifocal insurgency, failing government, and the deployment of a stabilisation complex

**Section's main points:** MINUSMA was created in 2013 after the collapse of Malian institutions, manifested in two ways: the takeover of northern Mali by a jihadist coalition following the outbreak of a Tuareg separatist rebellion, and the concomitant meltdown of central authorities. These events have demonstrated the fragility of security governance arrangements in the north and state institutions in Mali's capital, Bamako. This dual crisis was the reason France intervened militarily in 2013, an initiative followed by a wider stabilisation effort pursued by various international actors.

MINUSMA has been operating in a volatile security environment since its inception in 2013 and has been forced to adapt constantly. This section details the evolution of the political situation in Mali, starting with the outbreak of the crisis which provoked MINUSMA's deployment. It discusses and analyses the evolution of the Malian crisis, from the Tuareg<sup>9</sup> rebellion in 2012 to the military coup in Bamako, leading to a jihadist takeover of the country in the same year. It also covers the French military intervention in 2013, the ensuing 'ruralisation' of jihadist militancy, and the consolidation of a heavy, multiplayer stabilisation complex. The chronology of salient security and political events in Mali since 2011 is shown in Figure 1 at the end of this section.

#### 3.1. Background to the 2012 insurgency

The Malian crisis has deep-rooted origins produced by the colonial era, decolonisation, and imbalanced and bumpy state-making efforts over the last five decades (Boilley 2012). What now forms the north of Mali historically belongs to an interconnected space, made of a constellation of hubs of commerce and trade and political, cultural, and religious junction points between the Arab, Saharan, and Sub-Saharan realms. Under the socialist rule of the first president of independent Mali Modibo Keita, Bamako's state elites saw this human space as an anachronistic system of feudal governance and a security menace (Boilley 2012). Repression against Tuareg claims that autonomy has ensued.

In the years preceding the 2012 rebellion, the north suffered from a lack of political representation and was governed through layers of formal and informal authorities, often in (armed) competition with

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<sup>9</sup> The Tuareg or Kel Tamashek are a Berberophone ethnic group whose population is spread over five countries (Libya, Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso). Their economic specialisation is historically associated with pastoralism or long-distance trade, yet colonial policies, postcolonial state-making, and technological change profoundly transformed their nomadic lifestyle and weakened them politically, by distorting their internal hierarchies and eroding their dominant position in the Sahelian political economy.

each other,<sup>10</sup> and constituting what some scholars have called an ‘area of limited statehood’ (Risse 2011). This situation was entertained by the central authorities as a form of remote governance on the cheaper, which would remain relatively sustainable as long as no northern coalition would become strong enough to challenge the north’s dependence on the centre (Baldaro 2018; Guichaoua 2014). Consequently, northern populations were excluded from major development programmes whose distribution was controlled by the Bamako-based incumbent political class (Mann 2015). This led to unjust and disproportionate access to resources, leading to resentment among Northerners. For these reasons, recurring rebellions led by Tuaregs until 2012 were studied through the prism of a centre vs. periphery cleavage (Guichaoua & Pellerin 2017). The events that followed this approach were obsolete. Insurgencies became ‘multifocal’ (Martin 2021), and the centre itself made its fragility blatant.

### 3.2. The year Mali collapsed: separatist rebellion and jihadist occupation in 2012

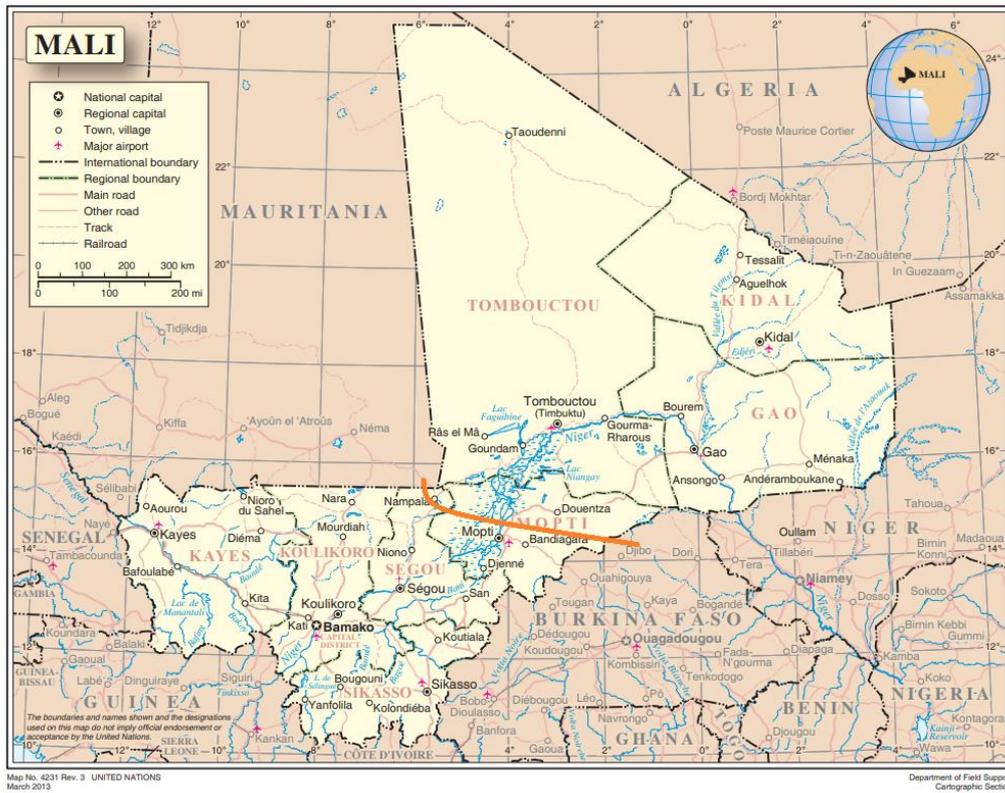
On 17 January 2012 a fourth<sup>11</sup> Tuareg uprising took place in Mali, with a first attack launched against a Malian military unit in the northeastern town of Menaka (Chauzal & Van Damme 2015). Various factions in northern Mali that were previously divided and in disagreement joined forces, and were represented by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). The MNLA was created in October 2011 by Tuareg militants of Malian descent formerly stationed in Libya, and Mali-based Tuareg activists with nationalist ideals (Chauzal & Van Damme 2015; Desgrais et al. 2018). Azawad, the territory claimed by the separatists, left unchallenged Mali’s external frontiers while vaguely establishing a new one inside Mali, cutting the country in two, following a line passing north of Mopti (Boilley 2019).

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Staniland’s concept of ‘armed politics’ has been elaborated in non-Saharan contexts but applies well to northern Mali. It characterises situations where violence is used to achieve limited political gains, for example during electoral cycles, in places where the state has no monopoly over the use of coercive powers (Staniland 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Rebellions in northern Mali have been cyclical and highly interconnected over generations. The first Tuareg rebellion took place immediately after independence in the early 1960s and triggered a fierce repression by the government, pushing many Tuareg youths into exile in Algeria or Libya. Their children spearheaded the next rebellion, occurring in the early 1990s, which led to an ambitious peace agreement whose provisions inspired the 2015 peace agreement signed in Algiers. In 2006, a third rebellion broke out, led by officers unhappy with the slow implementation of the peace agreement. The 2012 rebellion was prepared by Ibrahim Bahanga, who commanded the 2006 rebellion but died in a car accident in 2011, just before ‘his’ rebellion kicked off. On these recurring rebellions, see Lecocq (2010); Bouhlel et al. (2009), and International Crisis Group (2012).

**Map 1.** Mali (while not formally established by the separatists, Azawad corresponds to the area north of the orange line).



Source: [UN](#)

The rebellion went on without much military resistance from the national armed forces (FAMAs), and by the end of April, the northern cities of Aguelhoc, Lere, Tessalit, Kidal, Timbuktu, and Gao were controlled by the rebels (Chauzal & Van Damme 2015). The rebels eventually declared Gao the capital of Azawad on 6 April 2012. The takeover of two-thirds of the Malian territory was precipitated by the meltdown of Mali's centre of power after a coup perpetrated by subaltern FAMA officers in March 2012. However, the rebels' military success in the north was short-lived. They ran out of resources and failed to keep a united front, as competition among Tuareg sub-groups and strategic disagreements about the separatist and 'secular'<sup>12</sup> agendas resurfaced. However, the most significant blow they received came from armed jihadist competitors affiliated with Al Qaeda that had set foot in Mali a decade earlier, in the aftermath of the civil war in Algeria, and gradually expanded their influence through a combination of parochial connections and money-making activities, including a lucrative hostage-taking business (Bouhleb & Guichaoua 2021).

Shortly before the first military attacks of the separatists, a new Tuareg faction called 'Ansar Dine' was created, led by Iyad ag Ghali, a former leader of the rebellion of the 1990s from Kidal, Mali's northern province. Ansar Dine had clashing ambitions with separatist factions. Iyad Ag Ghali considered previous attempts at Tuareg autonomy as a failure and, in the broader environment of the

<sup>12</sup> The MNLA is often portrayed as a secular movement while other Tuareg factions are considered more open to political Islam. This representation has been created for international consumption, notably to justify France's proximity with the MNLA. In practice no leaders in northern Mali can ignore the influence of religious actors in public affairs and necessarily are in a dialogue with them.

Arab Spring,<sup>13</sup> proposed a religious agenda rather than a secessionist agenda, including the intention to implement Sharia law and empower religious elders. Ansar Dine established ties with Al-Qaeda through the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Oneness and the Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), an offshoot of AQIM active in the Gao region. In May 2012, the coalition formed by Ansar Dine, MUJAO and AQIM, evicted separatists from all the northern cities they had previously taken over.<sup>14</sup> The jihadists ruled northern Mali for about ten months until the French launched Operation Serval. This 10-month unchallenged rule offered jihadists an opportunity to implement a governance system based on their reading of the Islamic scriptures. The results were mixed in terms of popular acceptance, yet the jihadists took advantage of their temporary hegemony to make their mode of governance known and develop support networks among sections of northern Mali's communities (Bouhleb & Guichaoua 2021).

### 3.3. The unravelling of central authorities

While Tuareg rebels and Islamic armed groups seized hold of the country's north, public discontent grew stronger in the South of Mali against the Malian authorities for their inability to put an end to the rebellion and control insecurity in the north. Additionally, the authorities were condemned by the families of southern soldiers sent to fight on the dangerous northern front, poorly equipped, poorly trained, and poorly paid.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, on 22 March 2012 low- and middle-ranked military officers conducted a coup and deposed President Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) in Bamako. International actors, led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), reacted promptly and forced a deal to put back power arrangements on constitutional tracks, at least on the surface, by designating the head of the National Assembly Mali's new interim president. The interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, was ushered into office and mandated 'to lead the transition, manage the crisis in the north of Mali, and organise free, transparent, and democratic elections' (International Crisis Group, 2012). The military coup revealed the structural flaws of the Malian 'consensual democracy', which accommodated opposition through clientelist favours. In the aftermath of the coup, the power of the interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, was very limited, as the junta leaders and their associates active in the government still retained influence. Against the backdrop of serious tensions among the military,<sup>16</sup> Traoré chaotically ruled over all Malian territory that remained in governmental hands until France's intervention in January 2013.

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<sup>13</sup> In talks among insurgents preceding the outbreak of the rebellion in 2012, it is reported that Iyad Ag Ghaly (who had already followed a personal trajectory toward political Islam) explicitly referred to the Arab Spring as a historical game-changer, paving the way for new forms of political emancipation in northern Mali (Author's personal research notes).

<sup>14</sup> The separatists from the MNLA dispersed. Some of them went into exile while others (leaders and rank-and-file) joined the jihadist coalition. How alliances are made and unmade follows complex rationales combining ideological, parochial, or economic motives (Desgrais et al. 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Boisvert (2020) aptly calls the mindset of the Malian soldiers sent in the north 'an expeditionary mindset' as the regular troops originating from southern garrisons land in places whose populations are fundamentally alien to them culturally, linguistically, and politically.

<sup>16</sup> On 30 April 2012, deadly confrontations took place in Bamako between the 'red berets' (close to deposed president ATT), and the 'green berets' (supporters of the junta)—eventually unveiling the deeply fractured nature of the military.

### 3.4. The international intervention

France, Mali's former colonial power, intervened through 'Operation Serval', which rapidly regained control of the cities occupied by the jihadist coalition during most of 2012.<sup>17</sup> The French intervention followed UNSC resolution 2085 and an official request from the Malian interim government. Crucially, the separatists that had been defeated and evicted by the jihadists in 2012 piggybacked the French intervention and made a return in Mali's political game. They *de facto* took back control of their stronghold, Kidal. The move crystallised discontent in Bamako, where nationalist activists still accuse the French of offering safe haven to those whom they saw (and still see) as the main cause of the collapse of Mali in the first place, and did not differentiate them from the jihadists (Guichaoua 2020, Notin 2014). The MNLA's return to Kidal eventually allowed the separatists to become one of the three parties to sign the peace agreement in 2015. France's alleged protection of the separatists was real, but it had more to do with pragmatic counterterrorism plans than with a desire to undermine Bamako's sovereignty over its territory (Notin 2014). During Operation Serval and immediately afterwards, the separatists most aligned with French interests<sup>18</sup> served as auxiliaries for the French forces.<sup>19</sup>

Operation Serval ended after Mali's northern cities had been regained; it morphed into a more permanent French regional deployment called Barkhane in 2014.<sup>20</sup> The logic of reconquest of territories lost in 2012 transformed into a 'whack-a-mole' one as the jihadists dispersed in rural areas, where they gradually rebuilt their manpower and military capabilities. Despite regular military successes (Shurkin 2021), the ongoing Barkhane operation has limitations. It did not manage to stop the geographical expansion of jihadist movements; it used disputable tactics empowering local self-defence groups<sup>21</sup> and, finally, has been contested by the nationalist activists in Sahelian capitals accusing France of pursuing a neo-colonial agenda. The French have responded to these challenges by giving Sahelian armies a bigger role in counterterrorism through a regional security partnership called the G5 Sahel<sup>22</sup> and by involving European countries in counterterrorism through the so-called Task Force Takuba, introduced in 2020. This burden-sharing effort in the military area (Clausen & Albrecht 2021) is prolonged by the design of a complex architecture of non-military, development, and governance-oriented initiatives in which the European Union is also firmly encouraged to participate by the French (D'Amato 2021). The French intervention precipitated the deployment of an international peacekeeping mission which was in the making during most of the year 2012. The African Union was responsible for it in the first place, yet it transformed into a UN led mission in early 2013, eventually established in April by Security Council resolution 2100 under the name

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<sup>17</sup> This paragraph is essentially based on Guichaoua (2020) and Notin (2014).

<sup>18</sup> The separatists never formed a very cohesive whole. Intra-Tuareg politics placed some of them close to the French (Desgrais et al. 2018).

<sup>19</sup> This joint venture between the French and the former separatists unravelled in the years following, as mutual distrust grew and there were consistent, targeted assassinations of local informants carried out by the jihadists.

<sup>20</sup> Barkhane spreads over five Sahelian countries (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad) with the stated goal of making the terror threat weak enough so that it can be fought by Sahelian armies themselves.

<sup>21</sup> In 2017 and 2018, French troops worked in close partnership with two militias—locally called 'politico-military movements'—in the Menaka region. The two groups have been accused of abuses against civilian populations, and their local political legitimacy is far from unanimous (Carayol 2018).

<sup>22</sup> The G5 Sahel is an *ad hoc* grouping of five Sahelian countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad) designed in 2014 to tackle regional security threats through military and economic cooperation. For a review of its origins, its very essence among other forms of African regionalisms, its relations with France and immediate neighbours (crucially Algeria), or its internal challenges, see Desgrais (2019) and International Crisis Group (2017a). How the G5 Sahel relates to MINUSMA is discussed in Section 6 of this report.

United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). France served as a ‘penholder’ in the process, leading to the finalisation of Resolution 2100.

### 3.5. The aftermath of the French intervention: reconfiguration of power in Bamako, jihadist expansion, and stabilisation efforts

A significant outcome of the international military and diplomatic efforts was to partially and temporarily assist the return of elected authorities in Bamako. General elections have been the priority of most of the international community in Mali immediately after the kick-off of Operation Serval, even though security was not guaranteed for voters all over the country. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK), a senior and experienced politician, emerged as the winner of the electoral race which took place in 2013 and was re-elected in 2018. IBK’s most memorable action as president happened in his first term when he signed the *Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation* (APR)<sup>23</sup> on behalf of the Malian government, putting an end to the separatist aspirations of the movements that had triggered the crisis in 2012 and raising hopes of a durable peace settlement between Bamako and its political challengers from the north (Zahar & Boutellis 2019).

However, the two terms of the IBK have also been marred by corruption scandals and, crucially, the authorities’ practical inability to contain the other and existentially more threatening insurgency raging in Mali, led by jihadist movements. This situation caused political unrest in Bamako and the country’s main cities, followed by repression from the government. The deterioration of the political climate culminated in a coup d’état in August 2020, sending IBK into exile and ushering in a new transition period placed under the control of high-ranking officers who had more carefully planned and prepared their access to power than the subaltern officers who had improvised the coup of 2012 (Diallo 2020). In May 2021, to clarify their intention not to abandon power, the coup leaders perpetrated what has been labelled a ‘coup within the coup’ (International Crisis Group 2021b). They removed from office the transition’s president and his prime minister, whose appointment had been negotiated with the ECOWAS immediately after the coup of August 2020. Assimi Goïta, the coup leader, became president of Mali and appointed a veteran of Malian politics, Choguel Maïga, as prime minister. Since his appointment, Choguel Maïga has initiated a violent verbal campaign against the foreign presence in Mali, culminating in harsh criticisms voiced against France and MINUSMA at the UN Assembly.<sup>24</sup> Choguel Maïga has also hinted that Mali could give green light to the deployment of Russian mercenaries, causing a diplomatic outcry among the current security partners of Mali. It is also clear, in November 2021, that the general elections due to happen 18 months after the August 2020 coup and marking the end of the transition are not going to be held in February 2022.

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<sup>23</sup> The full document can be found [here](#). The APR was prepared and discussed in Algiers under the auspices of Algerian diplomacy. It has three main Malian signatories: the government, the (former) separatists regrouped into the *Coordination des mouvements de l’Azawad* (CMA), and the *Plateforme*, a coalition of northern groups originally not aligned with the separatists yet whose loyalty later oscillated between Bamako and the CMA. The APR recognises Mali’s territorial integrity hence puts an end to secessionist aspirations from the signatories. It is made of four blocks of measures involving 1) institutional reform promoting the devolution of certain governance prerogatives to regional assemblies and a better representation of northern populations at the centre of power through the creation of a Senate; 2) new security arrangements favouring the representation of locals in local security governance; 3) development programmes specifically designed for northern territories; and 4) truth and reconciliation initiatives.

<sup>24</sup> The speech can be found [here](#).

MINUSMA now must work daily with authorities publicly disparaging its action, challenging established deals such as the APR, and displaying evident illiberal tendencies.

In parallel with the regime's chronic instability in Bamako, jihadist groups have consistently affirmed their influence in rural areas (International Crisis Group 2017b), where they waged a deadly guerrilla against the Malian and MINUSMA forces (see Figure 5 below) and made the civilians more vulnerable to communal violence. The most notable shift in the post-Serval insurgency landscape is the push of militant activity toward Central Mali, an area originally not covered by the MINUSMA mandate, whose first focus was on the political rift between the north and Bamako's authority in the south (Guichaoua & Nsaibia 2019). Central Mali is rich in agricultural and pastoral resources, and access to land is disputed. State-making efforts and resource management by the postcolonial authorities have disenfranchised sections of the political economy (e.g., historically exploited herders<sup>25</sup>) to which jihadists offered the opportunity to settle scores with their perceived oppressors. The groups threatened by jihadist militants responded by creating self-defence militias and vigilante groups, and forming murky ties with state forces (Thiam 2017). The weaponisation of parochial and class-based cleavages simultaneously by the jihadists and the state caused a deadly spiral of communal violence and abuse against civilians from all sides. Note that while Central Mali is still the epicentre of insurgency, as this report is being written (October 2021), worrying signs of expansion of jihadist militancy accumulate in eastern (Kayes region) and southern (Sikasso region) Mali.

After 2015, Central Mali gradually became the epicentre of Mali's security and political crisis (Thiam 2017, Benjaminsen & Ba 2019). In March 2017, the most active jihadist group, called at the time the *katibat Macina*, merged officially with the northern jihadist units, forming the entity called *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (Support Group for Islam and the Muslims, JNIM), placed under Iyad ag Ghaly's command. JNIM carves out local influence through coercion, but also through persuasion and attempts to deliver a governance system based on Islamic principles (Thurston 2020). Its judges adjudicate disputes between individuals or communities, often in line with local Islamic jurisprudence. JNIM carries a reformist agenda, has pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda's transnational agenda but cannot be said to import in Mali a form of Islam alien to local populations (Benjaminsen & Ba 2019). This is probably less true of JNIM's competitor in Mali's jihadist arena, the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara (ISGS, officially affiliated with the Islamic State via its West African Province based in northeastern Nigeria), which was built up in the aftermath of the French intervention as an offshoot of the jihadist groups that occupied the city of Gao in 2012. Unlike JNIM, ISGS uses extreme violence against communities that do not comply with the order it seeks to impose. JNIM and ISGS spent most of the year 2020, fighting each other (Nsaibia 2021). Reasons for infighting were ideological and turf-related. Clashes resulted in the partial withdrawal of ISGS from the Central Mali and Gourma regions for JNIM's benefit. These infights undermined the jihadists' military capabilities yet did not stop them from targeting the Malian and MINUSMA forces, provoking a severe humanitarian emergency (see Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 below). The persistence of destructive insurgency and relatively successful local initiatives to de-escalate violence have led some Malian and international voices to call for a high-level dialogue with jihadists.<sup>26</sup> Such dialogue has always been considered a 'red line' by French authorities. However, the Malian authorities affirmed their intention to initiate it in October 2021.

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<sup>25</sup> See Sangaré (2019) and Benjaminsen & Ba (2019).

<sup>26</sup> See International Crisis Group (2019). Dialogue with jihadists of Malian origins is a recommendation of the broad-based consultation of Malian civil society organisations organised by the authorities in 2017 then again in 2019.

The French intervention in 2013 and the MINUSMA deployment immediately after opening the door to (or temporally coincided with) many more international, bilateral or multilateral, military and non-military initiatives to stabilise Mali, including the European Union Training Mission, and the G5 Sahel. These institutional actors have made Mali and the Sahel more broadly a new front of the war against terror, as well as the laboratory of engineers of stabilisation and their litany of ‘Sahel Strategies’, their obscure acronyms and their double or treble ‘nexuses’ (Helly et al. 2015). This multiplicity of initiatives, often presented as poorly coordinated, has formed what some scholars have called a ‘security traffic jam’ (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen 2020) or a ‘patchwork’ of policies (D’Amato 2021). In this complex institutional ecosystem, France, due to its colonial history and continuous postcolonial influence in Mali, has been called by some the ‘natural’ pivotal broker of cooperation’ (D’Amato 2021, p.13), yet it is not necessarily the most consensual because of its strategic orientations or its unilateralism in diplomatic relations with other partners (International Crisis Group 2021a).<sup>27</sup>

### 3.6. Conclusion

Mali collapsed in 2012 due to a dual crisis. On the one hand, militant groups posed extreme military challenges, which were endogenously produced over the pre-war years by a nefarious logic of ‘armed politics’ (Staniland 2017) in the north. On the other hand, the system of governance in Bamako, the centre of power, was corrupt. As a result, the crisis that broke out in 2012 could not be reduced to a centre vs. periphery cleavage where the periphery follows centrifugal inclination. Claims for better political inclusion or access to development for marginalised peripheral communities were only one part of the problem. Misgovernance in the centre was the other part.

The 2012 outbreak of violence provoked the military intervention of Mali’s former colonial power, leading to two principal outcomes. First, the country was placed under what we may call a *de facto* ‘neo-trusteeship’ (Fearon & Laitin 2004) composed of a complex and poorly coordinated web of international military and non-military actors, in which MINUSMA plays a less prominent role than the aggressive, French-led counterterrorism effort. Second, militancy has not disappeared; it has left cities and is entrenched in rural areas. There, jihadists have developed their own system of governance and have become increasingly dangerous for national and international forces as well as civilians, whose divisions can now manifest themselves more violently due to facilitated access to arms provided by the jihadists or the state.

To complement the above factual and analytical considerations on the background of the crisis, Mali’s latest political trends include the following:

- a rapid process of democratic backsliding at the very centre of power due to repeated coups and the growing influence of the military in politics;
- an elusive ‘return of the state’ in zones considered priorities by domestic and international authorities;<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> No research exists on how France fosters a ‘coalition of the willing’ to intervene in the Sahel, though such a study is much needed.

<sup>28</sup> The quarterly report of the United Nations Secretary General on the situation in Mali systematically monitors the deployment of civil servants in the country, which is consistently low in conflict-affected areas. See United Nations (2021a) for a recent installment.

- a higher scale than ever before, in 2020, of the war between the government forces, their international allies, and violent extremist insurgents, with dramatic consequences for civilians (see Figure 2 below); and
- a drawdown of French forces from certain locations in northern Mali, potentially leaving Malian and MINUSMA forces more exposed to jihadist attacks

This situation raises many pressing questions and dilemmas for MINUSMA: How should it defend itself against jihadist attacks? How should it position itself within the ‘security traffic jam’ and deal with sometimes hostile Malian actors? How far should it contribute to building the capacity of an undemocratic regime? How can it better protect civilians in a context characterised by complex, historically entrenched social stratifications, deep political divisions, and high and volatile fragmentation among the carriers of arms?

**Figure 1.** A chronology of salient security and political events in Mali since 2011



Tuareg combatants and weapons from Libya rally Tuareg separatists in Mali



Tuareg separatists start a rebellion in northern Mali



Military debacle in northern Mali provokes a coup in Bamako



All northern provinces fall under the control of separatists



A jihadist coalition evicts the separatists and imposes its rule on northern Mali



French Operation Serval is launched to restore Mali's territorial integrity. Jihadists retreat to rural areas



Creation of MINUSMA



General elections. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita becomes Mali's President



Peace agreement signed between the government and the separatists



Jihadist insurgency starts in Central Mali



Jihadist entities operating in Mali regroup to form the Group for Support of Islam and the Muslims



Large scale communal violence erupts in Central Mali



Dozens of Malian soldiers die in a series of jihadist attacks against Malian forces



Protests in Bamako against international intervention

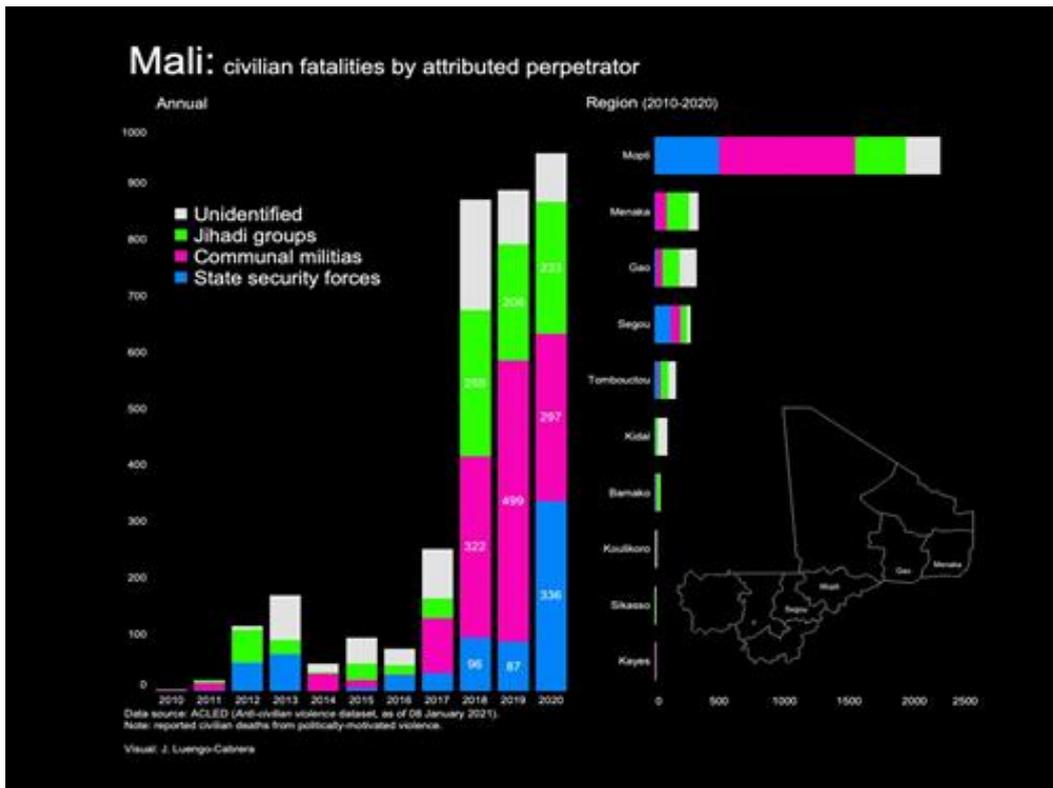


Emergency meeting of Sahelian and French heads of states in Pau, France to rethink security plans in the Sahel



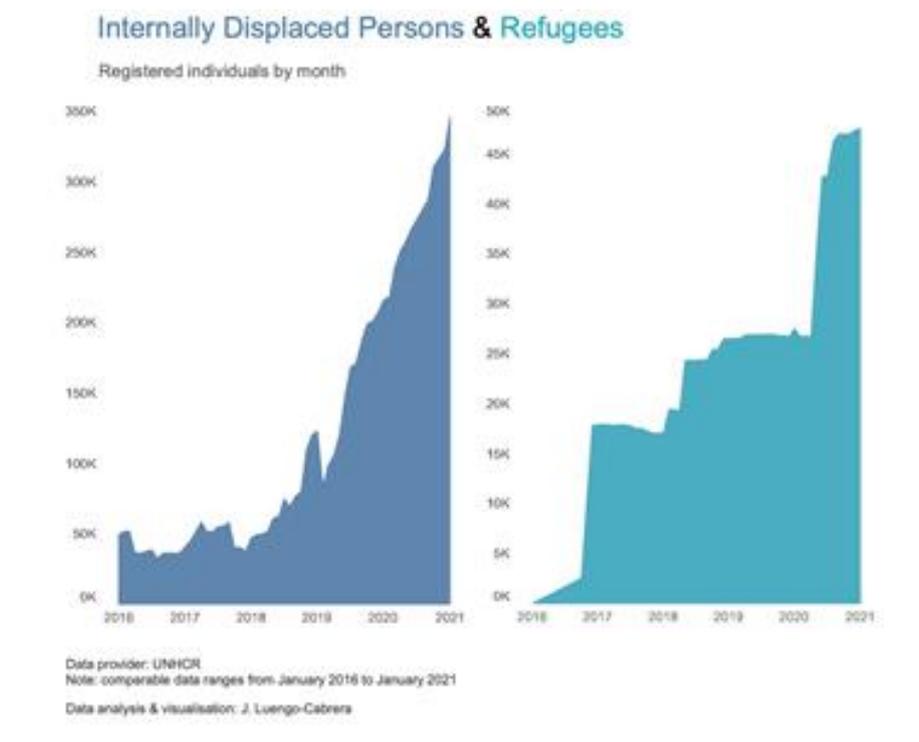
Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita is deposed by a coup led by Col. Assimi Goïta

**Figure 2.** Malian civilian fatalities, by perpetrator (2010–2020)



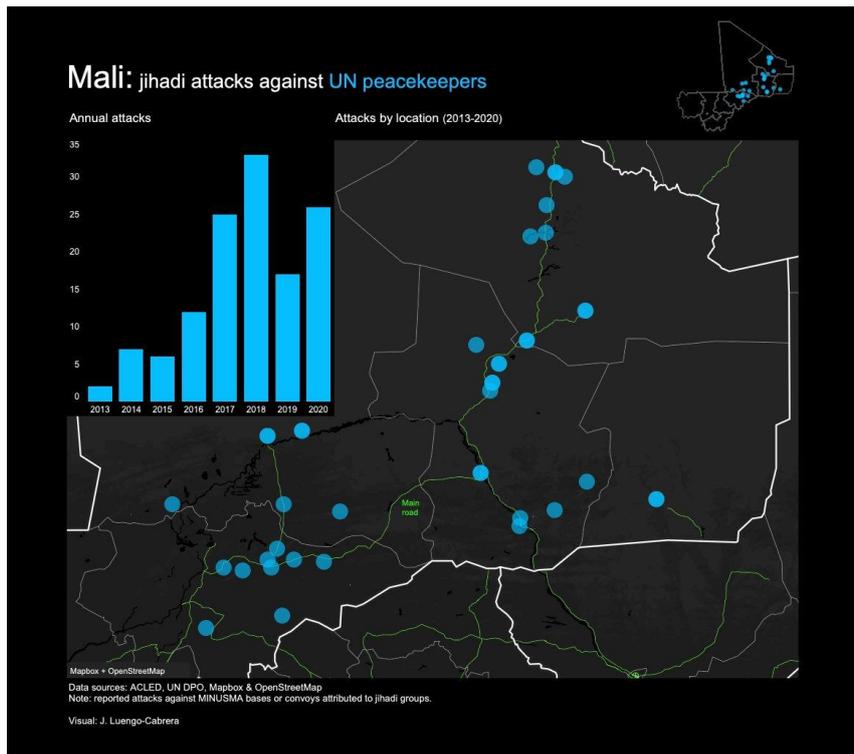
Source: [José Luengo-Cabrera](#)

**Figure 3.** Internally displaced persons and outgoing refugees in Mali since 2016



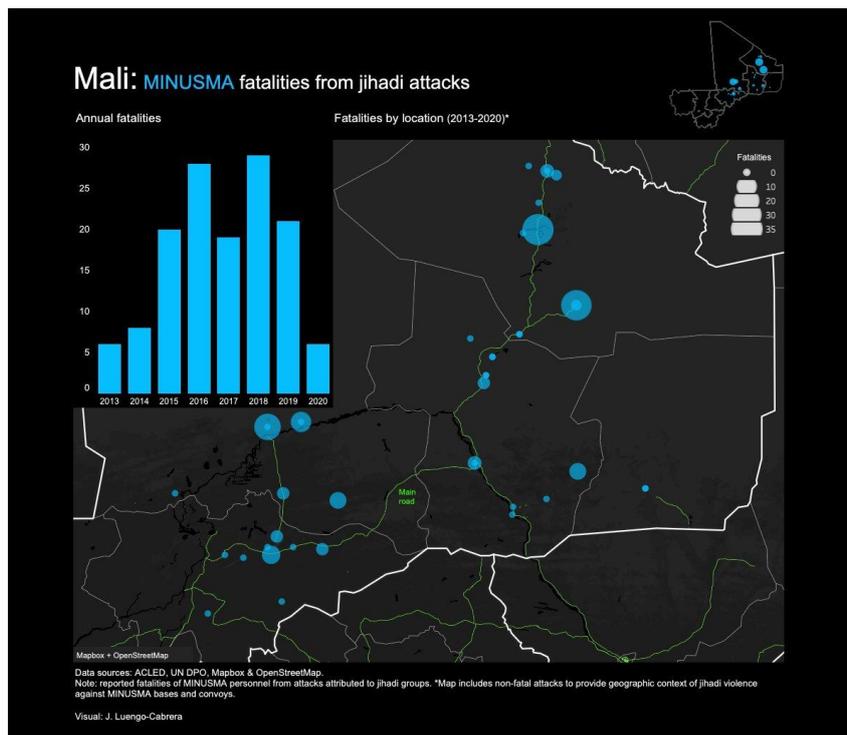
Source: [José Luengo-Cabrera](#)

**Figure 4.** Jihadi attacks against UN peacekeepers



Source: [José Luengo-Cabrera](#)

**Figure 5.** MINUSMA fatalities from jihadi attacks



Source: [José Luengo-Cabrera](#)

## 4. The doctrinal debates structuring MINUSMA's mandate

**Section's main points:** Before turning to the concrete steps taken by MINUSMA on the ground and what the available literature says about them in Section 5, this section explores the doctrinal debates surrounding MINUSMA's deployment. This doctrinal preamble focuses on the ambiguities of the term 'stabilisation' which is officially part of MINUSMA's mandate yet does not enclose an unequivocal guide for action. Some of the concrete challenges and limitations faced by MINUSMA arguably stem from the relative indeterminacy of its underlying doctrine of intervention.

Quantitative, cross-country analyses show that peacekeeping does work, and whether variables such as duration of peace, protection of civilians, or spread of violence are considered (Walter et al. 2020). Such encouraging probabilistic findings may not be true in specific cases, and certainly do not put an end to debates surrounding the many forms peacekeeping can take.

MINUSMA's action on the ground, reviewed below, is shaped by doctrinal dilemmas that are abundantly commented on in the peace studies literature. To understand what works and does not work on the ground, a reflection on the big ideas structuring contemporary peacekeeping is needed.

MINUSMA embodies many of the ambiguities and conundrums of contemporary peacekeeping, pertaining to the polysemic nature of stabilisation (and the amount of use of force it implies), and the potential conflicts between the goals of a multidimensional intervention, that is, the compatibility between peacekeeping, peace-enforcement, state-building, and the adoption of more kinetic activities against those threatening the civilians.

The establishment of MINUSMA in 2013 naturally raised concerns among specialists of the peacekeeping doctrine. 'How far can we stretch UN peacekeeping along the use of force trajectory, before it loses its core ethos and transforms into something else?', De Coning asked (2015a).<sup>29</sup> Karlsrud (2015) explicitly called stabilisation a violation of peacekeeping and the paramount principle of impartiality. There is hardly any peace to keep in Mali, and 'S' for 'stabilisation' means that force can be used against those who contribute to violence,<sup>30</sup> hence worries emerged that MINUSMA could become a party to the war.

These uncertainties were short-lived. Stabilisation is an elusive term, which can concretise in hot measures (with a stress on enemy fighting) or cool measures (with a stress on development and governance), depending on the interpretation given to it. In the case of MINUSMA, a cool option has been taken while the proper counterterrorism effort is undertaken by 'parallel forces', the French operation Barkhane, and later the G5 Sahel joint force.

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<sup>29</sup> In a separate blog post, De Coning (2015b) explains the difference between peacekeeping and stabilisation as follows: 'The essential difference between peacekeeping and stabilisation seems to be that in peacekeeping the aim is to arrive at, and then maintain a cease-fire and implement a peace agreement, among the parties to a conflict, whilst in stabilisation, the theory of change is to restore and maintain order by managing or containing aggressors and spoilers.'

<sup>30</sup> MINUSMA shares an 'S' with other last generation peacekeeping missions such as MINUSCA (Central African Republic) or MONUSCO (Congo)

Although MINUSMA has been established under Chapter VII and authorized to ‘stabilize key population centres and support the re-establishment of state authority throughout the country, especially in the north of Mali...deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas,’ it was not originally intended to pursue peace-enforcement. (Daniel 2017: 242)

In practice, MINUSMA has taken hardly any step toward a pre-emptive use of force against potential threats against civilians or their own camps. According to the present literature, MINUSMA only used force pre-emptively on one occasion, in January 2015, when Dutch Apache helicopters struck an MNLA vehicle allegedly threatening areas inhabited by civilians, killing five combatants. The episode occurred during combats between two Tuareg factions, the separatist MNLA, and the pro-government GATIA. The MNLA rejected the claim that its forces threatened civilians (Reuters, 2015).

MINUSMA may not eventually have ‘gone khaki’ itself but it is operating in an environment that is subject to an intense stabilisation effort conducted by other forces, which poses serious challenges to MINUSMA’s positionality. This ambiguity has caught the attention of an independent reviewer of MINUSMA appointed by the United Nations, whose conclusions provoked tensions among UN decision-making organs, as shown in Figure 6 below.

**Figure 6.** The independent strategic review of MINUSMA and a fracture between the Security Council and the Secretariat (Forti 2021, p. 9)

The review of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was a highly contentious exercise due to political disagreements with the review’s proposals. Ellen Løj’s report proposed three options for MINUSMA’s future, two of which directly countered the mission’s expansive support for non-UN counterterrorism operations in Mali. Different parts of the Secretariat and the mission strongly disagreed with these options and were concerned about their possible implications for the UN. The report was also controversial among Security Council members and some (including France, which is the council penholder on Mali) actively lobbied the secretary-general and the Secretariat to maintain the mission’s existing trajectory and prevent the report’s circulation.<sup>41</sup>

Given these pressures, the Secretariat portrayed a selective and inaccurate summary of Løj’s recommendations in the secretary-general’s report to the council: it made no reference to the two options that conflicted with these political interests and instead framed the third option as the review’s main recommendation.<sup>42</sup> Security Council members learned of the discrepancies between the independent review and the secretary-general’s report, souring relations between them and the Secretariat while marring the review’s integrity. This incident subsequently led the council to take a more proactive role in the independent review process so that it could encourage the submission of full reports.

Based on the literature reviewed, we identify four areas of concern pertaining to MINUSMA’s relationships with muscular actors of stabilisation, such as France’s Operation Barkhane.

First, stabilisation is an effort toward state-building—which leaves unaddressed the question of which sort of state exactly needs to be built. It transforms supposedly equidistant peacekeeping into a one-sided pro-state project. The plan becomes ‘building a sovereign [state] and defeating its opponents’ (Daniel 2017, p. 241). Zimmerman (2020) points to the absence of reflection among the foreign stabilisation complex regarding what makes a state legitimate in culturally diverse contexts. The ideologically dominant model is the Western rational-legal model (Clausen and Albrecht 2021), which may be at odds with the local representations, and practices of power and justice, particularly in the highly diverse linguistic, cultural, and social environment of Mali, where traditional and religious

leaders feature prominently as sources of legitimacy. Stabilisation logic tends to ignore these considerations and instead adopts a technocratic approach made of ‘good governance’ rhetoric (Thurston 2021). It endorses and strengthens the official incumbent authorities, which, in the case of Mali, are, to a large extent, the cause of the crisis and whose military has a record of abuses against civilians. According to Louise Wiuff Moe (2021), the state that grows in the shadow of stabilisation and counterterrorism endangers civilians further.<sup>31</sup>

Second, participating in a stabilisation mission along with entities enforcing an explicitly aggressive counterterrorism agenda risks undermining and politicising the non-military activities being carried out, including the delivery of humanitarian assistance, whose efficacy is intimately linked to the preservation of an impartial humanitarian space (MSF 2017).<sup>32</sup> Stabilisation puts the UN in a less prominent position than parallel forces, which are more active militarily and politically. It subjects peacekeepers’ actions to a military objective, first and foremost. In the continuum between kinetic and non-kinetic actions (Clausen and Albrecht 2021), development projects (for instance, in the form of Quick Impact Projects, see MSF 2017) and humanitarian assistance risk the appearance that they are nothing more than civil–military efforts to win hearts and minds—in violation of humanitarian ethics.

Third, as part of a stabilisation complex, MINUSMA becomes vulnerable to attacks. The consequence is that it must commit important resources to its own protection, and risks ‘bunkerisation’ at the expense of the mission it is supposed to conduct for the benefit of populations. This leads not only to rising costs and relative ineffectiveness but also deteriorates the image of the mission, seen as manned and equipped primarily for self-preservation.

Malian anthropologist Boukary Sangaré, who has worked as an adviser to EU countries in Mali, said MINUSMA’s main contribution was in keeping a spotlight on human rights abuses, promoting inter-community dialogue, and supporting local projects such as building roads and digging wells. ‘I don’t see much use in their peacekeeping except for protecting their own convoys, but the Human Rights division is very important,’ he said. (Taylor 2021, p. 54)

Fourth, stabilisation and, more specifically, the particular twist of this concept imposed by the war against terror, imply a differentiation between ‘good guys’ you can talk to and ‘bad guys’ you must defeat. Consequently, the mission automatically sees some of its classic channels for peacemaking or, less ambitiously, obtaining a de-escalation of violence through dialogue severed with one category of insurgents (Charbonneau 2017). There is also some arbitrariness in declaring that some political actors are legitimate interlocutors, and others are not. A hardly measurable yet significant section of Bamako’s public opinion, as exemplified on influential social media accounts’ posts on a daily basis, calls the former separatists, now signatories of the APR, ‘terrorists’ while advocating for a dialogue with jihadists of Malian descent. Section 3 describes the multifaceted origins of Mali’s jihadist militancy. The dichotomous world of the war against terror leaves no room for peacebuilders to design nuanced and fine-tuned political initiatives. Another point put forward by Artiñano et al.

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<sup>31</sup> Moe’s argument goes as follows: ‘[The] refashioning of protection to an anticipated outcome of counterterrorism-inspired stabilization indicates the subtle ‘militarization of PoC’. Moreover, while abuses committed by non-state armed actors are a genuine concern, the presumption that support to state forces automatically translates into the protection of civilians is inaccurate and risks underplaying human rights abuses and violations committed by these forces themselves’ (p. 15).

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that *Médecins sans frontières* (MSF) is a medical humanitarian organisation and not a scientific or academic resource, and therefore should be considered with precaution. The authors did not find scientific sources tackling this theme.

(2014) is that the jihadists' transnational scope 'defies the UN's country-specific approach' (p. 6): the physical geography of the insurgency that foreign interveners are supposed to deal with has not the same boundaries as their perimeter of intervention.

## 5. MINUSMA's mandate delivery

**Section's main points:** MINUSMA was created in 2013. Its mandate is to stabilise Mali's political situation, restore state authority, and support the peace process between the government and the separatists. An inherent ambiguity of the mandate is to support state authority while supposedly being a neutral mediator in the peace process. Priorities changed over time. Following the increasing victimisation of civilians, the protection of civilians is now considered more important. The available literature hardly assesses all aspects of MINUSMA's mandate delivery. Therefore, the assessment that we offer is partial. The peace process progressed slowly. Stabilisation, including the protection of civilians, is far from achieved, while little evidence exists to rigorously measure the restoration of state authority in the context of chronic instability in Bamako's power circles.

This section consists of two subsections. The first details the mandate of the MINUSMA and the evolution of its priorities. The second proposes a synthetic appraisal of the attainment of the goals set by the mission, as portrayed in the literature.

### 5.1. MINUSMA's mandate and its renewal

#### **The initial mandate**

This subsection details the deployment of MINUSMA with its original mandate and organisation, along with its yearly renewals in response to its systemic and challenging environment. On 25 April 2013, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 2100 establishing MINUSMA, to take over from the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) on 1 July 2013. The mission initially comprised 12,640 uniformed personnel (11,200 troops and 1,440 police) with a yearly budget of \$800 million (Tardy 2013), with the paramount aim of supporting the country's transitional authorities in the stabilisation of the country and the application of the transitional roadmap, including the national political dialogue, i.e., the peace process (UNSC Res. 2100; Mills, 2013). As per UNSC Resolution 2100, the mission's mandate is centred around the re-establishment of state authority in major population centres, supporting the political and electoral processes, protecting civilians, promoting human rights, and supporting humanitarian assistance as well as national and international justice. To conduct its mandate, the mission is permitted to use *all necessary means* (UNSC Res. 2100) through its robust rules of engagement, allowing the troops to resort to force in defence of the mandate and of themselves (Tardy 2013).

Nevertheless, the mission's mandate tends to contradict itself. Since one of the fundamental objectives of MINUSMA is to reinstitute state authority, the mission is to effectively support the state and help consolidate its presence. Thus, this does not allow it to be neutral in its other major objective of supporting and enforcing the national peace agreement, since it is clearly not at the same distance from all the belligerents. This has caused MINUSMA to be perceived by several factions as a 'rival' because of its close association with the state (Muiderman 2015).

The mission's initial mandate has been renewed yearly since 2013, with mainly the same strategic objectives but with at times a few additional aspirations (Gorur 2020). The additions depended on the organisation and advancement of MINUSMA, but also on the fast-changing Malian environment and the new players involved. We outline these renewals below by underscoring those that incorporate substantial adjustments and modifications to the original mandate.

### **Mandate renewals and significant amendments**

The mission's second mandate renewal in **2015** (UNSC RES. 2227) allowed it to enter a second phase (2016–2018) in which it welcomed the signing of the *Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation* (APR), also known as the Algiers Agreement, in Mali in 2015. In this mandate renewal, the UNSC mandated MINUSMA to support the implementation of the Algiers Agreement (Boutellis 2021). Additionally, this renewal was the first to authorise the deployment of 'at least 40 military observers in order to monitor and supervise the country's ceasefire' (UNSC RES. 2227). Originally, MINUSMA was mandated to protect civilians from armed groups through both military and non-military channels such as reconciliation attempts (HRW 2018).

The third mandate renewal in **2016** (UNSC Res. 2295) made a further step towards the protection of civilians (PoC) by also giving it a more explicit political framework and permitting the mission to assume a more 'proactive and robust posture' (UNSC Res. 2295), including when protecting civilians under threat and by countering asymmetric attacks. This was to be done 'through active and effective patrolling in areas where civilians are at risk, and to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas, engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats' (UNSC Res. 2295). It also required the mission to assist the endeavours of the Malian security forces to hinder the return of extremist armed groups in the north.

The subsequent mandate renewal in **2017** (UNSC Res. 2391) created an opportunity for MINUSMA to put forward 'operational and logistical support' (UNSC Res. 2391) to the G5 Sahel Joint Force (JF-G5S) contingents, to support them in their cross-border counterterrorist operations. This mandate renewal ended the second phase of the mission's framework, as it subsequently entered a third phase of operation starting in 2018.

In fact, the fifth renewal in **2018** (UNSC Res. 2423) came at a time of a degenerating security situation in the centre. Thus, in this renewal, the UNSC requested that the mission increase its support of the Malian security forces and re-establish state authority in the centre (HRW, 2018)— by keeping the same number of troops and by maintaining MINUSMA's priority of supporting the implementation of the APR and its clauses. Thus, shedding light on the tensions between the mandate's ambitions and the number of troops, with several reports of under-staffing making it difficult for the mission to broaden its priorities and geographical reach (International Peace Institute 2021, p. 6). Additionally, this renewal gave more substantial attention 'to the financial sources for conflicts in Mali' specifically naming 'terrorism-related crimes, mass atrocities and transnational organized crime activities (including trafficking in persons, arms, drugs, and natural resources, and the smuggling of migrants)' (UNSC Res. 2423). This has prioritised attention to illicit activities by drawing up strategies in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the UN Office for West Africa, and the Sahel (UNOWAS) (International Crisis Group 2018).

The sixth renewal on 28 June **2019** (UNSC Res. 2480) made the protection of civilians its second strategic priority, as a reflection of the UNSC's concern for the growing victimisation of civilians. In

this resolution, the UNSC requested that the secretary general report on PoC throughout the mission by strengthening ‘early warning mechanisms and systematically record and analyse MINUSMA’s rate of response’ to forthcoming threats to civilians (UNSC Res. 2480; Centre for Civilians in Conflict 2020b). This came in the aftermath of the violence against civilians sharply increasing in Mali and MINUSMA, struggling to protect civilians (Lyammouri 2018). According to one tally, conflict-related incidents accounted for 71 civilian deaths in 2016, 192 in 2017, and 815 deaths in 2018 (Spink 2019). The transpiring perception was that MINUSMA was not doing enough to protect civilians, specifically during massive attacks (HRW 2020). Despite the presence of several military operations in Mali, the occurrence of violent events intensified, essentially caused by the ascending magnitude of intercommunal violence, with civilians often paying the consequences (Baldaro 2019; Spink 2019; HRW 2020). For instance, in March 2019, 157 civilians were killed during an attack on the Ogossagou village of Mopti, targeting mainly members of the Fulani community,<sup>33</sup> which then precipitated several retaliation attacks, which also claimed numerous civilian lives. Such attacks include a major one near Sangha, also in Mopti, in June 2019, mainly targeting the Dogon community (Centre for Civilians in Conflict 2020a; HRW 2020). Until 2019, the focus of the mission was mainly on the peace process and the northern region; however, as civilians were being abundantly targeted, a more PoC-focused language was added to the mandate. However, as this strategic objective was added, and although the new resolution mentioned that the mission ‘should ensure that sufficient mission resources are allocated to the implementation of the second strategic priority’ (UNSC Res. 2480), no additional resources were provided for this new objective. Moreover, concerning geographic expansion, MINUSMA delineated a new geographic region in order to spread the focus of the mission from solely the north—Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal, and Bamako—to cover an additional region in eastern Mopti (Centre for Civilians in Conflict 2020a).

Furthermore, in the following mandate renewal in **2020** (UNSC Res. 2531), the UNSC omitted the direct reference to ‘reporting on the early warning mechanisms concerning the PoC’ that was added in the 2019 MINUSMA mandate renewal. In fact, the 2020 mandate renewal focused more on long-term PoC indicators, rather than immediate measures. Without this early warning recording mechanism, no more data would be gathered to determine whether MINUSMA is making progress in terms of PoC. This omission has been reported by research centres (Centre for Civilians in Conflict 2020b), sending the wrong message to MINUSMA in terms of de-prioritizing the focus on PoC.

The most recent mandate renewal in June **2021** (UNSC Res. 2584) came after another military coup (on 18 August 2020), focusing on the primary strategic priority of supporting the political transition and handover of power within the 18-month transition period, decided in the meeting of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on 15 September 2020. The second strategic priority revolved around PoC, the reduction of intercommunal violence, and re-establishing the state authority in Central Mali (UNSC Res. 2584).

To sum up, since the deployment of the mission, the main strategic objective has been to support transitional authorities in the stabilisation of the country, including the national political dialogue, with some reorganisation among some of the secondary priorities but without much modifications to the main aim of the mission. Nevertheless, the progression of the mission in the Malian context and

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<sup>33</sup> This massacre happened after government troops left the zone, taking the life of 35 villagers. Community leaders from Ogossagou reported having alerted the military, security, government representatives, and MINUSMA of their fear of an attack because of the previous departure of army personnel. Witnesses have reported MINUSMA vehicles passing through the village; however, they did not stop to help (HRW 2020).

numerous incidents have raised awareness of the importance of PoC and increased its urgency at the UNSC level, thus making several additions to the mandate renewals concerning violence against civilians and their protection. Despite some subsequent omissions in terms of PoC languages in mandate renewals, it remains the most notable adaptation in the mandate throughout the mission.

## 5.2. A synthetic appraisal of MINUSMA’s mandate delivery as portrayed in the literature

Figure 7 below details how MINUSMA categorises its areas of intervention.

**Figure 7.** MINUSMA’s actions disaggregated

 Military	 Police	 Human Rights
 Civil Affairs	 Mine Action	 Gender
 DDR	 Stabilization & Recovery	 Justice and Corrections
 Political Affairs	 Electoral Assistance	 Conduct and Discipline
 Environment and Culture	 Protection of Children	 Protection of Civilians

Source: [MINUSMA](#)

There is no open-source material available for systematically assessing the action of MINUSMA in any of the areas listed. As aptly mentioned by Gorur (2020), specific benchmarking is not entrenched in the culture of UN peacekeeping operations, although reports on the progress of missions are regularly produced. We have constructed Table 1 below to offer a snapshot of MINUSMA’s areas of intervention for which a partial assessment exists in the literature.

We base our statements on the literature already mentioned in this report, as well as on the additional references that follow: United Nations (2019), Zahar & Boutellis (2019), and Boutellis et al. (2020). In green, we indicate the broad areas where MINUSMA is supposed to have an impact, which are then broken down in several sub-objectives in rows placed underneath. The second column proposes a synthetic assessment of MINUSMA’s performance in the relevant area of intervention. The third column offers tentative explanations for the statements derived from the literature reviewed. The intellectual exercise represented in the table is possibly speculative. It is a reconstruction of findings collected in the literature, whose purposes are disparate. Some items we refer to in the table may be just briefly evoked in a few (or sometimes unique) pieces included in the review. For the sake of readability in Table 1, we include a mixture of clickable links and in-text citations.

**Table 1.** Assessing the effectiveness of MINUSMA actions: a synthetic representation

Area of Intervention	Assessment	Factors
<b>Support to the peace process<sup>34</sup></b>		
- Diplomatic action with APR signatories	- very slow yet consistent progress of the implementation of APR - Important constitutional reform still not in sight <sup>35</sup> - APR increasingly decried as <a href="#">obsolete and inadequate</a> considering the new security situation	- politically instrumental foot-dragging by parties - promised constitutional reform at a standstill (no referendum programmed)
- DDR	- no thorough assessments exist beyond the Carter Center reports, which regularly stress how slow but indispensable the process is	- jihadist attacks against the process <sup>36</sup> - contested validation of list of beneficiaries - regular political tensions between Malian government and other signatories of the APR
- Local ‘good offices’ missions (peace from below)	- little is known about this except a few positive cases such as <a href="#">Anefis</a> - no space nor explicit intentions for engaging with jihadists	- dialogue with jihadists (even limited to truce) made impossible by mandate
<b>Stabilisation</b>		
- Containment of insurgency	The insurgency has not returned to cities but has expanded geographically (see section 3)	Multiple causes not specifically attributable to MINUSMA (see section 3)
- Protection of civilians	Multiple failures to assist endangered civilians despite warnings of imminent threats (see section 3)	Unpreparedness to combat and deficient intel (see section 6 and Human Rights Watch 2020)
- Quick impact projects, trust fund	List of projects is public but assessment available scant (notable exception <a href="#">here</a> )	N.A.
- Humanitarian assistance <sup>37</sup>	Low trust of public in MINUSMA; weak coordination with classic humanitarian actors	Nature of mandate over-militarising MINUSMA’s action
<b>Restoration of state authority</b>		
- Electoral assistance	Elections organised on a regular basis with very low turnout and limited legitimacy of appointed official resulting in unrest and coups (see Section 3)	Nature of mandate, no reflection on what ultimately makes power and legitimacy in the Malian context
- Human rights promotion	Work considered <a href="#">effective</a> yet ex-post, to document abuses	Well-endowed Human Rights Division pursuing consistent investigations (see the treatment of the Bounti incident discussed in Section 6)
- Support to the deployment of administration (judiciary, police, etc.)	- Support to deployment of administration through the <a href="#">PSIRC</a> but no evaluation available - MINUSMA’s work hailed on the judiciary front (mobile courts <a href="#">successful</a> ) - Impact of UNPOL unknown	No suggestion

## 6. MINUSMA's organisation and interactions with its institutional environment

**Section's main points:** MINUSMA faces challenges emanating from its internal organisation, as well as its institutional and political environment, made of other participants of the international stabilisation complex and collective domestic actors. Internally, MINUSMA's challenges can be technical, logistical, or pertaining to human resources. They might be fixed progressively as MINUSMA learns from the challenges it is confronted with. A structural concern is the imbalance in several dimensions that exists between Western and non-Western staff. With regard to its external relations, MINUSMA acts more or less cooperatively with its different interlocutors. A synergy on multiple levels is sustained by France's Operation Barkhane, by necessity. Relationships with the Malian government and the G5 Sahel have ups and downs. Humanitarian actors and some sections of the Malian public have been the most hostile toward MINUSMA, yet episodes of tension seem to be short-lived, suggesting—as inferred by the authors of this review rather than stated in the literature—that MINUSMA uses diplomatic resources to fine-tune its relations, which are sadly unexplored in the literature.

This section details two main points. First, we discuss MINUSMA's intra-mission challenges, as they are portrayed in the literature. Such challenges primarily concern staff, logistics, and equipment. Second, we study the relationship between MINUSMA and its institutional and political environments. MINUSMA navigates a complex multiplayer environment made of actors carrying heterogeneous, sometimes conflicting, agendas and behaving more or less cooperatively toward MINUSMA. These include the French military deployment Barkhane, the G5 Sahel, the European Training mission, the humanitarian actors, the Malian authorities, and Malian (also heterogeneous and vocal) public opinion.

### 6.1. Intra-mission challenges and (eventual) solutions

Since its deployment, MINUSMA has experienced an elaborate series of challenges that hamper its mission from being prosperous and attaining full capacity. This section details the main internal challenges that the mission faced throughout its mandate(s), and some of the solutions put in place to face such obstacles.

Some of the fundamental challenges that MINUSMA faces, like other UN-led missions elsewhere in the world, include its capacity, which involves both human resources and material resources. In fact, the mission's leadership highlighted a hesitancy from UN member states to generously send troops to Mali. The troop-contributing countries (TCCs) have been wary of sending troops to specific areas because of the soaring insecurity and insurgent attacks. This has led to reports of under-staffing in that the mandate does not have the advantage of expanding the mission's reach into broader geographical

areas since the current staffing does not allow so (International Peace Institute 2021, p. 6). In addition to human resource scarcity, the mission also suffers from limited equipment compared to the mandate it is expected to conduct. At its start, the mission was deficient in terms of air assets and intelligence capacities (Bergamaschi 2013). Additionally, training the troops was a major impediment as various TCCs did not prepare and equip their troops with specific trainings to respond to attacks by armed groups, even though the blue helmets are frequently targeted by attacks during patrols, but also in their own camps, or ‘super camps’. Thus, troops were often ill-prepared and sometimes unable to engage in such confrontations (NUPI 2015).

Another main challenge for this mission is leadership. MINUSMA staff from several departments report a lack of vision and clear agenda and guidance (NUPI 2015).<sup>38</sup> Coupled with the problem of miscommunication, this led to disorganisation and confusion concerning tasks and duties and affected the personnel’s enthusiasm and initiative. Additionally, the personnel are constituted from various nationalities and backgrounds, thus leading to differences in opinion and cross-cultural disagreements. Even more so, the personnel were generally deployed with short-term contracts, further straining their enthusiasm and motivation, and even bringing about feelings of competitiveness and enmity among them to ensure their contracts are extended (NUPI 2015). Furthermore, many TCCs and police-contributing countries (PCCs) have sent staff that are inept at speaking French, thus embroiling the relationship between them and the Malian government, the security forces, and even the general public, who are scarcely able to converse in English (NUPI 2015). Finally, the literature also mentions miscommunication between the roles occupied in the mission, particularly along the civilian/military cleavage.<sup>39</sup>

### **A Europe-dominated mission?**

A further fundamental internal challenge to the mission that is being exceedingly highlighted is the difference between African and European soldiers in MINUSMA. MINUSMA has been hailed as ‘Europe’s return to peacekeeping’ (Koops & Tercovich 2016; Karlsrud & Smith 2015; D’Amato 2021; Boutellis & Beary 2020). Koops & Tercovich (2016) define a ‘European return to UN peacekeeping’ as ‘a systematic and long-term commitment to blue helmet operations, consisting of troop deployments beyond “token contributions”, the provision of critical enablers as well as support among European policy-makers and the wider public’ (p. 601). MINUSMA is considered emblematic of this European return to peacekeeping, with the Netherlands playing a leading role (van Willigen 2016). The European contribution of troops has numerous motivations, depending on the country, including knock-on effects on other countries. Fighting terrorist groups and containing migration to Europe seem to be widely shared reasons for European countries to become involved in MINUSMA. Europe’s alleged return to peacekeeping came with conditions consisting of occupying high-end, low-risk jobs generating bifurcated statuses between European and African blue helmets.

Concerning the African side, there have been extensive concerns that the Chadian troops, forming a large and much-exposed contingent of MINUSMA, are not especially acquainted with international

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<sup>38</sup> This issue may have been addressed since NUPI’s relatively old observations.

<sup>39</sup> ‘While now housed in the same compound, until recently, the civilian and military components of MINUSMA in Bamako were located in separate bases in different sections of the capital. Significant time was required to travel between the two bases, which undermined regular communication, coordination, and planning’ (Spink 2019, p. 5).

humanitarian law, as pointed out by Karlsrud (2015), but also local activists.<sup>40</sup> According to Karlsrud (2015), MINUSMA was given six months to attend to this and make sure that the African troops joining MINUSMA could comply with UN standards.

Throughout the mission, and even though the majority of the staff is African, African and European personnel have separate functions and deployments, including intel. They were also unequally exposed to the risk of attack. These inequalities determined the distribution of death, risk, and supply among the troops in the mission. For instance, the better-endowed Dutch, Swedish, and German soldiers are placed in their personal camp in more secure areas, causing massive imbalance between the troops. This has caused ‘intra-mission friction’ and a feeling of ‘two-tier mission’ (Cold-Ravnkilde et al. 2017) among the staff. Clausen and Albrecht (2021) propose a rather damning interpretation of this bifurcated reality, which they attribute to a deliberate political choice:

When the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) was established in April 2013, it was hailed as the return of Europe to peacekeeping, given the strong impetus of international concerns about the implications of Mali's immediate crisis for European security. However, unlike African soldiers in MINUSMA, European forces are deployed predominantly, if not exclusively, in coordinating and strategic roles (and in considerably more secure camps)...As such, the global North maintains the ability to intervene via proxies and uses the notion of partnership rhetorically to maintain distance and minimise risk. This is done without pretending to be able to solve the complex network(s) of conflict(s) across the Sahel or to establish functioning liberal democracies in the region.  
(Online version, no page number)

Moreover, each TCC has its own conditions when contributing troops to the mission. For instance, Niger requires that the troops it contributes to MINUSMA be deployed near the border between Mali and Niger, thereby restricting their movements and concentrating their job on ‘doing border monitoring’ (Cold-Ravnkilde et al. 2017). Thus, the literature criticises some troops for serving the interests of their own governments more than that of the mission (Cold-Ravnkilde et al. 2017).

### **Intelligence and ASIFU**

UN missions necessitate comprehensive intelligence to be successful; however, integrating such intelligence in missions is challenging. In MINUSMA, numerous Western states have provided extremely competent capabilities to the mission’s intelligence chain (Rietjens & de Waard 2017). MINUSMA’s All Source Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU) was created to conduct ‘focused intelligence operations.’ Its creation, pushed by the Dutch authorities, was perceived as revolutionary within the context of a peacekeeping operation. It provides intelligence products mainly relying on the performance of military units that are specifically tasked with gathering intelligence (Duursma 2018). However, it remains challenging to verify events in a peacekeeping environment and with the limited surveillance capacities of Mali and the few French-speaking staff in the responsible team (Sandor 2020).

In fact, establishing such new capacities (as the ASIFU) and performing counterinsurgency operations in any UN environment is generally controversial and can cause further confrontations between

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<sup>40</sup> In April 2021, several activists of the Aguelhoc region reported the summary execution of three old men by Chadian MINUSMA soldiers in the MINUSMA camp. According to MNLA leader Inkineane, the old men had allegedly joined the camp the day before it was attacked by JNIM in search of medical assistance. They were killed, the [activist argues](#) [warning: distressing images], as reprisal for the attack. We do not know if MINUSMA followed up on these allegations.

military, development, and humanitarian actors (Karlsud 2015). For instance, ASIFU is possibly used as an instrument to serve the interests of the TCCs instead of the mission itself (DIIS 2017). Several reports have declared that the mission's military is perceived as an alliance of military contingents, where each is more answerable to their own governments, including delivering intelligence information, than to the principal authority of the mission (MSF 2017). Additionally, another challenge to the ASIFU and associated intelligence-mechanisms is that they are constituted by a clear hierarchy 'between so-called western skiing nations (a NATO term for Western countries) and African forces' (Cold-Ravnkilde & Lindskov Jacobsen 2020; Rietjens & de Waard 2017). As a matter of fact, ASIFU has been hesitant to share the intel it gathered with the rest of the mission and the Malian authorities, thus questioning its role as supporting the local functions (Daniel 2017, p. 245). The African versus European divide has led to deficient collaboration, limited trust, unbalanced deployment and supply of experts, and technological benefits (Cold-Ravnkilde 2017). Additionally, even when such data are generated, they do not have the capacity to interpret it (DIIS 2017).

Although ASIFU brought unparalleled analytical capacities and practical supplies to MINUSMA, the mission nevertheless struggles with limited intelligence-gathering capacities sustaining ASIFU, specifically those regarding evolving threats. The majority of the intelligence that is analysed remains 'open-source' seemingly because of the restrictions on what is approved in a UN peacekeeping environment. Even once the intelligence was analysed, they originally turned out to be almost identical to those of other components of the mission (Joint Mission Analysis Centre, JMAC, and Force Headquarters U2) and rarely sufficient to fend off terrorist attacks (Boutellis 2015). A better integration of these components was decided in 2017 through the merging of U2 and ASIFU (Duursma 2021). Duursma (2021) also notices in ASIFU, which seems to be a structural feature of MINUSMA, and has been criticised as a non-viable blueprint for information collection and analysis in UN peace operations. It is especially deemed as too expensive, the idea being that Western TCCs were only willing to finance ASIFU because they wanted to identify threats to their troops' (p. 29).

## 6.2. MINUSMA and non-UN actors in Mali

MINUSMA must navigate a complex multiplayer institutional environment made of Malian and non-Malian actors with varying tendencies to cooperate, depending on their respective agendas, ideological orientation, and changing circumstances. Malian politics are contentious, heterogeneous, and volatile. The acceptance of MINUSMA among Malians needs to be constantly fought for. Among foreign interveners, MINUSMA plays a prominent role in terms of budget and staff. However, MINUSMA may not be the most influential foreign intervener on the political front. France, through the military operation Barkhane it conducts, and as a broker of EU diplomatic initiatives and development policies, retains a great deal of leverage on Mali's political trajectory. As already mentioned, France is also the 'penholder' of the UN Security Council for Mali and, as a result, France drafts the UN-endorsed texts framing MINUSMA's action. However, this relative hierarchy of external interveners may change, as French authorities have announced a gradual drawdown of Operation Barkhane, involving the continuation of aerial support but significantly fewer boots on the ground.

To secure the attainment of a wholesome outcome from the foreign missions in Mali, the UNSC has called for sufficient coordination and exchange of information between MINUSMA, the Malian

Defense and Security Forces (MDSF), the JF-G5S, the French Forces, and the European Union missions in Mali. The Council additionally required MINUSMA to hold perpetual meetings of the *Instance de Coordination au Mali* as the main platform for such coordination and exchange of information. Nonetheless, this coordination poses a challenge depending on the institutions involved (NUPI 2021). In fact, several missions have many overlapping responsibilities (see Table 1 below), which can easily lead to either friction or synergy (examples explored below) (Hellquist & Sandman 2020). On the ground, MINUSMA pools some resources with the French military as well as the G5 Sahel, whose design was encouraged by France. As indicated above, MINUSMA is also significantly affected by European countries. Therefore, MINUSMA is de facto ‘close to’ other interveners taking care of Mali’s stabilisation. The following quote captures one perspective on the matter, put forward by staff from the European Union Training Mission (yet not necessarily shared by MINUSMA staff):

The short-term perspective is Barkhane to eliminate the ‘bad boys’, the mid-term perspective is MINUSMA to stabilise the entire region, and the long-term perspective is EUTM to build up the capabilities, so that they are able to take care of their own security....Of course, all three are running in parallel. (Moe 2021, online version)

The logic encapsulated in the above quote may be problematic at the normative level evoked in Section 4 and discussed further in the Conclusion. As put forward by Labbé & Boutellis (2013), “‘parallel’ deployments between UN and non-UN forces often do not guarantee the impartiality that the UN strives for’ (p. 544). This section examines the relationships between MINUSMA and other non-UN actors through a practical perspective, as they are portrayed in the available literature.

**Table 2.** MINUSMA and non-UN military actors operating in Mali<sup>41</sup>

	MINUSMA	EUTM	BARKANE	FC-G5S
<i>Military personnel</i>	13,289 (authorised)	620 (authorised)	5100	5000 <sup>9</sup>
<i>Geographical scope</i>	5 sectors: North, South, Central, West, East	South of the Niger River loop; FC-G5S Sector HQ in Niger, Chad, and Mauritania	Sahel	50 km within border areas of Mali/Mauritania, Mali/Niger, Mali/Burkina Faso, Niger/Chad
<i>HQ</i>	Bamako	Bamako	N'Djamena (Chad)	Bamako
<i>Core aim</i>	Re-establishment of state authority	Re-establishment of state authority	Re-establishment of state authority	Re-establishment of state authority
<i>Core mandate (equiv.)</i>	Robust peacekeeping, support implementation of peace agreement, protection of civilians	Capacity-building of the Malian armed forces and FC-G5S	Counter-terrorism, strengthening FC-G5S, supporting MINUSMA in case of emergency	Counter-terrorism; fight against transnational crime and human trafficking
<i>Core activities</i>	Patrolling, mine action, border monitoring, training Malian security forces, DDR/redeployment	Training and advice of FAMA; advise FC-G5S, DDR/redeployment	Operations against armed terrorist groups, accompanying and training FC-G5S, medical aid to the population, civilian-military developmental projects	Operations against armed terrorist groups, facilitation of humanitarian operations, criminal investigations
<i>Budget</i>	\$1,221,420,600/ ~€1,119,297,600 (July 2019–June 2020) <sup>10</sup>	€59,700,000 (2018–2020) <sup>11</sup>	~€600,000,000 (yearly) <sup>12</sup>	Aim €423,000,000 (first year of operations) <sup>13</sup>

Source: Hellquist & Sandman (2020)

### MINUSMA and Barkhane

France is the key broker of foreign interventionism in the Sahel. While France's military contribution to peacekeeping is limited, it plays a visible political role in that it derives influence over peacekeeping operations from its permanent seat on the UNSC and is responsible for drafting resolutions on MINUSMA. Thus, while initially hesitant, the UNSC mandated MINUSMA to be deployed alongside a French counterterrorism operation, Barkhane, authorised to intervene in support of the UN upon the request of the secretary-general (Tardy 2016). Some overlapping responsibilities between the two missions have led to synergies. In fact, on the ground, Barkhane and MINUSMA pool resources. Crucially, Barkhane protects MINUSMA camps through its aerial support (Baché 2021), and several French officers in MINUSMA have the deliberate and strategic responsibility to liaise with Operation Barkhane (Cold-Ravnkilde et al. 2017). Accordingly, the aforementioned many-sided entanglement between both Barkhane and MINUSMA is proof of MINUSMA's impartiality.

Cooperation may temporarily derail, however, as exemplified by the consequences of the 25 January 2021 French aerial strike in Bounti. The MINUSMA's Human Rights Division has led the Bounti investigation and established that 19 victims were civilians (MINUSMA 2021). This investigation has infuriated French authorities, which raised concerns about the 'methodology' and findings of the

<sup>41</sup> The budget of Barkhane is estimated to be closer to €800M than the number stated in the table (see Guichaoua 2020).

MINUSMA report and its use of ‘unverifiable’ local witness testimony (Ministère des Armées 2021), yet it is unclear whether this bitter episode will have lasting consequences on the relationship between both missions.<sup>42</sup>

As a consequence of the synergy between both missions, Barkhane’s partial disengagement may leave MINUSMA vulnerable, which has also been highlighted by some senior MINUSMA officers in Mali. ‘The might, reactivity, professionalism, and cohesion of the French force are precious and will be missed in case of an emergency’ (Baché 2021, translated from the French).

### **MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel**

The G5 Sahel, created in 2014, is a constantly evolving institutional creature driven by regional heads of state which mixes an ambitious developmental agenda with a counterterrorism objective. According to Desgrais (2019), it is also a funnel for capturing international funds, allowing highly presidentialist regimes to gain external leverage for perpetuating incumbency. In February 2017, and as part of the larger G5 Sahel, the *G5 Sahel Joint Force* (FC-G5S) was launched as an experiment to settle regional armed conflicts and address the Sahelian instability (International Crisis Group 2017a). The UN has supported the G5 Sahel Joint Force by mandating MINUSMA to contribute logistical support and life-support consumables to the force, such as fuel, rations, medical evacuation, and engineering support, creating some dependency on MINUSMA (De Coning & Karlsrud 2021). Consequently, the G5 Sahel countries are demanding that their coalition be transformed into ‘a brigade under Chapter 7’, so that the G5 can be partially funded by the UN instead of receiving support via MINUSMA. However, demand is consistently met with rejection by the United States. In the quest for FC-G5S to find its place in the region and the resources it will receive, a UNSC meeting was held on 18 May 2021 unveiling controversial stances with regard to MINUSMA and the EU’s support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Some participants in the high-level meeting argued in favour of the UN mandating a stand-alone support office to the FC-G5S to strengthen the scope and flexibility of support. Others expressed concern that a ‘new model of support would not resolve the difficult normative, policy, and logistical questions inherent to UN support for a non-UN operation’ (International Peace Institute 2021). The debate is open as to how the UN can help the G5 Sahel. Three contributions are available [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). The direction eventually taken may have budgetary and political consequences for the MINUSMA.

### **MINUSMA and EU actors (EUTM, EUCAP)**

To attain its objectives, MINUSMA has been mandated to coordinate with the government of Mali and its security forces as well as other foreign missions. In addition to the French Operation Barkhane, MINUSMA is expected to coordinate with two other European foreign military missions present in Mali and the Sahel: the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) and the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP).

EUTM, deployed since 2013, has its headquarters in Bamako and is mandated by the UNSC to deliver military and training advice to the Malian armed forces in the south of Mali to play a part in the reinstatement of their military capacity to defend the country and face terrorist groups (EUTM Mali; House of Commons Library 2013). Thus, EUTM’s mandate is mainly related to re-instituting state authority as it engages directly with the capacity building of the armed forces. Despite the differences

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<sup>42</sup> Knowing the importance of the investigation and in anticipation of its impact, MINUSMA’s Human Rights Division has produced a video publicising its efforts to establish the truth around the incident. This is notable as the Human Rights Division generally operates discretely. See this [clip](#).

in mandates, there is a central overlap in the activities of different missions. For instance, EUTM and MINUSMA share responsibilities in the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) and redeployment processes, and thus could be confused with each other in the public eye. However, the EUTM reported that this confusion was a risk to its entity. For instance, in 2019, some protestors mistook EUTM for MINUSMA and therefore hindered their trainers from leaving the compound. Hellquist and Sandman (2020) therefore argue that it is important to have a clear division of labour, one understood by both parties and the public as well.

In terms of information-sharing, EUTM and MINUSMA regularly exchange briefings and have a strong intelligence-sharing mechanism (Hellquist & Sandman 2020). When it comes to cooperation with the purpose of working toward the same goal together, MINUSMA and EUTM's interaction is considered marginal in that they both coexist among joint operations and camp protection missions; however, they do not really cooperate. Some explain this by looking at the internal cooperation within each mission, in which MINUSMA has been accused of being dysfunctional internally, thus making it harder to cooperate with other external missions (Hellquist & Sandman 2020).

EUCAP, deployed in January 2015 following an invitation by the Malian government, is a European Union civilian crisis management mission in Mali, with its headquarters in Bamako and a mobile unit in central Mali (Mopti-Sévaré). Its aim is to assist the country's internal security forces in re-establishing state authority. It does so by providing 'strategic advice, training, and *accompagnement* to the Malian Police, Gendarmerie, and National Guard and the relevant ministries' (EEAS 2021). We found no proper assessment of the relationship entertained by EUCAP and MINUSMA, yet anecdotal evidence of joint initiatives is available in open source. Examples include [training](#) delivered to the *Gendarmerie nationale*, [training](#) offered to community police outside Bamako, or [high-level coordination](#) meetings.

### **MINUSMA and humanitarian organisations**

At the humanitarian level, the situation in Mali is bad. Despite extensive humanitarian needs, the dominant insecurity and the government's weak systemic support have precipitated restricted access to services, specifically in the central and northern regions. This has increased the dependence on external and international humanitarian assistance; however, the presiding insecurity, among other factors, led the presence of humanitarian actors in Mali to be poor and insufficient according to MSF (2017).

In fact, the humanitarian presence and efforts in Mali face several challenges. As defined by the UNSC, the MINUSMA peacekeeping operation is comprehensive and comprises various levels: political, development, humanitarian, and military. Along with the French operation, Barkhane supports the Malian government in re-establishing its authority in major population centres and in its fight against terrorist groups (UNSC Res. 2100). Thus, it gives rise to the perception that the whole spectrum of foreign instruments is in support of the government, including humanitarian actors. Associating foreign military instruments with foreign humanitarian instruments has deep repercussions, in that the latter are de-legitimized and rejected by many parties as they lose their credibility. This also increases the risk of humanitarian actors being targeted and attacked, thus diminishing the presence of actors on the ground, bringing about an emergency gap, where crucial demands remain unfulfilled (Spink 2019; NUPI 2015).

Additionally, this association goes even further than causing a sceptical and negative perception of humanitarian actors. In fact, civil–military initiatives encompassing humanitarian activities are

primarily conducted by military organisations, such as MINUSMA and Barkhane. These activities include MINUSMA-funded quick impact projects (QIPs), such as the distribution of medicine. This leads to the politicisation of aid and its use for different purposes that are not necessarily congruent with humanitarian ideals, further costing humanitarian actors their credibility, but also hindering the extent to which MINUSMA is able to gain and maintain the communities' trust (Lamarche 2019). Since MINUSMA is defined by an integrated agenda, different levels of the mission (political, military, and humanitarian) depend on the same authority/person. While in some other missions these roles are clearly distinguished, in the case of Mali, any conflict between the interests would generally lead to the prioritisation of the political or military objectives, at the expense of humanitarian ones (MSF 2017). Consequently, relief organisations have trouble working with MINUSMA, given that it is not a neutral actor in the Malian context.

### **Perception of MINUSMA among Malian political class and public opinion**

The literature has been increasingly focusing on which standards render peace operations legitimate to host populations and how these operations function with respect to these standards. More specifically, the literature has recognised the importance of local perceptions in peace operations for customising successful and sustainable peace operations (Sabrow 2016).<sup>43</sup> This section looks at the way MINUSMA was perceived and evaluated by the public in Mali and how this outlook evolved throughout the mission's mandates and the challenging Malian context in which it operates.

After the deployment of MINUSMA, surveys conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's instrument 'Mali-mètre'<sup>44</sup> also included questions about MINUSMA to examine the Malian perception of the mission. This section recapitulates some of these findings, focusing on the level of satisfaction with the mission and the execution of its mandate, and the main local criticisms targeted at MINUSMA. In 2015, only one-third of the population was reported to be satisfied with the execution of the mission's mandate, with the population having several criticisms, such as condemning MINUSMA for not fighting armed groups, for even collaborating with the armed groups in the north, and to not protect civilians from such extremist threats. Additionally, the surveys show that most of the Malians interviewed by the organisation do not trust MINUSMA in its role in supporting the implementation of the APR, with an even higher proportion of distrust among citizens with a higher education level. (Mali-mètre 2015). In 2018, the surveys demonstrated an increase in the proportion of people satisfied with the execution of the mission's mandate to 42% (versus 46% reporting being dissatisfied and 12% without an opinion). Furthermore, after three years of increasing violence against civilians, the surveys revealed that the main criticism of the Malian population to MINUSMA in 2018 was its failure to protect civilians against extremist groups (with 59% raising this subject as their main concern—Mali-mètre 2018). In 2019, the level of satisfaction with MINUSMA's work in Mali was significantly low, with 78% of the population reporting dissatisfaction with the mission versus 16% satisfied (6% without an opinion), with the same criticisms reported in the previous year (Mali-mètre 2019). In fact, throughout the mission, many Malians have questioned the usefulness of MINUSMA,

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<sup>43</sup> The disconnect between international peace missions and local perceptions and political realities has become a classic trope in the peacebuilding literature, thanks notably to the relentless work of Severine Autesserre on this issue (2010, 2014, 2021). Craze (2021) offers a highly relevant review of her works, including some important warnings against the risk of 'fetishizing' local peacebuilding initiatives. What would have been ideal for this review is to include equivalent studies on MINUSMA's peacebuilding efforts on a local level, but no such granular research exists, to our best knowledge.

<sup>44</sup> We take the Mali-mètre findings with caution, as surveys only include Mali's main urban centres, some of which have no MINUSMA presence. The findings of the latest Mali-mètre report have actually been partly [rebuked](#) by MINUSMA's spokesperson, Olivier Salgado, on Twitter.

since it is not mandated to entirely engage in the fight against violent extremism (Sandor 2020). In June 2021, while the UNSC extended the mission's mandate, some populations were protesting in the centre, demanding that the blue helmets leave, as their presence was not making them more secure. At the same time, the civil society in Gao was content with the renewal (Studio Tamani 2021), thus exposing the sometimes heterogeneous features of Malian domestic opinion.

Local media and newspapers conveyed the difficulty of identifying with MINUSMA, as it was consistently considered as not representative of the Malian reality. In many instances, the mission's motives were questioned. It has been subject to many rumours regarding its intervention, and must navigate the Malian environment without an advanced data collection mechanism, despite ASIFU's assistance. MINUSMA had to repeatedly 'set the record straight' regarding its mandate (Sandor 2020). Rumours include that 'MINUSMA soldiers always stay locked away in their bases' or that 'MINUSMA troops are bunkerised, and ultimately useless' (Sandor 2020). Such rumours, stemming from incidents taking place in the Malian context and the way they are interpreted, sometimes lead to a negative perception of MINUSMA among the public, to which the mission must respond and clarify its position and perhaps take accountability for its presence and actions. Additionally, some of the mission's camps have been at several times targeted and inflicted with violence during protests and riots by a dissatisfied Malian population. For instance, in January 2015, some citizens protested in front of the MINUSMA office in Gao, accusing the mission of trying to weaken armed groups and to support the government against the rebels (Maliactu.net 2015). In October 2019, the population of Sevare ransacked the MINUSMA camp there because of being denied funds to fight extremists and jihadists. In the aftermath, the representative general of Mali at the UN, Mohamed Saleh Anadif, clarified the mission's position during an interview (Maliactu.net 2019). In May 2021, numerous protests took place in Aguelhoc and Kidal, with Malians asking MINUSMA to displace its camp under the pretext of being threatened by its presence. Subsequently, the mission was threatened by locals that they would inflict more violence if MINUSMA would not displace its camp (Adielhoc 2021). The head of the mission, El Ghassim Wane, eventually made a statement, and the *porte-parole* issued a press release to explain the situation and accentuate the mission's priority of PoC (United Nations 2021b).

Concerning the political class's perception of the mission, there are interesting discrepancies between Malian government officials and foreign partners, creating significant dissonances and sources of dysfunction that compromise the working relations between them. This, in turn, negatively affects the willingness of the Malians to cooperate, consequently limiting the favourable outcomes of the mission. The relationship between both sides ends up being a contest over power and authority, as to who gets to set priorities and strategies to rebuild the Malian security sector (Tull 2019). In fact, the foreign partners' recommendations regarding the Malian security sector are generally not in line with the local decision-makers, who are mostly keen on preserving the status quo, specifically in a context such as the Malian one, in which corruption and clientelism are widespread. Additionally, some Malian officials perceive international actors as striving to dominate cooperation at the expense of local knowledge, engagement, and agency (Tull 2019). In this respect, perceptions of the mission—whether by the public or by the decision-makers, in this case—play a substantial role in the shape and success of the mission. Additionally, when foreign partners take over reforms in Mali, such as in the army or the security sector, they often neglect local resources and competencies and impose a total overhaul of some sectors or state institutions. This gives the impression that the Malian security sector is completely incompetent and null, further affecting the perceptions among Malians, in turn affecting the mission's success (Tull 2019).

On a political level, MINUSMA shows a responsiveness to demands emanating from Malian authorities, and generally maintains a low public profile in times of domestic political tensions. An anecdotal but telling case concerns a French official of MINUSMA based in Kidal who was accused of making a discourse separating Mali from ‘Azawad’,<sup>45</sup> causing a diplomatic incident with Malian authorities and an outcry on social media. MINUSMA fired its employees after he was declared *persona non grata*.<sup>46</sup> More significantly, MINUSMA has to compose with changing regimes in Bamako and renews its ‘support to the transition’ whenever a coup happens, as official communication consistently repeats.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> As careful watchers of the incident with access to the entire transcript of the incriminated speech, we can personally testify that this was absolutely not the case.

<sup>46</sup> See Voice of America (2019).

<sup>47</sup> The communiqués respectively issued after the coup of August 2020 and May 2021 can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

**Figure 8.** Anti-MINUSMA protest against foreign presence in Bamako after the coup in August 2020



Credit: Getty Images

Looting of MINUSMA stocks after protest against foreign presence in Sevre, October 2019 (longer footage is available [here](#))



Credit: unknown

Protest against MINUSMA camp location near houses in Aguelhoc, Kidal, July 2021



Credit: [Adielhoc](#)

## 7. Where is MINUSMA going?

This report had two objectives: characterising the crisis in Mali, and offering an assessment of MINUSMA action, based on the existing literature.

We have portrayed the crisis in Mali as primarily endogenous to Mali. The crisis also has multiple subnational peculiarities that require specific attention and tailored conflict-resolution processes. The collapse of the country has roots inside Mali. The colonial and postcolonial governance system and the management of domestic security over the years have planted the seeds of chronic insurgency and the eventual takeover of some parts of the country by jihadist movements. Such movements are recruiting locally, even though they are also connected transnationally, ideologically, and logistically. The meltdown of Mali's governance system has provoked a foreign intervention initiated by France. It also involves kinetic and non-kinetic actions carried out by a range of international actors, among which MINUSMA has been featuring prominently since 2013.

We have disaggregated the assessment of MINUSMA's action by successively discussing the stabilisation logic it espouses, the intra-mission challenges it faces, the relations it entertains with other institutional actors, and the public opinion in Mali and its aptitude to deliver its mandate. These items are reviewed through the lens of the available literature, made of scholarly and selected non-scholarly references. The exercise had a few caveats. First, the topics we cover are those covered by the literature, which certainly does not exhaust the range of interesting questions to be asked about MINUSMA. Second, the studies certainly overrepresent problems as opposed to successes due to the inherent bias of the qualitative literature consisting of 'selecting on the dependent variable', that is, looking at notable deviations from normalcy. Third, the problems identified in the literature were certainly problematic when the studies we reviewed were conducted, but we have no way to know whether they persisted or were addressed after the research was conducted.

MINUSMA faces huge, highly concrete challenges on a daily basis, ranging from staffing adequately (numerically and qualitatively) the many roles it fulfils in ensuring the delivery and maintenance of its equipment (notably air assets), and navigating a complex institutional environment. Technical fixes may be needed at many levels to improve MINUSMA's logistical and bureaucratic processes, to deploy military that are better prepared for combat or to refine the intelligence it collects, which is decisive to its safety and efficacy in the delivery of its mission. Some deeper thinking may also be given to its internal division of labour, characterised by systemic inequalities between European and non-European (African) staff. A profound introspection is shaking humanitarian and international development organisations. The so-called 'decolonise' agenda both reveals and challenges the structures of domination shaping their field of activity, with practical implications for the way they recruit, pay, and involve staff from the global South in their decision-making processes. These reflections could inspire the reform of the UN and its missions and inform their staff about their practice.

Another important finding from this report stems immediately from hard doctrinal questions. MINUSMA's mandate is to stabilise Mali and work with other agencies to achieve this goal. We emphasise that 'stabilisation' is a highly polysemic term that is open to interpretation. The exact interpretation of MINUSMA in this term is unclear. Should MINUSMA's stabilisation agenda be cool or hot? Opting for a hot stabilisation agenda would mean that MINUSMA need not differentiate itself

dramatically from the French-led counterterrorism coalition, and that it can pursue a state-centric effort prioritising military capabilities. The ensuing risk is that MINUSMA could side with a national army committing abuses, or abandon any form of impartiality when delivering humanitarian assistance. Any distance taken from this hot stabilisation agenda demands that lines are clearly drawn to differentiate MINUSMA's actions from what other institutional actors are doing. In the case of Mali, these lines could involve: (a) a paramount priority given to the protection of civilians, (b) an active defence of the currently threatened APR as a framework for dialogue with the former separatists, (c) clear condemnations of army abuses against civilians, and (d) the opening of discussion channels—at least for violence de-escalation purposes—with insurgents who are not (yet) considered valid political interlocutors.

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