

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can the UN Stabilize Mali? Towards a UN Stabilization Doctrine?

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Almost two years after the deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in July 2013, the increasing number of asymmetric terrorist attacks targeting UN peacekeepers – in the context of a drawn-out peace process – has raised a number of questions in Mali, the sub-region, and in New York, over the relevance and adequacies of MINUSMA's mandate and capabilities. It also raises a broader issue, of whether the consent-based UN peacekeeping tool is appropriate and can be effective in carrying out stabilization mandates in such a context and what doctrine such operations should be based on. The UN is indeed under increasing pressure from host countries and some African troop-contributing countries to go on the offensive. Member States have also increasingly recognized terrorism and organized crime as a strategic threat, and while opposed to the UN directly engaging in counterterrorism (CT) operations, some may wish to see the UN playing a greater stabilization role following the January 2013 French military intervention in Mali. However, little guidance and means have been given so far to UN missions for dealing with such threats and implementing effective stabilization mandates. The High-Level Panel on Peace Operations, which recently released its report, noted that the usage of the term "stabilization" by the UN requires clarification. This article analyses the complex and evolving nature of threats in northern Mali and implications for MINUSMA and describes the military and political tools – including mediation – so far available within and outside the UN. The article concludes that the UN is bound to move towards stabilization when and if deployed in contexts such as Mali's if it wants to remain relevant. However, such a move should be based on an overarching UN stabilization doctrine and context-specific UN-wide stabilization strategies which are first and foremost political, and should not be confused with the reestablishment of state authority. Such a move should also be accompanied by reforms in the design of 'lighter' but more capable UN operations, and partnership with non-UN parallel fighting forces with shared stabilization objectives, but with a clear division of labor.

Introduction

On November 10, 2014, the UN Security Council held an Informal Interactive Dialogue 'brainstorming' session on the UN

Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), where the mission had increasingly been the target of asymmetrical terrorist attacks. To date, 35 MINUSMA peacekeepers have been killed and another 138 wounded in over 70 attacks, the highest number of fatalities in a single peacekeeping operation in such timeframe

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since the UN Operation in Somalia II in 1994 (DPKO 2015). While this may in part result from MINUSMA having become the largest force in northern Mali and terrorist groups reorganizing in the broader Sahel, it has raised a number of questions in Mali, the sub-region and in New York regarding the relevance and adequacy of MINUSMA's mandate and capabilities in such a context. While no member state seems to think that the UN should directly engage in counterterrorism (CT) operations, some have nonetheless suggested that the context calls for a more robust stabilization posture.

The operational environment in which the UN mission is operating in Mali has indeed significantly changed since its inception. UN Peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous, when briefing the UN Security Council on October 8, 2014, stated that MINUSMA is no longer operating in a peacekeeping environment. The following day, MINUSMA's then Force Commander, General Jean Bosco Kazura told the Council that 'MINUSMA is in a terrorist-fighting situation without an anti-terrorist mandate or adequate training, equipment, logistics or intelligence to deal with such a situation' (SCR 2014). African troop contributing countries (TCCs) also raised the alarm, with Chad – which has lost the most troops overall and is also currently on the Council – threatening to withdraw its peacekeepers. Niger, whose troops in Mali have also been the target of attacks, and the government of Mali itself have been pushing to make MINUSMA's mandate 'more robust' and to set up a 'force intervention brigade' along the lines of the brigade of the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to 'combat terrorist groups and drug-traffickers' (SPV 2015).

The Security Council has so far resisted these calls, judging that the mission's mandate which authorizes peacekeepers under Chapter VII to 'use all necessary means' to protect civilians and to 'deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements' is sufficiently robust. MINUSMA's main European

TCCs – the Netherlands and Sweden – whose troops previously served in Afghanistan CT operations have so far remained outside of the debate. The main instance of MINUSMA peacekeepers using force to date has been a January 20th, 2015 Apache helicopter strike on a MNLA Tuareg armed group, whose fighters had allegedly been firing in the direction of peacekeepers in the town of Tabankort (UN 2015, §18), rather than against 'terrorist' groups. This new 'African way' may also signal a departure from the traditional South-North divide between the large South Asian TCCs who usually favored restrictive traditional peacekeeping roles whilst the North supported more robust, stabilization and state-building peacekeeping roles.

In light of the significant changes to the political and security operational environment in Mali, and the signing of a peace agreement, the Security Council nonetheless supported the idea of the mission reviewing its strategy to implement the mandate given to it by the Council ahead of the mandate renewal at the end of June 2015 in order to focus on a limited set of key stabilization priorities (UN 2015, §57). This however poses a broader question of whether the consent-based UN peacekeeping tool is appropriate and effective in carrying out a stabilization mandate in such contexts, and if so, based on what doctrine and/or strategies. Missions such as MINUSMA have so far been given little guidance or resources to deal with the threats they face and for implementing effective stabilization mandates. The High-Level Panel on Peace Operations, which recently released its report, noted that the usage of the term "stabilization" by the UN requires clarification.

This article analyses the complex and evolving nature of threats in northern Mali and implications for MINUSMA. It describes the military and political tools available (within and outside the UN) to allow the organization to carry out its stabilization mandate. The article concludes with a series of recommendations, including on how UN missions in contexts such as Mali should be deployed

on the basis of an overarching UN stabilization doctrine and context-specific UN-wide stabilization strategies that are first and foremost political, and should not be confused with the reestablishment of state authority simply. Such a move should also be accompanied by reforms in the design of 'lighter' UN missions on the ground and clear division of labor with parallel fighting forces.

UN Stabilization following the French Military Intervention?

The 2012 crisis in Mali started with a Tuareg rebellion of the *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA)¹ in January 2012 (the fourth since the country's 1960 independence). The rebels, bolstered by the return of soldiers from Qaddafi's legions with heavy weaponry, occupied a large part of northern Mali and declared the independence of this territory which they call *Azawad*. The Malian armed forces' poor performance in fighting the rebellion triggered in turn the March 2012 coup d'état by frustrated army officers in Bamako, consecrating the collapse of a Malian State weakened by corruption and President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT)'s policy of 'demilitarization,' as well as his alliances with the local elites of Northern Mali and use of ethnic militias in pursuit of narrow political agendas. The Tuareg MNLA occupation of northern Mali was however short-lived. Militarily and financially superior AQIM (Al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb) and its MUJAO (the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) offshoot quickly drove MNLA elements out, taking control of Timbuktu and Gao respectively, while another Islamist Tuareg group *Ansar Dine* controlled Kidal. Negotiations that had started between the interim Malian government and the MNLA and *Ansar Dine* came to an end when the Islamist groups started moving south towards the capital Bamako, triggering the January 2013 French military intervention.

The initial international response to the 2012 Mali crisis had been a military one,

with the planned African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) overtaken by events and the decisive French military intervention on January 11, 2013, which killed a few hundreds in the first days. After some initial confusion about whether the objective of the intervention was simply to prepare for the AFISMA deployment, French forces quickly re-conquered the northern towns of Gao and Timbuktu, then Kidal with support from Chadian AFISMA troops (ICG 2013). They faced little resistance as armed groups largely vanished into the rough terrains of northern Mali's '*Adrar des Ifoghas*' and southern Libya, now described as the new center of gravity of destabilization for the region.

With the end of major combat operations, France supported the idea of deploying a UN mission in Mali as an exit strategy for its forces and as a way to 'multilateralize' its intervention. Possibly inspired by the 'clear, hold, build' counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy developed by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan (US 2014), there was also a sense that UN peacekeepers could play a 'hold and build' stabilization role following the January 2013 French intervention. Despite questions over whether there was yet a peace to keep after the end of major French combat operations, key permanent Security Council members supported the idea of a UN mission on the basis that such an arrangement would provide greater oversight than an AMISOM-UNSOA-type partnership with the Africa-led peace enforcement mission AFISMA (Boutellis 2013).

MINUSMA is neither the first nor the only 'stabilization' mission the Security Council authorized. The first were MINUSTAH in Haiti in 2004 and MONUSCO in the DRC in 2010. Shortly after MINUSMA, MINUSCA was also authorized in the Central African Republic in 2014. But while the US developed the concept of 'Stability and Reconstruction Operations' and the above-mentioned COIN strategy, the African Union and NATO developed the concept of 'Peace Support

Operations,' and the EU its own concept of 'Crisis Management Operations,' the UN has not yet conceived its own stabilization doctrine. Contrary to what UN peace operations are traditionally meant to do, these 'stabilization' concepts have been largely about using military means to stabilize a country, creating the risk of a 'mismatch between doctrine and current practices in UN peacekeeping' (Karlsrud 2015: 50).

In theory, the 'Capstone Doctrine' (UN 2008) had reaffirmed the basic UN peacekeeping principles (including consent of the parties to the peace process, and impartiality and non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of the mandate) while introducing the concept 'robust peacekeeping' as a recognition that the use of force at the tactical level may be necessary to defend the mission and its mandate from spoilers. Despite the 'New Horizon' (UN 2009) announcing 'DPKO is already working to identify essential early tasks as the first step to a coherent post-conflict stabilization strategy,' such a strategy has not yet been revealed. In practice, the main thing that these UN 'stabilization' missions have in common is that they operate in the midst of on-going conflicts and therefore have to maintain a ceasefire and support a peace process rather than simply supporting the implementation of a peace agreement. They are also tasked with restoring and maintaining order by protecting a government and its people through robust operations to contain aggressors and spoilers (De Coning 2015).

Also, little guidance exists in terms of carrying out UN stabilization mandates following or in parallel with a non-UN military operation with its own chains of command and rules of engagement, but sometimes stabilization objectives that are similar. Such parallel deployments also challenge the principle of impartiality the UN strives for. The Security Council decision to deploy a UN peacekeeping mission to stabilize Mali without a clear stabilization doctrine or strategy would soon be called into question

by the challenges the mission would face on the ground.

MINUSMA: Mission Impossible?

The UN integrated multidimensional stabilization mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was authorized in April 2013 and took over from AFISMA on July 1st (incorporating most of its 6,000 African troops²) (**Figure 1**) following the signing of the Ouagadougou interim peace agreement of June 18, 2013 between two rebel groups of Northern Mali, MNLA and HCUA³, and the interim government in Bamako. Two other groups, MAA⁴ & CMFPR,⁵ who had not taken part in the MNLA-led rebellion and are considered to be closer to the government, also adhered to the agreement.

This in turn made it possible for Mali to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on its whole territory in July 2014. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (popularly known as 'IBK') was elected president with a solid margin. But while the Ouagadougou agreement clearly called for the new legitimately-elected government to initiate negotiations towards a comprehensive and final peace agreement no later than 60 days after its installation, such talks never started and the follow-up mechanisms of the agreement – *Comité de Suivi* and *Comité Technique Mixte de Sécurité*, presided over by the MINUSMA head of mission and force commander, respectively – stopped meeting by October due to the lack of political will on both sides.

This made the implementation of MINUSMA's mandate to provide 'support for the reestablishment of State authority throughout the country' and 'take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas' while also supporting 'the implementation of the transitional road map, including the national political dialogue' (UNSC 2013, §16 (a) & (b)) very difficult – some would argue, paradoxical. The government of Mali wanted the UN to focus its support on the latter, which it understood as the return of the Malian Defense & Security Forces (MDSF) and of

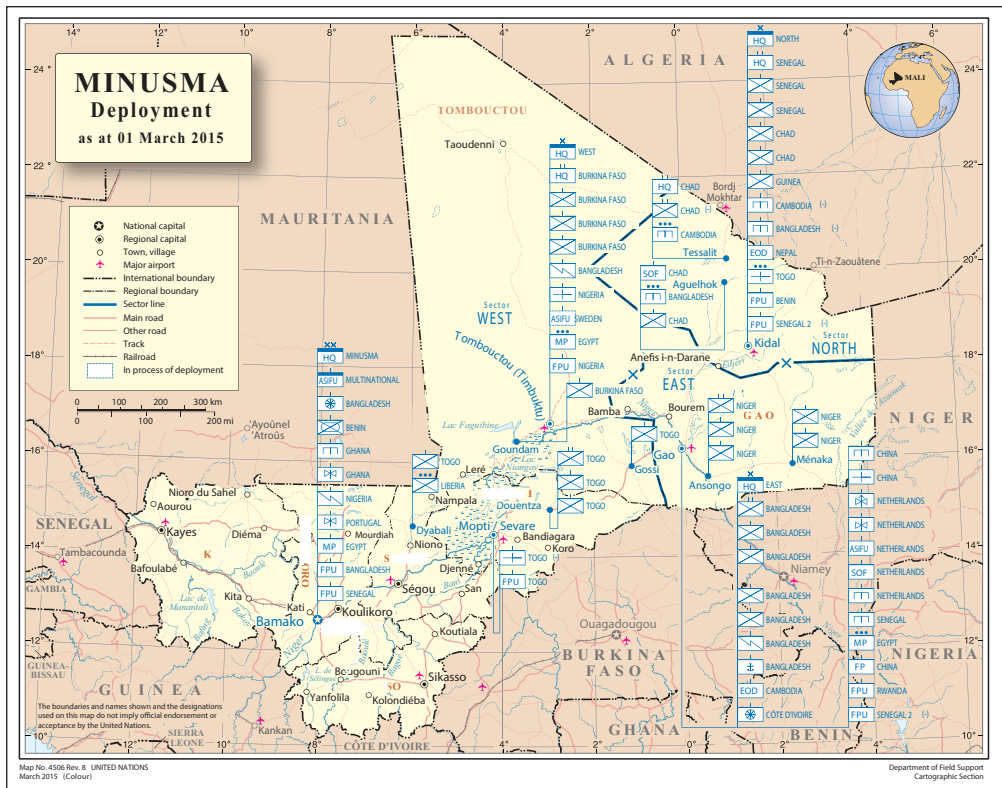


Figure 1: MINUSMA Deployment in Mali as of March 1st, 2015. *Source:* UN Department of Field Support Cartographic Section.

State administration to northern Mali – largely perceived as ‘southern’ and predatory by local northern populations – rather than basic services which could have helped improve local acceptance of the return of State presence. But MINUSMA’s attempts to re-launch the political dialogue through the facilitation of workshops in February-March 2014, building on the momentum created by a visit of the Security Council from February 1–3, met little success. Armed movements continued to resist the cantonment of their troops (even though they had agreed with the government on a February 18 Modus Operandi on cantonment as the only tangible outcome of the workshops) in the absence of political negotiations, and the government continued to oppose moving forward on confidence building

‘security arrangements’ such as joint patrols and direct political negotiations with rebel groups. This was despite all Malian stakeholders having reaffirmed to the Council their willingness to take part in an inclusive dialogue towards reaching a comprehensive settlement to the recurring crisis.

With the lack of progress on the political front, tensions continued to rise and culminated with a 17 May 2014 visit of Prime Minister Moussa Mara to Kidal, which led to clashes between the MDSF and armed groups and the killing of six civil servants at the Governor’s office. Both sides blamed each other for having initiated the fighting and the government called it a ‘declaration of war, which it has to respond to’ (GoM 2014). Four days later, after having sent reinforcements, the MDSF launched an assault on

Kidal using heavy weapons on 21 May, but retreated after a few hours of fighting (and more than 30 casualties on their side) against MNLA, HCUA and affiliated armed groups, and sought refuge at MINUSMA camps in Kidal and other cities of northern Mali (UN 2014, §4 & 5).

Despite the brokering of a ceasefire on 23 May, the assault on Kidal radically changed the situation – and *rapport de force* – on the ground, as the armed movements MNLA, HCUA and ally MAA-Ould Sidatti⁶ were now in control of a large part of northern Mali from which MDSF and administration had fled. These groups started setting up a parallel administration in these regions, including local security committees. This led to much questioning within MINUSMA on how to now work in these areas and engage with armed movements – de facto authorities – without legitimizing them.

The mission was often caught between communities criticizing the UN for doing too little, armed groups suspecting the mission to be partial to the government, and a government wary of the UN indeed legitimizing these groups if it started implementing stabilization projects focused on reestablishing basic services such as water and electricity in areas where state administration was absent. In practice, the government effectively limited the ability of a 'state-centric' UN to carry out any kind of meaningful activity in the Kidal region beyond humanitarian medical evacuation and flying delegations to and from Kidal, such as the government delegation which travelled to Kidal in December 2014 to offer condolences following the death of the traditional Ifoghas Tuareg *Amenokal* leader, and various armed group delegations travelling in the context of the inter-Malian negotiations. The January 20, 2015 MINUSMA helicopter strike on MNLA Tuareg armed group in Tabankort also damaged the UN mission's relationship with armed groups, and armed groups' supporters vandalized the Kidal airstrip, which was rendered non-operational for months after that (UN 2015, Para. 18 & 19).

Extremist and criminal groups with little interest in stability also started to reorganize themselves and have increasingly been targeting UN peacekeepers – now the main force operating in northern Mali after the departure of MDSF (the few MDSF troops that remained in Menaka and Tessalit after May 2014 became effectively disarmed and cantoned into their camps) and the progressive downsizing and reorganizing of French forces as part of their Sahel-wide counterterrorism strategy.⁷

Terrorism: a Threat to Everyone but not Everyone's Fight

Despite the initial embedding of small French Liaison and Support Detachments within many MINUSMA units to ensure operational coordination and coherence, the fact that 'French troops [can] intervene in support of elements of MINUSMA when under imminent and serious threat' (UNSC 2013), and the occasional French-MDSF-MINUSMA coordinated operations (Le Monde 2013), MINUSMA as a UN stabilization mission is not mandated to engage in explicit counterterrorism tasks. Security Council members understood that *Serval* was essentially a parallel counterterrorism force with its own objectives (replaced by *Barkhane* in July 2014, maintaining some 1,000 French troops in Mali out of a total of 3,000 operating in the sub-region), to deal with other armed groups who had neither signed nor adhered to the Ouagadougou agreement, namely AQIM⁸ and MUJAO/Al Murabitun.⁹

The *Ansar Dine*¹⁰ group has been largely dormant, as most of its prominent members have since moved over to the more respectable HCUA. A notable exception is Iyad Ag Ghali, who reappeared in a July 2014 video threatening both France and MINUSMA (RFI 2014), and claimed a December 29, 2014 rocket attack on a MINUSMA camp in northern Mali (JA 2014). Many prominent Tilemsi/Lemhar¹¹ Arab members and financiers of the MUJAO (an organization put on the Al Qaeda sanctions list in December 2012) have also since joined the more

acceptable MAA-Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed (DDM 2014) branch and continue trading, smuggling and trafficking. This illustrates the blurring of lines between so-called 'compliant armed groups' (CAGs) and 'extremist' (commonly referred to as 'terrorist,' although the UN has no internationally-agreed definition of terrorism) and criminal groups as a result of competition over influence, control of trade and trafficking routes, and fluidity both in their leadership and among opportunistic fighters (**Figure 2**). While the January 2013 French military intervention has been largely successful in 'clearing' northern Mali of most foreign fighters, most Malians who had joined the various groups remained in Mali. Under these conditions, it should come as no surprise that some of these groups and individuals have since reorganized themselves.

This reality has sometimes encouraged broad generalizations whereby all these groups are labeled as 'bandits' or 'terrorists,'

which is not helpful either. That said, the November 2013 kidnapping and killing of two RFI journalists in Kidal, regular planting of mines and IEDs, and rocket and mortar attacks on MINUSMA camps across northern Mali, suggest some level of complicity or at least a tacit understanding between mainstream elements of CAGs, the local population and extremist groups. This however could also result from the fear of retaliation by better-equipped extremist groups, with no possibility for MINUSMA to protect those who choose to collaborate. Notably, MNLA members who supported the French troops in driving out the extremist groups have been the target of regular abductions and assassinations, and it is the only armed group that has publicly denounced acts of terrorism against MINUSMA, MSDF and civilian populations.

As a peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA remains acutely vulnerable to such

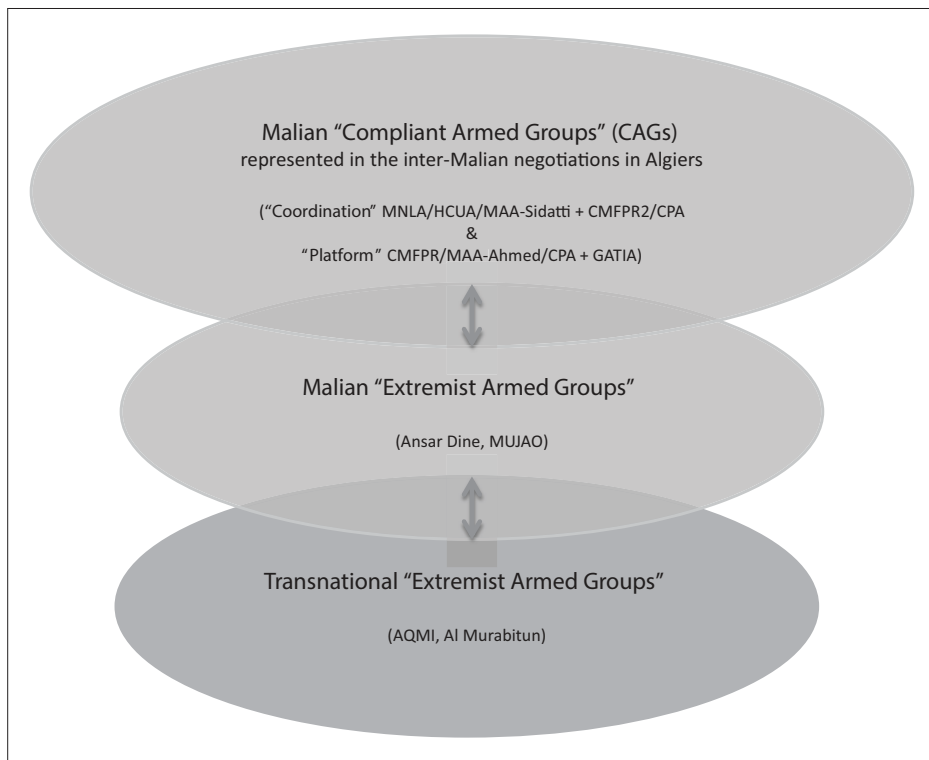


Figure 2: Simplified Typology of Armed Groups Operating in Mali.

asymmetric threats, and has neither the mandate nor the capabilities to fight back. Troops it inherited from AFISMA lack the specialized training and equipment for adequate force protection, let alone more offensive measures. MINUSMA is now in the process of reviewing its Rules of Engagement and Mission Concept in light of the threats, and created an additional 'military sector' for northern Mali in December 2014 in order to improve the mission's response. It also started building 'bunkers' in its camps, deploying force protection units, and training and equipping its troops against IEDs, steps that have contributed to better reactions by peacekeepers and to limiting the number of deaths as a result of IEDs. It will also carry out Quick Impact Projects (QIPs)¹² and Community Violence Reduction (CVR)¹³ projects to improve the acceptance of the mission and prevent further recruitments by CAGs and extremist groups.

Collectively, these efforts to modernize the mission's capabilities do not however constitute a counter-terrorist or counter-insurgency (COIN), nor a stabilization doctrine or strategy. Better protection alone could lead to an escalation, with extremist groups using more advanced techniques and carrying out complex terrorist attacks on UN facilities and employing larger or more sophisticated explosive devices including explosively formed projectiles (EFPs), against UN armored and anti-mine vehicles. As UN peacekeepers have become more resilient, extremist groups also started targeting 'softer' targets such as UN supply convoys (contractors) and humanitarian actors (NGOs). The use of remote-controlled and magnetic IEDs and instances of both vehicle borne (VBIED) and suicide bomber (SBIED) attacks, which had not been seen in this region before, also illustrate the growing sophistication of these extremist groups in staging complex attacks against UN bases in all three northern Mali regions of Kidal, Timbuktu, and Gao. The first ever terrorist attack in a bar in Mali's capital Bamako on March 6th, 2015, which killed six, demonstrated the ability of extremist groups

to strike far away from northern Mali using accomplices in Bamako. In late May 2015, UN personnel were also the target of two attacks in Bamako (AJ 2015).

The only 'high-capability' contributions MINUSMA can rely on – intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) units and short-range UAVs from the Netherlands and Sweden, and highly mobile Special Forces units and attack and transport helicopters from the Netherlands that are soon to be joined by more air assets from El Salvador – have so far had a limited range outside of Gao and Timbuktu due to foreign units' limited knowledge of French and local languages. However, imagery intelligence (IMINT) has already greatly contributed to improving the situational understanding of the armed groups' respective presences and strengths in the field.

MINUSMA also still lacks a good understanding of the evolving threat, particularly of those behind the attacks targeting the UN mission. On the intelligence front, the NATO-standard All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU) brought unprecedented analytical capabilities to the mission, and supplies the mission with useful weekly, monthly and quarterly written and map products. However, the mission still has limited intelligence collection capabilities feeding into ASIFU. Much of the information analyzed remains 'open-source' as there are limits on what can be authorized in a UN peacekeeping context (i.e., placing sensors to conduct remote surveillance, gathering signals intelligence and building field-level human intelligence 'HUMINT' networks). Analytical outputs have in turn too often been similar to those of other parts of the mission (JMAC and U2, with which ASIFU should be better integrated) and too seldom timely and tactical to prevent terrorist attacks.

In order for MINUSMA to get ahead of and disrupt the terrorist planning and operational cycle, a concurrent higher-tempo cycle of intelligence-led operations would have to be created, which would be unprecedented for a peacekeeping operation. To date the

only examples of intelligence-led operations in a peacekeeping context were the anti-gang operations in Haiti (Dziedzic & Perito 2008) and some of the operations by the 2013 UN intervention brigade in eastern Congo to 'neutralize and disarm' rebel groups but under an unusual peace enforcement mandate (UNSC 2013, Para. 12). Formal information sharing with the French and Americans operating in the Sahel is also challenging in part due to confidentiality issues and a lack of protocols when southern Libya and parts of Northern Niger are used as rear bases by some groups. That said, the collection and analysis capabilities that ASIFU and 'high-capability' TCCs bring to a UN mission could greatly contribute to developing and regularly updating a context-specific UN-wide stabilization strategy. To be effective, that would also require that the added-value of such tools be better understood and that analysis be used by UN mission leadership to improve planning and decision-making.

Stabilizing through Political Negotiations: Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Much of the hope for an improvement in the security situation in northern Mali lies with the Algerian-led international Mediation (of which MINUSMA is a member)¹⁴ of the inter-Malian peace talks initiated in the aftermath of the assault on Kidal in May 2014. Algeria, which played a key role in mediating Malian crises since the 1990s, had started 'exploratory discussions' in January 2014 in an attempt to bring together the various CAGs in a coherent platform ahead of a negotiation with the government of Mali. These efforts did not fully succeed and the various CAGs entered the first phase of the negotiations and signed the July 24, 2014 *feuille de route* (roadmap) as two separate CAGs platforms. On the one side, the MNLA, HCUA, and MAA-Sidatti as the *Coordination of Azawad Movements* (or 'CMA,' an alliance which had existed since November 2013) and on the other side a *Platform* signed on June 14 by the MAA-Ahmed, CMFPR, and

the CPA (*Coalition du peuple pour l'Azawad*, created on March 18 as an MNLA dissident group). Following four more rounds of negotiations, a 'compromise' agreement was initiated by the Government and the *Plateforme* on March 1, 2015 in Algiers as the *Accord pour la paix et la reconciliation au Mali*.

The *Coordination*, for its part, had refused to initial the agreement on the basis that it does not address some of its main aspirations, including the recognition of the northern territory which they call *Azawad* as a geographical and political entity, and security arrangements therein. Instead, it called for continuing discussions towards a consensual agreement, reaffirming its commitment to respecting the various ceasefire agreements and cessation of hostilities in various communiqués, partly out of concern of being subjected to 'targeted sanctions, against those who resume hostilities and violate the ceasefire' (PRST 2015). Following further consultations in Algiers with the *Coordination* from April 15 to 18, 2015, the Algeria-led Mediation issued a communiqué inviting all parties to the inter-Malian dialogue to sign the peace agreement at a ceremony in Bamako on May 15, 2015. Meanwhile, when addressing the Security Council on April 9, the Mali Foreign Minister indicated his government's position that 'negotiations are over' and that it is moving forward with implementation, and called on the international community to 'isolate... and impose sanctions' on 'radical and extremist individuals' who would not sign on to the agreement (GoM 2015). The threat of sanctions has not deterred ceasefire violations. There was also a risk that sanctions imposed too early would close the door for individuals and groups wishing to (re-)join the process during the implementation phase and radicalize them further.

Over the course of the eight-month long negotiations however, armed groups have fragmented and alliances have shifted, as the various groups and their leadership position themselves ahead of the conclusion of a possible agreement and as their relative military

strength evolved. Since the beginning of the Algiers talks, part of the CMFPR allied with the *Coordination* (as 'CMFPR2') before eventually returning to the *Platform* (in April 2015), part of the CPA quickly returned to the MNLA (of which it was a dissidence in the first place), and a new group called GATIA¹⁵ announced its formation in August 2014 and joined the *Platform* following the first clashes between *Platform* groups and *Coordination* groups in the Gao region, after which its strength grew quickly to become the main military force of the *Platform* alongside the well-funded MAA-Ahmed. GATIA openly supports the government, and is considered by the *Coordination* as a proxy militia under the direct orders of MDSF General Elhadj Ag Gamou despite having formally allied to the *Platform*. Just ahead of the announced May 15 signing ceremony, GATIA and MAA-Ahmed attacked the *Coordination* – which had just publically reaffirmed its intention to initial the agreement – in the town of Menaka on April 27, 2015, leading to a breakdown of the ceasefire and *Coordination* retaliation attacks against MDSF positions in Timbuktu and Gao regions. Ensuing fighting around Menaka led to important casualties on both sides, reportedly including members of prominent Tuareg families which will no doubt make reconciliation even more challenging.

This did not derail the peace process, however. On June 5, following further consultations focused on the modalities of the implementation of the future agreement, the *Coordination* announced it would finally sign the peace agreement on June 20 in Bamako. This came along with another agreement between the *Coordination* and the government on security arrangements consisting of the withdrawal of *Platform* forces from Menaka and UN peacekeepers temporarily taking over the security of the town and its population in return for the *Coordination* ceasing its attacks in northern Mali. Platform commander Yoro Ould Daha – the former MUJAO Islamic police chief in Gao who served during the 2012 occupation of northern Mali (RFI 2015) – eventually withdrew its

troops from Menaka on 19 June. Proximity between and mobility of the various forces on the ground however make renewed clashes very possible despite the presence of UN peacekeepers.

The government of Mali has always denied any links to the *Platform* groups, which it has described as 'vigilante groups... formed by the communities concerned in order to protect their land' (SPV 2015). While the international Mediation adopted the attitude not to recognize any of these 'new groups' (to avoid encouraging the creation of more), article 67 of the agreement specifies that the *Coordination* and the *Platform* are understood to include all the entities comprising them at the time of the signature. The participation of two platforms of armed groups, in addition to the government as the third party and the military strengthening of the *Platform* through GATIA, which altered the *rapport de force* on the ground, created major challenges during the negotiation and may have ultimately rendered confrontation inevitable for the parties to 'test' this new balance of military power on the ground (ICG 2015: 11).

It was only under strong international pressure that the *Coordination* eventually initialed the agreement in Algiers on May 14, 2015 with the condition that direct discussions be held with the Government of Mali to address its demands ahead of the signing of the final agreement. The May 15 signing ceremony was therefore held in Bamako without the *Coordination* being present. The UN Secretary-General's statement delivered at the ceremony by Hervé Ladsous called for the agreement to remain open for the signature of remaining parties and for dialogue to continue, and warned against the utilization of the signing as a pretext for the resumption of military operations against non-signatory groups. This message was not well received by the Malian president who in turn accused MINUSMA of partiality, revealing 'substantial divergences with the host country on the process that should follow the signing' (ICG 2015).

While the signing of the peace agreement by the *Coordination* representative Sidi Brahim Ould Sidatti on 20 June in Bamako represents an important and necessary step towards the country's stabilization through a political and security agreement dealing with some of the root causes of the conflict, it will not solve all the problems. Indeed, it would help draw a sharper line between CAGs and extremist groups and enroll CAGs into the fight against terrorism alongside the MSDF. This would have been almost impossible in the case of an inconclusive and/or partial peace process that would have excluded certain armed groups. But those not present in Algiers (such as the ethnic Fulani/Peul pastoral nomadic populations of the Mopti/Massina region) and extremist groups will likely continue to be spoilers. Extremist groups could also very well enroll some of the younger more radical (and/or opportunistic) members of those CAGs represented in Algiers whose internal divisions may have been exacerbated by the decision of their leaders to sign the agreement. This is particularly likely if there is no attractive alternative provided to them through military integration and socio-economic reinsertion, or if a final status settlement fails to satisfy the nationalist or religious demands of a young and more ideologically motivated base. This will be all the more challenging in that integration/enrollment into the Malian security services is not often seen as an attractive option for many combatants in light of the lucrative criminal economy and trafficking opportunities prevailing in parts of northern Mali.

With MINUSMA's mandate renewal Security Council members could be divided. On the one hand, there are those who may think there is no time to lose now that the agreement is signed, and want the mission to implement a robust stabilization mandate in support of the host government. On the other hand, there are those who may wish to emphasize the respect for the ceasefire, putting in place confidence-building security arrangements in the agreement (such as

joint patrols between Malian army and CMA forces) and the continuation of political dialogue during the implementation phase (SCR 2015).

Implementation will prove challenging in a country where there is a history of agreements not being implemented. The deep-rooted mistrust and lack of political will on either side to make peace – each side using and abusing the sentiments of 'its populations' – could easily lead to the stalling of follow-up mechanisms to the agreement, as was the case in the aftermath of the signing of the June 2013 Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement. This would be all the more problematic that many key security issues (including the composition of the future restructured defense and security forces) have not been resolved in the Algiers negotiations and will require further negotiations during the implementation phase through these follow-up mechanisms. If there is no progress, confrontations between and positioning by the parties and their allies – with their own criminal and extremist agendas – could continue for some time with the risk of deteriorating into full-blown civil war between communities of northern Mali. The international community may have succeeded in getting the Malian parties to sign peace, now will be time for Malians themselves to make peace. In this context, it seems reasonable for MINUSMA, which will continue to be one of the key security actors in northern Mali and have an important role in following-up on the implementation of the accord, to hope for the best but plan for the worst.

Conclusion: Towards a UN Stabilization Doctrine

Instability and the terrorist threat in Mali and the broader Sahel are not about to go away, and MINUSMA may be in for the long run. The growing number of asymmetric attacks targeting the UN mission no doubt provide strong arguments against deploying large, static, and therefore vulnerable UN peacekeeping missions to such theatres; and instead preferring a lighter footprint,

with a parallel non-UN rapid response and/or counterterrorist multinational force doing the fighting necessary to stabilize the situation and create space for the UN to support a political process through impartial good offices. This is very much in line with what the Brahimi report advocated for and what the UN peacekeeping doctrine has been so far, and was effectively followed in Mali until the Security Council decided – prematurely, probably – to authorize a full-fledged UN peacekeeping mission to take over from the AU peace enforcement mission AFISMA.

Looking at trends, it is however very likely that the Security Council will continue to deploy UN stabilization missions in environments where there is no peace agreement to implement and where the risk of the asymmetric attacks is high, ‘not because they are a preferred option, but as an option of last resort’ (De Coning 2015). But while member states have increasingly recognized that terrorism and transnational organized crime (TOC) have become both a direct threat to UN peacekeepers and civilian staff themselves, and a strategic threat to the successful implementation of the mission’s mandate, there is still a considerable lack of clarity about what stabilization is, and Council members have so far given little guidance and means to UN missions for implementing stabilization mandates (Muggah 2014). In this context, if it is to remain relevant, the UN must also adapt its ways of doing business and start addressing the mismatch between doctrine and current UN peacekeeping practices.

First of all, the UN needs to develop its own stabilization doctrine that should be first and foremost political when and if peacekeeping operations are mandated to stabilize. UN peacekeeping remains too state-centric and in the absence of a UN stabilization doctrine, the concept has too often been confused with the ‘reestablishment of state authority’ part of the mandate, when the weak and contested state authority is often part of the problem rather than the solution. In such cases, a re-foundation of the state and of the state-citizens relationship through the

‘national political dialogue and reconciliation’ as mandated in Mali, may be required to bring lasting stability through a negotiated and inclusive peace settlement (UNSC 2014) which implementation the UN supports thereafter.

The ‘overtly political’ and ‘integrated, civilian-led approach’ to stabilization adopted by the UK Government may provide a good basis for the development of a UN doctrine (UK 2014). In practice however, host countries such as Mali will likely resist (or push out) a UN stabilization mission that would be too overtly political. In the name of sovereignty, host countries may also continue to receive some support from African TCCs for military approaches to stabilization through intervention brigades fighting groups that the host government and/or the region would have termed ‘enemy of peace,’ ‘negative’ or ‘terrorist,’ thereby precluding them from joining the peace process downstream.

Second, the development of a UN stabilization doctrine would be the opportunity for a long-overdue review of the planning and design of UN operations. The ‘phased approach’ used by the UN in Mali with the initial deployment of a small political mission UNOM (with AFISMA as a parallel fighting force) followed by a larger peacekeeping mission was by chance rather than by design, and was not exempt from the characteristic departmental turf wars between the UN department of political affairs (DPA) and department of peacekeeping operations (DPKO). However, a phased approach consisting of first deploying a ‘light footprint’ and more mobile high-capacity military contingents (as enabler for civilian staff to carry out its political stabilization work in the country rather than remotely) before ‘tailoring’ a larger mission has some validity. A UN system-wide planning standing capacity (placed directly under the Secretary-General or his deputy) could help the organization rise above silos and come up with more creative solutions.

More generally, the UN needs to finally move away from the numbers-based

approach to force generation, which requires the building of large 'super-camps' and leads to a 'bunkerized' response to threats. It should instead adopt a capability-driven force generation approach already used by NATO or the EU to generate smaller more capable, force protected, and mobile military components (Smith & Boutellis 2013). The UN should also continue to explore how 'lighter' UN stabilization missions can effectively carry out their mandate in non-permissive environments in partnership with non-UN parallel fighting forces, if and where there are shared stabilization objectives, but with a clear division of labor.

Thirdly, a UN peacekeeping stabilization doctrine should be complemented by UN-wide crosscutting stabilization strategies that could combine the above-mentioned need for self-protection, with the strategic use of traditional peacekeeping tools such as Mediation, DDR and CVR programs, but in innovative ways to start addressing the issue of extremists and criminal agendas (Cockayne 2013). While such strategies may not be able to propel the socio-economic transformation and address the poor governance sources of disillusionment to counter such agendas, the UN should also explore non-traditional tools such as deradicalization, disengagement and rehabilitation programs, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), and early peacebuilding approaches aimed at addressing the root causes of terrorism and transnational organized crime (TOC) through non-repressive approaches as well (Kemp, Shaw & Boutellis, 2013).

In order to develop such effective stabilization strategies, a UN stabilization mission should first develop a good understanding of the context, including more accurate profiles of CAGs and extremist groups, their political, criminal and ideological interests and motives, and the threats they represent, as well as the dynamics of radicalization, resilience and self-defense strategies applied within at-risk communities. This takes time and requires that missions be equipped with better military intelligence collection and analysis

capabilities (such as the ASIFU) that would be better integrated with more varied civilian skills (anthropologists for instance), and that the stabilization strategy, as well as Mission Concept and its 'end-state,' be reviewed on a regular basis to be able to adjust stabilization priorities to the evolving situation.

Lastly, a major obstacle for a UN mission to contribute to stabilization is the fact that it is geographically limited to the borders of a country, such as MINUSMA in Mali, while terrorism and organized crime are transnational and groups operate across borders in the Sahel region. MINUSMA has been sharing information with UNOWA (Sahel Strategy) and UNODC, but this has been largely done on an ad hoc basis. The development of regional and cross-border programming and aligning of international Sahel strategies (ISS 2015) is critical to any longer-term success; otherwise the mission is 'leaving the back door open.' The UN should explore ways for more systematic information-sharing and collaboration with UN Panel of Experts (on Libya particularly),¹⁶ and again, partnerships with non-UN forces (French and US) operating in the region, EUCAP Sahel, and whenever feasible with national forces within the framework of the HRDDP.¹⁷

Deploying a peacekeeping stabilization mission such as MINUSMA in any such an environment creates a historic and time-bound opportunity to alter some, but not all, of the negative dynamics that are at the root causes of the crisis and instability in the first place. Adopting the correct balance of capabilities and postures, both political and military, vis-à-vis this shifting spectrum of armed actors of all kinds is challenging, but should aim, through an overarching UN stabilization doctrine and context-specific UN-wide stabilization strategies to create a new, improved status quo by the time the mission departs.

Author Information

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual Deputy Special Representatives of the Secretary General (DSRSG) Dialogue

in December 2014 jointly organized by the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) and the Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), which led to the publication of the scoping report 'Understanding a new generation of non-state armed groups.' The present article focuses more on analyzing the stabilization mandate of the UN mission in Mali, and covers the most recent developments in Mali.

Notes

¹ The MNLA is a primarily ethnic Tuareg secular separatist group, which originated in October 2011 from the fusion between the (pacifist) MNA (*Mouvement National de l'Azawad*) and the armed MTNM (*Mouvement Touareg du Nord Mali*).

² Integrated AFISMA troops were given a four-month grace period, until October 31, 2013, to meet UN standards for equipment and capability, with support from the AFISMA Trust Fund.

³ The *Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA) was created in May 2013 out of a splinter group of *Ansar Dine*, the *Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad* (MIA) itself created in January 2013. It is primarily composed of Tuareg Ifoghas (dominant Tuareg 'noblesse'), is based in the Kidal region and has a strong Islamist agenda.

⁴ The *Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad* (MAA) started out in April 2012 in Timbuktu from residual elements of an Arab militia (backed by former president ATT and led by Colonel Ould Meydou) of the first months of the rebellion. It aims to protect Arab – legal and illegal – commercial interests and communities. MAA helped AQIM entry into Timbuktu out of preference over Tuareg MNLA, but later distanced itself from the jihadists. In 2013, the MAA split into two branches, the 'MAA-Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed' and the 'MAA-Ould Sidatti' which allied with the MNLA and HCUA.

⁵ The mainly-Songhai self-defense militia *Coordination des Mouvements et Forces*

Patriotiques de Resistance (CMFPR) emerged due to the absence of state authority during the 1990s rebellions in northern Mali as a group called 'Ganda Koy' and were recently reactivated alongside other smaller self-defense groups of sedentary populations of Gao and Timbuktu regions.

⁶ The MAA-Ould Sidatti emerged as a division within the MAA.

⁷ MINUSMA, Serval and MSDF have carried out coordinated patrols in northern Mali. However, the government of Mali had always refused to set up joint patrols including armed movement elements, despite the fact that these were envisaged in the Ouagadougou Interim Agreement as a confidence-building measure.

⁸ AQIM was created in January 2007 out of the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) – and its predecessor Armed Islamic Group (GIA) which fought against the secular Algerian government – after it pledged allegiance to al Qaida (AQ). It is organized into several zones and katibas with four katibas in the Sahel. It aims to create an Islamic state across North Africa, has used trafficking, kidnapping-for-ransom, and taxing to fund its terrorist activities.

⁹ MUJAO is a jihadist militant group that broke off from AQIM in October 2011, reportedly due to disagreement over kidnapping revenue distribution and the dominant position of Algerian nationals in the leadership. Unlike AQIM, the majority of MUJAO's members are Malian (Tlemsi Arabs, Fulani and Songhai) active in the Gao region. In August 2013 MUJAO merged with Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al Muwaqi'un bil-Dima group, to create 'Al Murabitun,' and claimed responsibility for the attacks on the French uranium mine in Arlit, and army barracks in Agadez, Niger.

¹⁰ Ansar al-Din is a militant Salafi Tuareg group, which played a crucial role in the jihadist takeover of northern Mali. Iyad Ag Ghali, a former rebel leader of the 1990s Tuareg rebellions, created the

group after he was denied the leadership of the MNLA in the 2012 rebellion. Its alliance with AQIM supplied Ansar Dine with both weaponry and combatants.

- ¹¹ The Tilemsi or Lemhar Arabs established themselves in the Tilemsi Valley (that runs from the town of Bourem, north of Gao, to Aguelhok) in the late 19th century when they migrated from Mauritania to help the Kounta Arabs – to which they were traditionally subordinated – in their fight against the powerful Iullemeden Tuareg confederation.
- ¹² QIPs are small-scale, low-cost short-term projects implemented by UN peacekeeping operations to build confidence in the mission, the mandate or the peace process.
- ¹³ CVR projects were first piloted by the UN Stabilization mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) as an alternative to DDR. These projects aimed at the social integration and empowerment of people vulnerable to the potential influence of armed gangs based on a careful assessment of local security concerns and community needs, including through employment opportunities for former gang members and at-risk youth, in order to contribute to stabilizing the country.
- ¹⁴ The Mediation is composed of Algeria as lead Mediator, the UN, AU, ECOWAS, EU, OIC, Mauritania, Niger and Chad as co-Mediators, which is a major difference with past negotiations in Mali carried out by Algeria alone.
- ¹⁵ GATIA stands for *Groupe d'Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés* and is primarily composed of ethnic Tuareg Imghad (considered vassals under the traditional Tuareg hierarchy) from the Gao region.
- ¹⁶ UNSC Resolution 2117 (2013) for example, required Peace Operations, Sanctions Committees, Panels of Experts and Member States to share information on illicit arms and ammunition trafficking networks, which fuels many of the conflicts across the southern belt of the Sahel, from Somalia to Mali. However, even within the UN system itself, no

mechanism or platforms exist to systematically share such information.

- ¹⁷ The UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on UN support to non-UN security forces (HRDDP) sets out measures that all UN entities must take in order to ensure that any support that they may provide to non-UN forces is consistent with the purposes and principles as set out in the UN Charter of and with its responsibility to respect, promote and encourage respect for international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law.

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