Protection of Civilians by the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Mali

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The UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, MINUSMA, was authorized in 2013 to support peace and stability in Mali. The core of MINUSMA’s mandate is to support the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali that resulted from the Algiers negotiations. This agreement was signed in May 2015 by the Malian government and two armed group coalitions: the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and the Platform of Armed Groups (Platform).

The Security Council has also identified the protection of civilians (POC) as a “priority task” for the mission. UN Security Council Resolution 2295 provides MINUSMA with a strong POC mandate, authorizing the mission to “anticipate, deter and counter threats… and to take robust and active steps to protect civilians.” However, violence against civilians in Mali currently occurs at a very low rate compared to other areas hosting similar peacekeeping missions with POC mandates, such as the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan.

Given the low level of deliberate violence against civilians in Mali, many MINUSMA personnel have been unclear about how the mission should implement its POC mandate. Recent efforts, including a revised POC strategy, aim to develop a shared vision among all MINUSMA components as well as UN agencies about how to enhance POC. This briefing note offers some recommendations on how the mission can improve its protection efforts. It outlines the major threats to civilians and MINUSMA’s current capacity to respond; the main potential threats to civilians in the near future; and how MINUSMA can incorporate POC more effectively into its political strategy.

Recommendations

- MINUSMA should adjust its political strategy to acknowledge the critical threat to peace posed by organized crime, and to increase engagement with politically marginalized stakeholders that could disrupt the peace process.

- The UN Security Council should explicitly task MINUSMA to analyze organized crime networks in Mali (including the involvement of Malian government representatives) and the link between organized crime and instability.

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MINUSMA should improve intelligence gathering and analysis at the tactical and operational levels to facilitate early warning and early response, including by improving community engagement and information-sharing between sections. Member states should ensure that infantry battalions sent to MINUSMA have received basic training on intelligence gathering and reporting.

MINUSMA should engage in contingency planning for the scenarios described in this briefing note that involve escalated violence against civilians.

MINUSMA should assess the potential risks to civilians and identify risk mitigation strategies before embarking on or enlarging initiatives that involve working with communities (such as increasing the number of Community Liaison Assistants, developing Community Alert Networks, setting up Local Protection Committees, or offering incentives to informants).

Member states should provide the additional troops authorized by Resolution 2295 without delay. Their deployment to central Mali is critical to prevent the seizure of this area by terrorist groups or other armed actors.

Current threats to civilians and MINUSMA’s efforts to address them

Uniquely among peacekeeping mandates, Resolution 2295 authorizes MINUSMA to protect civilians from “asymmetric threats” by anticipating, deterring, and countering such threats.\(^2\) This language implies that terrorist groups operating in northern and central Mali pose a significant threat to civilians. In fact, both terrorist groups and armed groups in Mali rarely target civilians at present, and on some occasions may even take steps to avoid or mitigate civilian casualties. These groups have been working to secure the confidence of populations in northern and central Mali and are likely concerned that perpetrating large-scale violence against civilians would undermine this objective.

Much of the violence against civilians is currently perpetrated by bandits or by other civilians during intercommunal clashes. When terrorist groups do target civilians, it is often in the form of assassinations of government representatives or community members whom they consider to be collaborators for the government or the international community. The government has also engaged in violence against specific groups, particularly the predominantly Muslim Fulani community, reportedly in its pursuit of suspected terrorists.

Protection by the military component

The military component’s capacity to physically protect civilians from these kinds of attacks is very limited. Many of these limitations are common in UN peacekeeping missions. The mission’s 11,692 uniformed personnel\(^3\) serve in a country almost twice the size of France. The difficult environment and lack of infrastructure, such as reliable roads or landing strips, force the mission to rely frequently on helicopters to transport both cargo and personnel. There is a shortage of helicopters, including helicopters with night vision capabilities.

Other factors that limit the force’s protection capacity are more specific to the Malian context. Since the deployment of MINUSMA in 2013, 106 peacekeepers have been killed,\(^4\) including through attacks on UN compounds, improvised explosive devices targeting peacekeepers on patrol, and ambushes of UN convoys. This unusually high level of threat forces the mission to devote the majority of its resources and assets to protecting itself. Logistics convoys delivering emergency supplies require force protection and can take weeks to plan and execute. Long range patrols are too risky to conduct in many areas; for example, the force deploys only a short distance from its

\(^3\) This figure of currently deployed uniformed personnel is taken from http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/factsheet.shtml#MINUS. The Security Council has authorized a maximum of 15,209 uniformed personnel for MINUSMA.
base in Kidal. There is a shortage of unarmed, unmanned aerial vehicles (UUAVs) that could help with force protection to facilitate more patrols.

Even if the force had the capacity to be more agile, the mission’s early warning capabilities are too weak to facilitate rapid responses to brewing violence (see “Intelligence gap” section for more details). The mission therefore has very little capacity to anticipate and deter imminent threats to civilians.

**Protection by the civilian sections**

MINUMSA’s civilian sections also engage in a range of direct efforts to deter and interrupt violence against civilians. For example:

- The protection of civilians unit, which recently received a senior protection advisor, engages with UN agencies, funds, and programs on assessing and analyzing protection threats and produces contingency plans for future violence against civilians.
- The human rights division monitors and reports on human rights violations, including violence perpetrated by the Malian government against civilians it accuses of being terrorists.
- The community violence reduction team within the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration section supports livelihoods projects near cantonment sites to discourage violence by ex-combatants and their communities.
- The civil affairs section produces analysis on local conflict, including a matrix regularly updated with information from the four regional offices, and organizes intercommunal dialogues to reduce tensions.
- The mediation section and political affairs division engage with peace agreement signatories to discourage violence.

In addition to these direct POC efforts, several sections (e.g., security sector reform, justice and corrections, stabilization and recovery) aim to contribute to POC indirectly by supporting the creation of a more secure environment.

The civilian sections face many of the same obstacles to protection as the force. The targeting of peacekeepers has affected the civilian sections’ ability to establish presence in many areas and to engage with local communities. For example, some people with whom the research team met reported that Community Liaison Assistants (national staff deployed in the field to engage with communities and ensure that communities’ concerns are transmitted to the mission) are not functioning effectively, due in part to concerns that those who are seen as “informants” for the mission will be attacked. Poor tactical- and operational-level intelligence means that it is difficult for civilian sections to know where to target their conflict prevention efforts.

In addition, many civilian sections do not see their efforts as contributing to POC, in part because the mission’s POC strategy has so far focused heavily on physical protection.
by the military component. As a result, protection efforts by all these sections may be ad hoc and diffuse. The POC unit is currently working to develop a new POC strategy that can offer a coherent vision of POC by the civilian sections.

**Intelligence gap**

As a result of the unique threats that MINUSMA personnel face, a few European member states have furnished the Mali mission with an All-Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU). The ASIFU produces regular predictive analysis with a one-week to three-month outlook, outlining most likely scenarios and worst-case scenarios. It also produces event-driven analysis on specific themes (e.g., migration patterns). In addition to the ASIFU, MINUSMA’s Joint Mission Analysis Center (JMAC) produces strategic-level analysis such as profiles and mappings of armed actors.

Notwithstanding MINUSMA’s strong strategic-level intelligence capabilities, the mission lacks effective information gathering and analysis at the operational and tactical levels. In particular, the mission has very limited engagement with local communities because of insufficient training among troops on intelligence gathering and reporting; fear among mission personnel that community engagement will expose them to attacks; and fear among communities of retaliation by terrorist groups if they appear to be informants for or supporters of the international community. What information is gathered is frequently not shared between different sections of the mission.

The mission has tried to mitigate these challenges in a number of ways. It uses unarmed, unmanned aerial vehicles (UUAVs) to gather a range of information such as details of armed group movements; however, UUAVs are required for many other tasks, including force protection, and their coverage around the country (even around major northern towns such as Gao and Kidal) is limited. The mission is attempting to improve human intelligence by implementing a new system whereby the mission offers non-cash compensation to informants; however, it is unclear how effective this approach will be given the pattern of retaliation by armed actors. The mission is also attempting to pursue improved signals intelligence, though this is difficult given the weakness of communications infrastructure and of Malian government capacity. Finally, to improve information-sharing, the mission has established a coordination mechanism known as the Joint Coordination Board, but several personnel from different sections reported that this mechanism had limited effectiveness – in part because some sections (e.g., human rights) did not regularly participate. Early warning is thus likely to remain a weakness for the mission.

**Potential threats to civilians**

The security situation in Mali is highly volatile with considerable potential for violence against civilians in the near future. The most likely scenarios that may result in violence to civilians are described below. These scenarios mainly pose a risk of indirect violence against civilians through generalized insecurity. However, some scenarios involve
conflicts taking on a more ethnic character, which could lead to deliberate violence against civilians from certain ethnic groups.

Analysts with whom the research team met did not think there were any specific dates or events that were likely to serve as triggers for renewed violence. However, some believed that violence may be timed to coincide with (and undermine) progress on the peace agreement. For example, several suggested that the resurgence of violence in Kidal that began in July was motivated by a desire to disrupt the installation of interim authorities in the town in accordance with the peace agreement.

Scenario 1: Increased violent activity by and/or radicalization of communal and other non-state armed groups that were not included in the peace agreement. There is an ongoing risk of violence by parties that participated in the fighting from 2012 to 2014 but that did not sign the peace agreement. These include armed groups that decided not to join the CMA or Platform coalitions, armed groups that later splintered from the CMA and Platform coalitions, and terrorist groups.5

But less widely recognized are the communal groups, not formally organized, that may feel left out of or disadvantaged by the peace process. These include:

- The Fulani community (also referred to as the Peul) in the central region of the country. Many Fulani people have felt marginalized by the Malian government both in terms of political exclusion and in terms of lack of physical defense during the height of the violence. In response, some Fulani persons developed links with violent extremist groups that offered protection and social services. In 2015, an Islamist group known as the Massina Liberation Front (a reference to the former Fulani empire), whose recruits included local Fulani, began conducting attacks in central Mali. The Malian government has retaliated against the Fulani population aggressively, allegedly conducting indiscriminate arrests and summary executions of suspected terrorists, further marginalizing the population and increasing the risk of radicalization.6

- Youth in Gao who resisted Tuareg and jihadist occupation. When the Malian government re-established control in Gao, it persuaded these resistance fighters to voluntarily disarm. These youth now feel disadvantaged for their compliance, compared to members of CMA and Platform that fought against the state and yet stand to benefit from DDR programs. They also feel betrayed by the peace agreement’s provision to install interim authorities in Gao; these authorities (many of them Tuareg) represent the same people against whom they had taken up arms during the 2012 crisis. Many of these youth are part of the Songhai community, a

6 Ibid.
Black African community that has felt neglected by the central authorities in Bamako and marginalized by Arab elites in the north, adding an ethnic dimension to the challenge.

These groups will not be included in DDR programs and therefore will not receive the same gains (such as integration into the Malian security sector or other livelihoods assistance) as CMA and Platform ex-combatants. The mission’s community violence reduction (CVR) programs are also concentrated on the communities linked to former combatants who are expected to go through the DDR process. Although the mission’s Stabilization and Recovery section supports livelihoods through quick impact projects (QIPs), these are small-scale, short-term, and scattered. The mission attempts to be inclusive in its political dialogues, but its main efforts focus on supporting the implementation of the peace agreement and thus prioritize engagement with the three signatory parties.

As a result, there is a risk that the Fulani or Gao youth may resort to violence to increase their political negotiating power or may strengthen ties with violent extremist groups who appear to cater to their needs more than the Malian government.

Scenario 2: Continued clashes over trafficking routes leading parties to abandon the peace agreement. The implementation of the peace agreement has been seriously undermined by struggles to control towns and axes that are critical for licit trade as well as the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans. Many of the people with whom the research team met believe that there is a strong risk that the parties will ultimately abandon the peace agreement altogether as clashes over the trafficking routes intensify. There is already considerable cooperation and overlap between the various actors labelled as terrorist groups, compliant armed groups, non-compliant armed groups, bandits, and armed communal groups. The dissolution of the peace agreement would prolong instability, making it difficult to address the root causes of the violence and potentially triggering civil war.

Scenario 3: The capture of central towns (such as Mopti and Segou) by terrorist and/or other armed groups, creating an informal northern state over which the Bamako government has little or no control. The narrow central area of Mali has become the new frontline and there is a serious possibility that armed actors may be able to gain control of the central region. Terrorist groups that gain control of territory could perpetrate serious human rights violations against civilians and cause significant displacement, as they did when they began to take over territory in 2012. It could also have severe political consequences: the central government in Bamako would be cut off from the north, Bamako itself would be at greater risk of capture, signatory parties could abandon the peace agreement, and the mission’s already limited movement in the country would become much more restricted.
MINUSMA currently has minimal military presence in central Mali, consisting only of a small force that provides security to civilian staff. However, the mission plans to deploy approximately one-third of the additional 2,000 troops authorized by its most recent mandate to the Mopti area. Delays to the deployment of these reinforcements, and the quality of the troops that are deployed, could have a major impact on the Malian government’s control of this region and thus the stability of the country as a whole.

**Scenario 4: Retaliation by ex-combatants and new recruits who do not see gains from the DDR process.** MINUSMA is mandated to “support the cantonment, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of armed groups.” The mission initially estimated around 10,000 former CMA and Platform combatants who would need to go through a DDR process. Since then, the two groups have raised their figures significantly, putting the new estimate as high as 40,000 ex-combatants. Many believe that armed groups are actively recruiting new members on the promise that they will gain employment through the DDR process.

At the same time, there have been significant delays in implementation of the DDR agreement, creating frustration among former combatants. The Malian government has yet to set up the commissions on DDR, integration, and SSR that were supposed to have been established six months after the signing of the peace agreement, delaying progress on DDR. The construction of the eight cantonment sites has been delayed by both security challenges (preventing the United Nations Office for Project Services, which manages the construction contracts, from visiting some sites) and logistical difficulties (such as the difficulty of finding construction companies that are willing and able to work in some parts of the country).

The closest any aspect of DDR has come to implementation so far has been with respect to the Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination (MOC). This initiative, outlined in the Algiers peace agreement, involves creating three mixed battalions, each with 600 soldiers – 200 each from the Malian armed forces, CMA, and Platform – to provide security in Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. The parties are still in the process of forming the battalions, and there are ongoing negotiations about which individuals from each party will be allowed to participate, but the MOCs are expected to be operational soon. However, while the MOCs could be seen as a kind of proof of concept that might help build the parties’ confidence in the DDR process, they do not constitute DDR on their own.

The combination of raised expectations and limited capacity to deliver on DDR has created a highly volatile situation. The mission is trying to mitigate this tension by implementing community violence reduction (CVR) programs – essentially small-scale livelihoods support programs – targeting communities around the cantonment sites. But

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many remain concerned that failure to meet high expectations on DDR will lead to radicalization and violence.

**Incorporating POC into the mission’s political strategy**

The mission’s primary mandated objective is to support the implementation of the peace agreement. However, the peace agreement addresses only a small slice of the diverse and inter-related conflict dynamics. Effective POC requires that the mission complement its support to the peace agreement by incorporating two critical areas into its political strategy.

First, organized crime dynamics drive violence and instability in Mali to a very significant extent.\(^8\) Notwithstanding the HIPPO Report’s exhortation for peacekeepers to remember the “primacy of politics,”\(^9\) the experience in Mali highlights that not all problems are addressed by political processes. Almost everyone with whom the research team met emphasized that organized crime – particularly drug trafficking, but also trafficking of humans, arms, and more – constituted a central economic motivation for a wide range of actors, including terrorist groups, compliant armed groups, non-compliant armed groups, criminal groups, and some government figures. Much of the violence in Mali has been and continues to be driven by these actors’ efforts to secure control over key axes or towns along trafficking routes.

For example, many analysts told the research team that the resurgence of violence in Kidal in July this year was motivated by the fact that Kidal is of great importance in drug trafficking. Interim authorities were expected to assume control of Kidal in accordance with the peace agreement, and rival groups in Kidal engaged in organized crime initiated clashes to protect or assert their competing interests. In this way, the government, CMA, and Platform may use ostensible political concerns over provisions of the peace agreement as a shield to disguise their true economic interests.

Organized crime is a central driver of violence in Mali, but mission personnel feel unable to engage with this issue in a sustained and meaningful way because it is not referenced in the Algiers peace agreement or the mission mandate. Both the ASIFU and the JMAC, for example, engage in some analysis of organized crime (and the ASIFU has a designated organized crime analyst), but only tangentially. Because the mandate makes no reference to organized crime, it is difficult for them to justify

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investing significant effort into this issue. There is a particular lack of information on the Malian government’s involvement in organized crime, since the issue is considered too sensitive and outside the mission’s mandate. Yet it is impossible to truly understand or prevent violence in Mali without engaging on the issue of organized crime.

Second, there are a number of armed groups, terrorist groups, and communal groups that command political power but are not signatories to the peace agreement. Good offices and reconciliation are identified as a “priority task” by Resolution 2295, including working “with and among all stakeholders towards reconciliation and social cohesion [and] to support efforts to reduce intercommunal tensions.” However, engaging with “all stakeholders” is easier said than done, and in practice the mission has had limited political engagement with groups that are not signatory to the peace agreement.

Several analysts argued that designations like “terrorist armed group,” “compliant armed group,” “non-compliant armed group,” and “bandit” were largely political and that in reality there was significant overlap, communication, and cooperation between actors with these various labels. The mission has had to wrestle with the question of whether and how it is appropriate to engage with terrorist actors. One MINUSMA representative said that while it would be inappropriate for the mission to engage with international terrorist groups like al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, engaging with some domestic terrorist groups, like Ansar al Dine, might advance the peace process (though some domestic terrorist groups may not want to engage with the mission). In addition, MINUSMA has engaged local communal groups largely through the civil affairs section, with little engagement by the mediation or political affairs sections. The mission must engage more comprehensively with the full range of actors who could play a role in derailing the peace process and thus causing violence against civilians.

If the mission wishes to treat POC as a “core priority” in accordance with Resolution 2295, it should expand its political strategy to acknowledge the central role of organized crime in perpetuating instability and to emphasize engagement with a broader range of stakeholders.

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