

The logo for the International Peace Institute (IPI), consisting of the letters 'IPI' in a bold, white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background.

INTERNATIONAL  
PEACE  
INSTITUTE

# Prioritization and Sequencing of Peacekeeping Mandates: The Case of MINUSMA

JUNE 2020



## STIMSON

On May 20, 2020, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a virtual workshop to discuss the mandate and political strategy of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). These discussions are part of a series of workshops that examine how the activities included in peace operations' mandates can be better prioritized, sequenced, and grounded in political strategy. This was the fourth consecutive year in which these partners convened discussions in support of the mandate negotiations on MINUSMA. This meeting note was drafted collaboratively by IPI, the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report. It summarizes the main points raised in the discussion under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants. The project is funded with the support of the government of Canada.

## Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in June 2020. While Malian stakeholders have recently taken steps to implement provisions of the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, the country's fragile social contract and deteriorating security conditions place pressure on national and international actors alike. Following significant changes to MINUSMA's 2019 mandate (UN Security Council Resolution 2480), including the addition of a second strategic priority, the upcoming mandate renewal negotiations offer council members the opportunity to take stock of progress on the UN's stabilization efforts in Mali and refine its strategic engagement with the country.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a virtual workshop on May 20, 2020, to discuss MINUSMA's mandate and political strategy. This workshop provided a forum for member states, UN stakeholders, and outside experts to share their assessments of the situation in Mali. The discussion was intended to help the Security Council make more informed decisions with respect to the strategic orientation, prioritization, and sequencing of the mission's mandate and actions on the ground.

The workshop's discussions focused on recent developments in Mali and on the mission's current mandate. They highlighted opportunities and challenges for consolidating political reforms and implementing key provisions of the peace agreement. The discussions also underscored the centrality of MINUSMA's support to the protection of civilians and the pursuit of a stronger, Malian-led approach to promoting human rights and accountability and strengthening state institutions. Participants reflected on MINUSMA's stabilization role in a landscape filled with national and international actors and discussed how it may take additional time for the UN to see gains from the shifts in the mission's 2019 mandate.

Participants largely agreed that MINUSMA's current mandate remains relevant but pointed to various pressing issues that should be resolved over the next mandate cycle to maximize the mission's effectiveness. The mandate could better refine MINUSMA's role in supporting the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Additionally, MINUSMA requires the budget and resources necessary to become more agile, as recommended in the secretary-general's force adapta-

tion plan.<sup>1</sup> Participants also proposed reinforcing existing provisions of the text to better contextualize the UN's engagement in the country over the coming year, including by strengthening MINUSMA's role as a political guarantor, reinforcing provisions on the protection of civilians, and focusing more on the mission's support to human rights and accountability. While the COVID-19 pandemic has forced MINUSMA to adapt to new operational complexities, participants did not feel that the Security Council needed to adjust the mission's strategic orientation in response.

## Conflict Analysis

MINUSMA has spent much of the past year adapting its engagements to align with the revised strategic priorities set forward in Resolution 2480.<sup>2</sup> The mission's dual strategic priorities—supporting the implementation of the peace agreement and the stabilization of Mali's center region—are at the core of its political engagement and support to protection. These efforts are unfolding in an operationally complex environment that remains one of the most dangerous facing a UN peace-keeping operation.

## Mali's Political Situation

Mali's peace agreement, signed in 2015, continues to be regarded as the most comprehensive political framework for long-term stabilization. Although many provisions of the agreement have not been implemented, some major milestones have been achieved since the beginning of 2020. Participants highlighted that Mali's Inclusive National Dialogue, a consultative, multi-stakeholder process that concluded in December 2019, provided an impetus to the implementation of key provisions of the agreement, starting with the holding of parliamentary elections in March and April 2020.

Despite threats to the parliamentary elections (underscored by the kidnapping of opposition political leader Soumaïla Cissé) and very low voter turnout, workshop participants affirmed the

importance of successfully completing the election process. The new National Assembly is now expected to play an important role in shaping Mali's constitutional reform agenda and in pursuing a more consensual approach to implementing the peace agreement.

Recent efforts to boost women's participation in Mali's political processes represent another tangible area of progress. The newly constituted National Assembly has forty female members, up from the fourteen who sat in the previous Assembly. This also brings Mali's government closer in line with the 2015 law that mandated that women comprise at least 30 percent of the country's legislative body. The successful convening in January 2020 of an inclusive, high-level workshop on ensuring the "full, effective participation of women in the mechanisms established by the agreement to support and monitor its implementation" also led to the appointment of six women to the monitoring committee (*Comité de suivi de l'accord*), in line with a Security Council benchmark.<sup>3</sup>

While these tangible results are positive, Malian women's participation in peace and reconciliation processes remains limited, despite the government's endorsement of international conventions such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). For instance, women are currently excluded from transitional authorities in the northern regions such as Ménaka. Some participants therefore called for a more concerted focus on gender inclusion in the implementation of the peace agreement at the local level, with support from MINUSMA.

Participants cautioned that the country's social contract remains fragile. One individual emphasized that low voter turnout for the elections and multi-city protests against the Malian Constitutional Court's confirmation of the election results may have an impact on the legitimacy of the new Assembly. Underlying social pressures and grievances remain, which participants linked to demonstrations across various sectors of Malian society over the past year. Some participants

1 UN Security Council, "Situation in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General," UN Doc. S/2019/983, December 30, 2019, paras. 60–61.

2 UN Security Council Resolution 2480 (June 28, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2480.

3 Ibid., para. 4.

encouraged the Malian authorities to work toward national unity and build confidence within civil society. They underscored that maintaining relative political stability will be necessary to undertake difficult political reforms, including the constitutional reforms foreseen by the peace agreement and the recommendations of the Inclusive National Dialogue.

## State Authority and Legitimacy

The Malian government remains unable to guarantee the security of the population throughout the country. Participants underscored that the lack of effective, inclusive, and accountable state institutions, and particularly of a security presence, is a persistent challenge that exacerbates threats to civilians, with one participant citing the army's departure from Ogossagou as a cause of the repeat attacks in the town in February 2020. The vacuum left by the state has been filled by self-defense militias that are often aligned with ethnic groups. These militias, according to some participants, are perceived by some local populations as their only security providers. Speakers pointed out that until the Malian government permanently returns to these localities, militias will continue to expand, with the risk of fueling further intercommunal violence.

The successful redeployment of the first reconstituted units of the Malian Armed Forces to northern localities was considered by some participants to be an important step forward. This deployment, which comprises former combatants from the signatory armed groups who have reintegrated into the Malian army, is both a symbolic and an operational achievement. It highlights the first formal Malian security presence in Kidal since 2012. Nonetheless, continued abuses by the Malian army and concerns over the impunity of perpetrators of violence risk undermining the legitimacy of both the state and the UN mission. MINUSMA and Human Rights Watch have recently reported on human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, perpetrated by the armies of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Although these acts were said to be under investigation by the Malian authorities, doubts were raised about the capacity of Mali's judiciary to complete these investigations. Further, participants suggested that a paradigm shift in the

counterinsurgency doctrine of the Malian Armed Forces is needed, with the measure of success switching from the number of insurgents killed to the number of civilians protected. Finally, one participant noted that most international support for security sector reform in Mali had focused on training and equipping the armed forces rather than developing the capacity of the Malian government to oversee them.

## Security Conditions

Over the past year, security conditions across Mali have deteriorated due to increased cross-border attacks across the region, alongside an upsurge in intercommunal violence. At the local level, intercommunal violence spurred by competition between militias and self-defense groups persists, causing many casualties. In February 2020, the village of Ogossagou was attacked, eleven months after a previous massacre of more than 160 people that had prompted the UN Security Council to elevate the protection of civilians to be a strategic priority for MINUSMA. Combined with the limited presence of Malian security institutions, particularly in the country's center region, this violence diminishes the possibility for national reconciliation. There are also growing concerns over the insecurity spreading to the western part of Mali where most of the gold mines are located, which could hurt the economy.

At the regional level, participants highlighted how armed groups listed by the Security Council under the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions List, including Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have been fighting for influence, territory, and resources throughout Mali. Moreover, participants noted that these non-state armed groups are expanding their area of operations, including to coastal West Africa. For one participant, this increased competition among extremist groups presents a potential entry point for the Malian government to consider engaging in dialogue with JNIM to identify opportunities for reducing violent attacks.

The overall rise in violence has had two main repercussions: a surge in the number of people displaced and in dire need of humanitarian

assistance and protection; and increased challenges for humanitarian actors trying to access vulnerable populations.

## Regional Cooperation

This rise in violence and intensification of attacks by armed groups designated as terrorist by the UN Security Council requires reaffirming a spirit of collective action. This could take place not only at the national level through the signatory parties signaling that they reject “terrorism” but also at the regional and international level through a show of unity and support to the Malian government.

There is a broad consensus that Mali needs a unified show of international support and coordinated messaging with respect to radical non-state armed groups and that this should come from a variety of operationally and politically complementary regional actors. The operational partnership between the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the French Operation Barkhane, and the European Union’s Takuba Task Force was the subject of high-level discussions at the January 2020 summit in Pau, France, convened by the French government. As this security framework is being reinforced, participants acknowledged the need to better define the coordination between MINUSMA and these military actors, on the one hand, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), on the other.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic

Participants agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to control the virus’s spread have added a layer of operational complexity for the mission and for humanitarian workers. There are also concerns that the pandemic could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and grievances within Malian society. As one participant noted, the closure of the border between Mali and Burkina Faso is already undermining food security in Mali. Participants agreed that the pandemic has not altered MINUSMA’s strategic objectives though it has affected some of its operations. Troop patrols, for example, have been replaced by surveillance and deterrence by air assets, and the mission’s community-engagement platforms with local civil society organizations are now mobilizing around

anti-COVID sensitization campaigns. One participant also highlighted MINUSMA’s role in helping the Malian government institute social-distancing measures during the legislative elections.

## Prioritization and Sequencing of MINUSMA’s Mandate

Workshop participants widely agreed that the strategic priorities identified in MINUSMA’s current mandate, Resolution 2480, remain relevant. They highlighted that the mandated priorities align with the urgent issues confronting Mali and that the UN can effectively engage based on its comparative advantages. While considering support to the implementation of the Malian peace agreement to be critical, participants commended the inclusion of the second strategic priority in the 2019 mandate to support the stabilization and restoration of state authority in Mali’s center. They emphasized that this addition, alongside language on the protection of civilians, offered direction to the mission for it to adjust to a fluid political and security landscape. Participants reflected on ways to reinforce these priorities one year on, as well as ways to strengthen the mission’s support to human rights and the extension of state authority, regional coordination between MINUSMA and other actors, and strategic communication. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of securing the necessary resources for the mission to effectively implement its mandate.

## Supporting the Peace Agreement through a Clear Political Strategy

Participants underscored that MINUSMA’s mandate establishes a clear political strategy for UN engagement in support of Malian stakeholders, anchored in the continued implementation of the peace agreement. Some participants acknowledged that the peace agreement has not brought about the changes envisioned upon its signing five years ago. Nonetheless, one participant described the agreement as an imperfect yet comprehensive framework to overcome some of the main political challenges and restore stability in Mali. Several



participants stressed the important role of MINUSMA in supporting the agreement's implementation, including the deployment of the reconstituted units. One participant, however, encouraged MINUSMA to engage more strategically with communities in Mali's center and western regions to mitigate resentment among communities that feel that the peace agreement does not address their needs. Another participant highlighted how the mission could provide technical support to the new Malian government as it implements decentralization and stabilization policies in the center of Mali.

Attendees also underscored that the role of the special representative of the secretary-general and mission leaders in providing good offices would remain crucial over the coming months. They highlighted opportunities for the mission to support dialogue among all political actors in the country and emphasized that the mission is well positioned to sustain channels of communication between all signatories to the peace accord. In this regard, sustained diplomatic pressure from the Security Council, such as the addition of new benchmarks, may be necessary to push forward the implementation of provisions of the peace agreement, including the most politically sensitive ones.

Participants frequently emphasized the mission's ongoing role in promoting inclusivity and encouraging gender equality throughout Mali's political process. This has contributed to progress in the participation of women in national politics and in peace and reconciliation processes. Participants noted that the mission has continuously prioritized a gender-sensitive approach to engagement with Malian authorities and should continue to mainstream gender priorities across its initiatives.

## Reinforcing the Protection of Civilians

MINUSMA's 2019 mandate made the protection of civilians in Mali's center region a second strategic priority. This shift, according to one participant, helped MINUSMA position itself to better engage with communities, improve internal coordination, and initiate more flexible and robust defensive operations. One participant said that these actions were needed to respond to the threat of ethnic

cleansing in the center of the country. However, some participants warned against the tendency to divide MINUSMA's priorities based on geographic considerations, whereby the north is associated with the mandate to support implementation of the peace agreement and the center with the mandate to protect civilians. One risk of this divided approach is that the Malian government may focus its political efforts on the north through the implementation of the peace agreement and view the center as more of a security issue for MINUSMA to address, even though the government's political support is also needed in the center. Participants suggested that these mandates should instead be seen as complementary and applicable throughout the country.

A debate emerged as to whether MINUSMA's provision of good offices comprehensively incorporates protection issues. One participant questioned whether the mission's protection strategies were sufficiently reflected in the ongoing dialogue between the mission, its government interlocutors, and other political leaders. Another participant responded that the mission does apply a holistic approach to protection, pointing to the dialogue it facilitated among neighboring self-defense groups in the center of Mali to defuse tensions and prevent the escalation of intercommunal conflict.

While protection threats often emerge through a complex interplay of dynamics, ineffective and inconsistent responses by the Malian armed forces and other national security forces were highlighted as a major challenge for both the mission's protection of civilians efforts and its support for political processes moving forward. Participants encouraged the Security Council to explore how the upcoming mandate renewal could strengthen the mission's support to Malian authorities in upholding their responsibility to protect civilians. For instance, it was suggested that the mission could directly support Malian authorities in implementing their recently finalized stabilization strategy for the center region. Another participant suggested that the Security Council should elevate the strategic importance of the protection of civilians within MINUSMA's mandate to guide decisions about its use of available capacity and resources.

Participants also discussed the need for better strategic communication from MINUSMA to increase awareness of its protection activities and support to communities. They discussed how a more coherent approach to strategic communications could strengthen the mission's legitimacy by convincing communities that its operations are ultimately intended to help protect them.

## Promoting Human Rights and Accountability

Participants encouraged Security Council members to strengthen the language in MINUSMA's mandate on the promotion and protection of human rights. Even though this is already incorporated as the mission's fourth priority task, participants acknowledged that the deteriorating human rights situation may necessitate stronger engagement by the mission. MINUSMA's documentation of human rights violations and support to Malian justice institutions were raised as two of its more tangible contributions in this regard. Nonetheless, participants noted the slow pace of Malian-led criminal investigations and judicial proceedings following alleged reports of abuse, including by national security forces.

In response, one participant suggested that the Security Council could adopt a benchmark on efforts to address criminal impunity in the upcoming mandate. However, such a benchmark should not come without the mission's increased support for the development of accountability and oversight mechanisms and for security and justice sector reform. Accordingly, one participant suggested strengthening the mandate's language on security sector reform to emphasize support for strengthening oversight capacity.

## Broadening Regional Coordination

Participants agreed that MINUSMA should amplify its regional coordination on political and security initiatives in Mali and throughout the Sahel to ensure that actions are mutually reinforcing. Participants called on the mission to

improve operational complementarity with the G5 Sahel, French, and European Union forces operating in the region while ensuring that these other forces, rather than MINUSMA, undertake counterterrorism operations. Some participants alluded to the ongoing debate over how MINUSMA can improve its existing support package to the G5 Sahel without detracting from its own efforts. Participants also called for greater political coordination between MINUSMA, the AU High Representative for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL), and the leaders of ECOWAS. They agreed that the Security Council should continue to apply a regional lens to its analysis and framing of developments in Mali to better contextualize and maximize MINUSMA's added value.

## Balancing Priorities and Resources

MINUSMA's last mandate significantly expanded the mission's responsibilities, particularly with the inclusion of a second strategic priority, yet it did not provide the mission with any additional resources. Participants discussed how MINUSMA's expansive mandate makes it difficult for the mission to achieve its priorities with limited resources and in the midst of a deteriorating situation. In response, several participants recalled the secretary-general's force-adaptation plan. The plan foresees the deployment of a mobile task force, including additional air assets, to provide MINUSMA greater mobility and flexibility to operate in both northern and central Mali. To carry out this force-adaptation plan, additional specialized capabilities must be generated, for which the secretary-general has requested \$58 million.<sup>4</sup> This proposed budgetary increase may be an issue of contention in the ongoing Fifth Committee negotiations.

## Conclusion

Amid a deteriorating security environment throughout the country and growing instability across the Sahel region, Mali's ongoing political process is at a critical juncture. Recent progress in

<sup>4</sup> UN General Assembly, "Budget for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali for the Period from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021: Report of the Secretary-General," UN Doc. A/74/745, March 10, 2020, p. 3.

implementing critical elements of the 2015 peace agreement provides Malian political actors with an opportunity to pursue the inclusive reforms necessary for national reconciliation. Nonetheless, sustaining progress on inclusion and decentralization may require difficult political choices and reforms. These will be impossible absent meaningful and rapid improvements in the Malian state's ability to provide basic protection guarantees and sustain effective and accountable security, justice, and administrative institutions. Rapidly changing conditions across the region and the resulting convergence of local and transnational security threats make these issues all the more pressing for communities across the country.

In this context, MINUSMA's current mandate remains relevant and positions the mission to engage throughout Mali. In the upcoming mandate renewal, the Security Council could consider strengthening MINUSMA's role as a guarantor of recent political progress, reinforcing provisions on the protection of civilians throughout the country, and focusing more on the mission's support to the state in promoting human rights and accounta-

bility. MINUSMA would also benefit from greater clarity from the Security Council regarding its coordination with, and operational support to, regional actors like the G5 Sahel Joint Force, ECOWAS, AU, and French Operation Barkhane.

With a broad and ambitious mandate, MINUSMA must perform a delicate balancing act in efficiently deploying its limited financial, human, and operational resources. Despite MINUSMA's prominent role in supporting Malian actors, the mission alone cannot resolve the multifaceted drivers of violence. Additionally, operational restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have further complicated MINUSMA's implementation of its mandate, though they have not deterred the mission from pursuing all of its objectives. The upcoming mandate should reflect the mission's comparative advantages in supporting political stability and the comprehensive protection of civilians. Moving forward, it is also important for MINUSMA and the UN country team in Mali to work together to support Mali's governance and development in order to consolidate the foundation of sustainable peace.

The **INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE** (IPI) is an independent, international not-for-profit think tank dedicated to managing risk and building resilience to promote peace, security, and sustainable development. To achieve its purpose, IPI employs a mix of policy research, strategic analysis, publishing, and convening. With staff from around the world and a broad range of academic fields, IPI has offices facing United Nations headquarters in New York and offices in Vienna and Manama.

The **STIMSON CENTER** is a nonpartisan policy research center working to solve the world's greatest threats to security and prosperity. Stimson's Protecting Civilians in Conflict program engages policymakers, practitioners, and communities on the ground to identify protection gaps and develop tailored strategies to protect civilians in war-torn societies.

**SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT**'s mission is to advance the transparency and effectiveness of the UN Security Council. We seek to achieve this by making available timely, balanced, high-quality information about the activities of the Council and its subsidiary bodies; by convening stakeholders to deepen the analysis of issues before the Council and its working methods and performance; by encouraging engagement of the Council with all member states and civil society; and by building capacity on Council practice and procedure through assisting incoming members and other training and assistance programs. SCR is independent and impartial; it advocates transparency but does not take positions on the issues before the Council.



**777 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017-3521, USA**

TEL +1-212-687-4300 FAX +1-212-983-8246

**Freyung 3, 1010 Vienna, Austria**

TEL +43-1-533-8881 FAX +43-1-533-8881-11

**52-52 Harbour House, Bahrain Financial Harbour**

**P.O. Box 1467, Manama, Bahrain**

[www.ipinst.org](http://www.ipinst.org)