

Prioritization and Sequencing of Security Council Mandates: The Case of MINUSMA

SIDEBAR

On April 19, 2022, 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 UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This discussion was 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 fifth consecutive year in which these partners convened discussions around the MINUSMA mandate negotiations. The meeting note 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 German Federal Foreign Office.

INTRODUCTION

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in June 2022. Deliberations on MINUSMA's mandate are unfolding during a period of heightened political uncertainty in Mali and as security, human rights, and humanitarian conditions are deteriorating throughout the country. These dynamics impact MINUSMA's role and engagement, as its strategic priorities are anchored in supporting the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali and the political transition, as well as protecting civilians, reducing violence, and helping reestablish state presence.¹

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report co-hosted a virtual roundtable discussion on April 19, 2022, to discuss the mission's mandate. This closed roundtable offered a platform for member states, UN stakeholders, civil society representatives, and independent experts to share their assessments of the situation in Mali in a frank and collaborative environment. The discussion sought to help the Security Council make more informed decisions with respect to the prioritization and sequencing of MINUSMA's mandate and the mission's strategic orientation and actions on the ground.

Participants agreed that MINUSMA has an important role to play in Mali and that the mission's mandated priorities still align with the areas where the UN can bring the most added value. But

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2584 (June 29, 2021), UN Doc. S/RES/2584 (2021), para. 21.

they also noted that MINUSMA alone cannot address all the critical challenges and that the mission is already spread thin across a dangerous operating environment. Given the rapidly changing dynamics in the country and throughout the Sahel region, some participants saw this as an opportunity for the UN Security Council to engage in strategic reflection about MINUSMA's future.

Participants raised several points for consideration during the upcoming negotiations on MINUSMA's mandate renewal:

On the political transition:

- Focus more on the political dimensions of the mandate, including not only the governance transition but also the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement;
- Reinforce the urgency of progress on the reforms needed to undertake legitimate elections; and
- Provide diplomatic support to ECOWAS in its negotiations on a consensual transition timetable.

On the security situation and the protection of civilians:

- Work with the transitional authorities to articulate a shared vision for the protection of civilians, including through the reduction of harm to civilians by the Malian armed forces and the removal of access restrictions for mission personnel;
- Continue focusing on human rights monitoring, investigation, and reporting; and
- Urgently fill the mission's capability gaps to meet the requirements set out in the Force Adaptation Plan as well as additional requirements following the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane and the Takuba Task Force.

CONFLICT ANALYSIS

Disagreements persist between the Malian transitional authorities and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) over the timeframe for concluding the political transition to civilian rule. Implementation of the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali—the principal political framework for engaging Mali's northern populations—has stalled, and tensions have risen among the signatory parties. The Malian armed forces have embarked on a new offensive against non-state armed groups, making some progress but also facing allegations of attacking civilians. The international security landscape in Mali and the Sahel is also undergoing significant change with the impending withdrawals of the French military's Operation Barkhane and the European Takuba Task Force from Mali, as well as the increasing prominence of Russian private military personnel working alongside the Malian armed forces.² These rapid shifts are

² On May 2, 2022, the Malian government announced its decision to terminate all military and defense cooperation with France, citing "flagrant attacks" on its sovereignty. See: Kemo Cham, "Mali Terminates Military Agreements with France," *The East African*, May 4, 2022.

contributing to an “increasingly precarious human rights situation,” rising levels of internal displacement, and growing humanitarian needs.³

Political Dynamics

Mali’s political transition, now in its second year following coups d’état in August 2020 and May 2021, is no closer to reaching a meaningful conclusion. The transitional authorities, led by the interim president, Colonel Assimi Goïta, have delayed the implementation of governance reforms and extended the transition calendar established after the August 2020 coup d’état, which provided for presidential elections by February 2022. These delays led ECOWAS and the West African Economic Monetary Union (WAEMU) to impose economic and financial sanctions in January 2022, which the African Union (AU) subsequently endorsed.⁴

Recent negotiations between ECOWAS lead mediator Goodluck Jonathan (supported by a local technical team including MINUSMA and the AU) and the Malian transitional authorities have brought the sides closer to agreement on a new extended timetable for the transition. The most recent discussions in March 2022 were based on an ECOWAS proposal for an additional twelve to sixteen months in the transition period, compared with the Malian transitional authorities’ request for an additional twenty-four months. The Malian government has argued for a longer timeline so that it could establish a minimum baseline for security conditions throughout the country, strengthen the independent electoral commission that oversees elections, and make progress on anti-corruption efforts and economic reforms. Some workshop participants speculated that the two sides would eventually reach an agreement somewhere between the two proposals, though it was unclear whether this agreement would be reached before MINUSMA’s mandate renewal at the end of June 2022.

Participants suggested that two variables will likely impact the trajectory of these negotiations and the political transition. First, some acknowledged that the economic sanctions imposed by ECOWAS and WAEMU were beginning to have a significant impact on Mali’s economy and population.⁵ While the Malian government has denounced these sanctions as illegitimate, the sanctions may incentivize the government to agree on the political transition as a way to begin conversations on reducing or removing them. Second, participants highlighted that dynamics in neighboring countries are likely to impact how the Malian transitional authorities engage with ECOWAS. Coups d’état have also taken place in Burkina Faso and Guinea in the past year, and some partners hinted at possible coordination between the three transitional administrations on

³ UN Security Council, *Situation in Mali—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2022/278, March 30, 2022, para. 52.

⁴ African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC), “Communique of the 1057th Meeting of the PSC Held on 14 January 2022, on the Situation in Mali,” AU Doc. PSC/PR/COMM.1/1057(2022), January 14, 2022; Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), “4th Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the Political Situation in Mali—Final Communique,” January 9, 2022.

⁵ Festus Kofi Abyn, “ECOWAS Sanctions Against Mali Necessary, but May Be Counter-Productive,” *IPI Global Observatory*, February 2, 2022.

how to engage with ECOWAS to choreograph their transitions to civilian rule. As in Mali, the military-led transitional authorities in both Burkina Faso and Guinea have rejected ECOWAS's suggested transition timetables.⁶

Although it has received considerably less attention since the May 2021 coup d'état, the 2015 peace agreement remains part of Mali's political landscape. However, participants were pessimistic about recent progress, a sentiment echoed by the most recent report of the UN secretary-general on Mali.⁷ One participant noted that discussions on the transition had "sucked away the oxygen" from the peace agreement and other political processes in the country and that implementation is very slow. Another participant observed that the Malian transitional authorities had tentatively signaled support for the peace agreement when they came to power; however, this participant argued that their engagement has become "largely limited and superficial" and that there is no momentum for moving implementation forward.

Participants highlighted four additional points related to the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. First, they emphasized that the governance transition and implementation of the peace agreement are interrelated political processes and cannot be looked at in isolation from one another. Second, they noted that the increased coordination among armed groups, as seen in the growing role of the Permanent Strategic Framework (*Cadre stratégique permanent*), made the Malian transitional authorities less willing to engage with them.⁸ Third, they highlighted the urgency of making political and operational progress on the peace agreement's accelerated disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program. And fourth, they underscored that MINUSMA still plays an important role in encouraging progress on implementing the peace agreement, including by convening the signatory parties throughout the country.

Security Dynamics and the Protection of Civilians

The deteriorating security situation in Mali remains the most pressing concern for the Malian population, the transitional authorities, and MINUSMA. Violence and indiscriminate attacks against civilians have increased in recent months. The UN secretary-general recently observed that Mali is in an "increasingly precarious human rights situation," while the independent expert on human rights in Mali asserted in March 2022 that the country's deteriorating security situation has "passed a critical threshold."⁹ MINUSMA documented 466 human rights incidents (241 violations and 225 abuses) from January to March 2022, 142 more than in the previous three-

⁶ France 24, "UN Chief Calls on Juntas in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali to Hand Power back to Civilians," May 2, 2022.

⁷ UN Doc. S/2022/278, paras. 16–17.

⁸ The *Cadre stratégique permanent* is "a coalition created by the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad and a wing of the Platform coalition of armed groups." Ibid., para. 21.

⁹ Ibid., para. 52; Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Human Rights Council: Concerns about Continued Reports of Localised Violence Involving Community-Based Militias in South Sudan, and in Mali the Deterioration of the Overall Security Situation Has Passed the Critical Threshold," press release, March 29, 2022, available at www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/hrc-continued-localised-violence.

month period.¹⁰ While the violence has primarily been perpetrated by non-state armed groups, there are also a growing number of allegations of human rights violations committed by the Malian armed forces and their security partners, stemming in part from recent offensive military operations in the center of the country. Beyond central Mali, participants in the discussion noted that there has been a significant escalation of violence in the northeastern region of Gao around the Liptako-Gourma border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.¹¹

Participants spoke with particular urgency about the alleged violations against civilians in Moura in central Mali from March 23 to 31, 2022. The Malian armed forces announced that they had undertaken a counterterrorism operation in the town, killing 203 individuals they characterized as “extremists” and arresting more than 50 others.¹² MINUSMA and external sources received various reports that the Malian armed forces and their security partners committed significant violations of international human rights and humanitarian law during this operation, including Human Rights Watch’s claim that they executed more than 300 civilians, which would be the single worst atrocity in Mali since armed violence erupted in 2012.¹³ Such violations may constitute crimes within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.¹⁴

One speaker emphasized that this high level of insecurity is shaping Malians’ perceptions of MINUSMA, the Malian transitional authorities, and their international partners. These perceptions are also shaped by a lack of understanding of MINUSMA’s role, particularly that MINUSMA is not mandated to conduct counterterrorism activities. Considering that the security situation has deteriorated considerably over MINUSMA’s lifespan, one participant suggested that parts of the Malian population have rallied around the offensive operations carried out by the transitional authorities. Another participant argued that the government’s counteroffensive may yield short-term victories but will not be sustainable if it leads to more abuses against civilians while the overall security situation continues to worsen. Specifically, the participant highlighted that the military operations are feeding into the incorrect perception that certain communities in central Mali are associated with some of the extremist armed groups—an association that could lead to rising intercommunal tensions and attacks targeting civilians.

Regional Dynamics and International Partnerships

¹⁰ UN Doc. S/2022/278, para. 53.

¹¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM): West and Central Africa—Liptako Gourma Crisis Monthly Dashboard 27,” March 28, 2022.

¹² UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), “MINUSMA Continues Its Efforts to Shed Light on the Allegations of Serious Violations of Human Rights and of International Humanitarian Law in Moura,” press release, April 7, 2022, available at <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/minusma-continues-its-efforts-shed-light-allegations-serious-violations-human-rights-and>; Reuters, “Mali Says Military Operation in Moura Area Kills 200 Militants,” April 2, 2022.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, “Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers,” April 5, 2022.

¹⁴ OHCHR, “Mali: UN Expert Urges Probe into Grave Rights Violations in Moura,” press release, April 6, 2022, available at www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/04/mali-un-expert-urges-probe-grave-rights-violations-moura.

Much of the conversation around stabilization and security operations in Mali has been shaped by the rapidly changing landscape of international partners operating in Mali and the region. MINUSMA has always been part of a larger international security architecture in Mali, and the emerging changes to this configuration are likely to impact counterterrorism operations over the coming months. Participants emphasized the significance of the impending withdrawal of France’s Operation Barkhane (first announced in February 2022) as well as the coordinated withdrawal of the Takuba Task Force (the European multinational special forces mission operating under French command alongside Barkhane). European countries (including Germany and Sweden) have similarly begun to reevaluate their deployments to both MINUSMA and the EU Training Mission in Mali.¹⁵ In January 2022, the Malian authorities also asked Denmark to withdraw its contingent of special forces from the Takuba Task Force, claiming that it was deployed without Malian consent.¹⁶

These decisions were prompted in part by the alleged presence of Russian military personnel associated with the Wagner Group (a Russian private military company) as an operational partner for the Malian armed forces. The Malian government has denied that these foreign personnel are involved in active operations, claiming they are only there as instructors, but Human Rights Watch, among other groups, has linked them to the security operation and alleged human rights violations in Moura.¹⁷ One participant noted that European countries want explicit assurances from the Malian government that their security assistance to the Malian armed forces will not be diverted to these foreign military fighters, which would be unacceptable to them in the current geopolitical context.

Given the rapidly changing landscape of international security partnerships, participants highlighted the role and potential of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. However, some participants were not optimistic about the force’s effectiveness or strategic direction. One participant observed that the force does not have clear political guidance from its member states, noting that three of the five members (Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali) are in the middle of military-led governance transitions, while relations between Mali and Niger have become particularly strained. Absent unified guidance, the speaker asserted, the G5 Sahel would continue to operate on “autopilot” and not be an effective counterterrorism operation.

PRIORITIZING AND SEQUENCING MINUSMA’S MANDATE

¹⁵ Peter Hille, “Germany Mulls End of Military Mission in Mali,” *Deutsche Welle*, February 2, 2022; Reuters, “Sweden Announces Early Pullout of Troops from U.N. Mali Mission,” *Euronews*, April 3, 2022.

¹⁶ Tiemoko Diallo, “Mali Asks Denmark to Immediately Withdraw Troops Deployed There,” *US News and World Report*, January 24, 2022.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers”; UN News, “Mali: UN Expert Calls for Independent Probe into Moura Massacre,” April 6, 2022; Jason Burke and Emmanuel Akinwotu, “Russian Mercenaries Linked to Civilian Massacres in Mali,” *The Guardian*, May 4, 2022.

Participants agreed that MINUSMA's strategic priorities, as outlined in Resolution 2584, still reflect the areas where the UN can make a tangible impact in Mali. The deteriorating security situation and heightened political uncertainty raise the importance of MINUSMA's day-to-day operations in areas such as the protection of civilians; human rights monitoring, investigation, and reporting; and the promotion of humanitarian access. However, there was acknowledgment that the UN Security Council will need to begin reflecting on the peacekeeping operation's strategic position in the country.

To this end, some stakeholders pointed out the need to help MINUSMA recalibrate its political engagement and its relationship with the host state. Others emphasized the practical challenges of MINUSMA's protection of civilians role in an environment where it is facing increased restrictions by host-state authorities on its movement and physical access to parts of the country, as well as rising asymmetric threats. Some encouraged the Security Council to put political weight behind MINUSMA's human rights monitoring, investigation, and reporting function. Some also urged UN member states to reinforce MINUSMA with additional capabilities, especially given the anticipated operational gaps following Operation Barkhane's withdrawal. It was noted that MINUSMA has not received all of the key enablers outlined in its 2019 Force Adaptation Plan.

Political Engagement and Relationship with the Host State

Participants discussed the ways in which MINUSMA's new mandate may need to reflect the more challenging political context compared to 2021. First, they acknowledged that the Security Council will need to carefully consider how to use the mandate renewal to clearly request progress on both the political transition and the implementation of the peace agreement. While MINUSMA is a critical interlocutor in both processes, it does not have a formal leadership role in negotiating the political transition, which ECOWAS leads. Because the dialogue on the transition timeline has become such a prominent issue, international partners have paid less attention to the transitional authorities' lack of tangible progress in implementing provisions of the peace agreement, including the reforms the Security Council identified in Resolution 2584.¹⁸

The Security Council and MINUSMA thus need to clearly articulate what steps the mission could take to revive momentum around the peace agreement. While some participants expressed optimism that ECOWAS and the transitional authorities would reach an agreement prior to the mission's mandate renewal, they understood that this may not be possible. As a result, the new mandate will need to balance between prioritizing the governance transition and the peace agreement, which are interlinked but often treated as separate issues.

Second, some participants acknowledged that MINUSMA and the Malian transitional authorities will need to work toward a common vision for the mission's new mandate. Multiple participants believed MINUSMA's relationship with the Malian government has become more delicate, as

¹⁸ UN Doc. S/RES/2584 (2021), para. 4.

reflected in more frequent restrictions on the mission's movement and access to parts of the country. Nonetheless, MINUSMA's leaders continue to play an important role in providing good offices even though they are not leading multilateral efforts. The mission's senior leaders are expected to engage the transitional authorities in consultations about the mandate renewal and receive their input. Some participants acknowledged that they are unlikely to be on the same page regarding certain substantive tasks related to stabilization and civilian protection. Even so, they argued that the ongoing dialogue is imperative to shaping a mandate that the transitional authorities support and can be used as a foundation for communicating the UN's role in Mali to the wider population.

Protection of Civilians and Engagement on Human Rights

Participants agreed that the mission's protection of civilians and human rights roles are essential to the UN's work in Mali. However, the mission faces challenges in accomplishing these parts of its mandate, in particular because of its lack of physical access and limited specialized capabilities. Participants argued that the Security Council and UN member states more broadly need to grapple with these challenges more directly, noting that growing risks to civilians pose a threat to prospects for long-term peace and the legitimacy of the mission.

The conflict dynamics and the changing configuration of international security partners in Mali impact how MINUSMA implements its protection of civilians mandate. The Malian armed forces' offensive against non-state armed groups, the growing number of asymmetric attacks against both civilians and the mission, and the increasingly regional dimension of intercommunal violence make it harder for the UN to provide physical protection in line with the Malian population's expectations. In addition, the departures of Operation Barkhane and the Takuba Task Force will likely place additional pressure on MINUSMA, the Malian armed forces, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and their partners. MINUSMA is continuing its diverse protection efforts, including by supporting the Malian transitional authorities in finalizing their political strategy for the stabilization of central Mali. However, as one participant explained, the Security Council could use the upcoming mandate renewal process to articulate a shared vision between the transitional authorities and the UN that centers on the protection of civilians, including a reduction in harm to civilians during operations by the Malian armed forces.

MINUSMA's efforts to protect civilians have also become more challenging because of the Malian armed forces' alleged human rights violations in recent months.¹⁹ One participant described the paradoxical nature of MINUSMA's mandate to protect civilians while also supporting the Malian state, which itself poses a threat to civilians. To confront this paradox, the participant argued that the mission needs to continue focusing on human rights monitoring, investigation, and reporting. However, as of the time of the workshop, neither MINUSMA nor the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) had received permission from the Malian authorities

¹⁹ UN Doc. S/2022/278, para. 57.

to deploy independent investigators to the village of Moura, where the worst alleged atrocities have taken place.²⁰

Capability Gaps and Operational Challenges

In light of the changing international security architecture in Mali, participants emphasized that MINUSMA will increasingly struggle to effectively implement its mandate if it does not receive the required enabling capabilities and specialized military personnel. Without the capabilities needed to deter and mitigate asymmetric threats like improvised explosive devices and rocket attacks, some worried that MINUSMA would be forced to further prioritize force protection and adopt a “bunker” mentality. This, they argued, would further reduce the UN’s ability to effectively fulfill its mandate, including to protect civilians through physical presence.

Others noted that the requirements set out in the secretary-general’s Force Adaptation Plan have not yet been met and that the sanctions imposed on Mali by ECOWAS and the WAEMU have affected some of MINUSMA’s operations and logistics convoys. One speaker mentioned that MINUSMA will also likely need additional capabilities that are not reflected in the plan because of the withdrawals of Operation Barkhane and the Takuba Task Force.²¹ These may include more military and air assets, troop contingents with capabilities and training to conduct high-risk operations, and medical capabilities. Some speakers indicated that member states are already having bilateral discussions on how to fill some of these capability gaps. One speaker noted that if member states do not provide MINUSMA with these capabilities soon, they cannot expect the mission to effectively deliver on these key aspects of its mandate.

CONCLUSION

Amid rapid changes in the political and security context in Mali and the Sahel region, MINUSMA finds itself at a critical juncture. Its strategic priorities and mandated activities still align with the areas where the UN can best support the Malian people. However, MINUSMA’s limited ability to protect civilians and the slow progress on the political transition raise questions about the future of UN engagement in the country.

One key takeaway from the discussion on MINUSMA’s mandate renewal was that the Security Council and MINUSMA need to focus more on the political dimensions of the mandate including not only the governance transition but also the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. At the same time, the tension between two of MINUSMA’s strategic priorities—protecting

²⁰ OHCHR, “Comment by UN Human Rights Office Spokesperson Seif Magango on Malian Authorities’ Failure to Grant UN Investigators Access to Moura,” April 20, 2022, available at www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/04/comment-un-human-rights-office-spokesperson-seif-magango-malian-authorities.

²¹ UN Security Council, *Situation in Mali—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2019/983, December 30, 2019, paras. 60–66.

civilians and supporting the extension of the Malian state—makes it challenging for the mission to be a legitimate and credible partner to the Malian people.

Another takeaway was that MINUSMA’s relationships with other actors in the country and the region remain critical to improving the security environment and advancing the political process. MINUSMA’s strategic role in Mali has partially been premised on it being part of a larger international response to insecurity in the Sahel region. As French and EU forces withdraw, the G5 Sahel Joint Force may take on a bigger role as a security partner for MINUSMA, though this will require the joint force to have a clearer strategic vision and more capacity. In the wake of this withdrawal, MINUSMA itself will also require additional capabilities to operate in Mali’s high-risk, complex environment.

Participants encouraged the Security Council to use the upcoming mandate renewal to reinforce the urgency of progress on the reforms needed to undertake legitimate elections while also providing diplomatic support to ECOWAS in its negotiations on a consensual transition timetable. They emphasized the importance of MINUSMA’s protection presence and its human rights monitoring functions across the country. And they implored UN member states to work with MINUSMA and the UN Secretariat to fill capability gaps and remove restrictions that could inhibit the mission’s operations at this critical juncture in Mali’s governance transition.