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

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STIMSON

On May 18, 2023, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a workshop to discuss the mandate and political strategy of the United Nations 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 a political strategy. This is the eighth year in which the series is examining the mandate of MINUSMA. The 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 German Federal Foreign Office and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in June 2023. Ten years after MINUSMA was established, the mission is at a critical juncture. As implementation of the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali remains stalled, there is no longer “a peace to keep,” and mistrust is growing between Mali’s traditional partners and the country’s transitional authorities.¹ These political challenges, alongside access restrictions, tensions over the mission’s human rights reporting, and the withdrawal or planned withdrawal of some countries’ peacekeeping contingents, have undermined the mission’s ability to implement its strategic priorities.² The upcoming negotiations will also unfold in the context of broader geopolitical tensions in the Security Council.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report co-hosted a roundtable discussion on May 18, 2023, to discuss MINUSMA’s mandate renewal. This roundtable offered a platform for member states, UN officials, civil society stakeholders, and independent experts to share their assessments of the situation in Mali in a frank and collaborative manner. The discussion was intended to help the Security Council make more informed decisions on the prioritization and sequencing of MINUSMA’s mandate, as well as the mission’s strategic orientation and actions on the ground.

This roundtable took place following an internal review of MINUSMA, released in January, which included three sets of options for reconfiguring the mission: (1) increasing the number of uniformed personnel to implement the mission’s mandate across all areas of deployment, (2) maintaining the current number of uniformed personnel with a focus on strategic priorities and a consolidated footprint, or (3) withdrawing uniformed personnel and converting MINUSMA into a special political mission.³ Participants generally agreed that Option 1 is not feasible considering that the UN is already struggling to meet the mission’s current troop authorization, and Option 3 is

¹ UN Security Council, *Internal Review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2023/36, January 16, 2023, para. 6; Arthur Boutellis, “Will it Be MINUSMA à la Carte, or Geopolitical Endgame in Mali?” *IPI Global Observatory*, March 30, 2023.

² MINUSMA’s strategic priorities include supporting implementation of the 2015 peace agreement and the political transition; helping to stabilize and restore state authority in the center; protecting civilians, with a focus on the north and center; promoting and protecting human rights; and supporting the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

³ UN Security Council, *Internal Review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2023/36, January 16, 2023, paras. 65–81.

inadvisable given the mission's ongoing role providing security and protecting civilians in parts of the country.

Participants therefore recommended that the Security Council focus on providing guidelines for the implementation of Option 2. Points participants raised for consideration during the upcoming negotiations on MINUSMA's mandate renewal included:

- Prioritizing the identification of new troop-contributing countries (TCCs) to ensure the mission is operating at full capacity, particularly countries with strong self-protection capabilities;
- Continuing to engage with the host state where possible, including in deconfliction of troop movements, training on human rights, election support, and support to the stabilization strategy for central Mali;
- Promoting host authorities' compliance with the status of forces agreement (SOFA) and ending restrictions on flights and ground movements;
- Working to rebuild commitment to the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation among the signatory parties and stepping up engagement on cease-fire monitoring mechanisms;
- Considering shifting toward a more mobile posture that could allow the mission to be more proactive in protecting civilians while reducing the resources devoted to self-protection;
- Remaining committed to the mission's human rights mandate and adherence to the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy; and
- Investing further in strategic communications and community engagement initiatives to clarify the mission's mandate and counter negative narratives about the mission, including in parts of the country where the mission is less active.

Capability Gaps, Operational Challenges, and Mission Reconfiguration

The workshop discussion took place in the context of the three options the secretary-general proposed for MINUSMA's reconfiguration in the January 2023 internal review. Participants generally agreed that Option 1 (increasing the number of uniformed personnel) was not feasible due to ongoing challenges in generating and maintaining troop contributions. Over the past year, several TCCs have announced they are withdrawing their troops from Mali, representing 20 percent of the force currently deployed.⁴ This reflects TCCs' reluctance to deploy troops in a context where they will face high levels of risk and difficulties delivering effectively on the mission's mandate.⁵

Participants also agreed that Option 3 (withdrawing all uniformed personnel) was inadvisable. The mission continues to play an important role providing security and physical protection to civilians, including in regions plagued by violent extremism such as Gao, Ménaka, and central Mali. For instance, MINUSMA's bases and flights continue to help extend the presence of the Malian state in the north and deter armed groups and violent extremists from taking over cities and towns. A special political mission would risk leaving a security gap that national security forces are currently unable to fill.⁶

Therefore, participants generally agreed that the Security Council should focus on Option 2 (maintaining the same number of uniformed personnel). They emphasized that the council needs to have a frank and pragmatic discussion on how to implement this option in advance of the mandate renewal, drawing on the secretary-general's internal review. Participants suggested that the council establish the four parameters laid

⁴ UN Security Council, 9302nd Meeting, UN Doc. S/PV.9302, April 12, 2023.

⁵ Fifteen peacekeepers were killed by malicious acts in Mali in 2022, and it has been the deadliest UN peacekeeping mission in eight out of the last ten years. UN Peacekeeping, "Fatalities," available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities>.

⁶ International Crisis Group, "MINUSMA at a Crossroads," December 2022; Arthur Boutellis, "Will it Be MINUSMA à la Carte, or Geopolitical Endgame in Mali?" *IPI Global Observatory*, March 30, 2023.

out in the review as a basis for monitoring and maintaining the mission's presence in the country. These parameters include: (1) advances in the political transition; (2) progress in implementing the peace agreement; (3) freedom of movement, including for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets critical to the safety and security of peacekeepers; and (4) the ability to implement the entire mandate, including its human rights provisions.⁷

Participants also noted that Option 2 will require the UN to prioritize immediate force generation. MINUSMA currently lacks the personnel and equipment needed to carry out its mandate effectively and extend its presence beyond urban centers to the rural areas where armed groups are active. While some TCCs have already been identified to replace those that are withdrawing, participants emphasized the need to prioritize TCCs that provide high-quality training and equipment, particularly capabilities to counter improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Implementing Option 2 will also require the mission to consider how to enhance the mobility of troops and reduce their need to focus on self-protection, including by closing some small bases and investing further in others. Some participants noted that the role of the Security Council should be to provide general guidance on reconfiguring the mission rather than request specific changes, leaving the UN to work out the details of the consolidation.

Relationship with the Host State

One of MINUSMA's main challenges is its complex relationship with the host government. While the government does not want the mission to leave, participants highlighted that the mission's relationship with the host state has deteriorated since the previous mandate renewal, particularly as the government has increasingly turned to the Wagner Group for security assistance. Participants noted that violations of the SOFA by the government remain unacceptably high, with one participant

questioning whether the SOFA was being applied at all. As of March 1, 2023, 24 percent of the mission's requests for flight authorizations had been denied, particularly in relation to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, and the government has repeatedly restricted ground movements in parts of the country.⁸ This lack of access and mobility undermines MINUSMA's ability to conduct on-site investigations of human rights violations. Participants also called on the Security Council to take an active role in holding the government accountable for SOFA violations (e.g., by conditioning the deployment of new troops on reduced violations).

Some participants mentioned that they do not expect to see an immediate shift in Malian authorities' attitudes toward the mission and agreed that there is no quick fix for improving host-state relations. However, they also noted that it is not an option for the mission not to cooperate with host-state authorities and that efforts to improve cooperation are ongoing. For example, the mission and the host government recently agreed to embed a representative of the Malian Armed Forces with MINUSMA's headquarters, and the armed forces communicate with the mission when conducting air strikes. One participant also noted that even in contentious areas like human rights, the mission continues to work with host-state authorities, including by providing training and building their capacity on compliance with human rights and international humanitarian law. Participants called for continued engagement with authorities at all levels within the four parameters for effective engagement laid out by the secretary-general.

Participants also emphasized that ultimately, the government does not want the mission to leave; it wants the mission to provide more robust security support, including counterterrorism, with greater coordination of activities with the state and a reduced focus on human rights.⁹ However, the UN is clear on the distinction between counterterrorism and peacekeeping, as well as peace enforcement. Participants also stated that removing the human rights component of the mission mandate

⁷ UN Doc. S/2023/36, para. 62.

⁸ UN Security Council, *Situation in Mali—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2023/236, March 30, 2023, paras. 59–60.

⁹ UN Doc. S/2023/36, para. 87.

is off the table. At the same time, some participants called on the mission to ensure its actions better complement those of security actors engaged in counterterrorism, including the Malian Armed Forces and the Wagner Group.

Peace Agreement and Political Process

Participants emphasized that MINUSMA's political engagement remains more critical than ever considering the stalled implementation of the 2015 peace agreement and national political transition. They expressed concern about the erosion of trust between the transitional authorities and the armed group signatories to the 2015 agreement, particularly the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), with each side accusing the other of undermining the agreement. Participants agreed that the mission should encourage all parties to abandon martial rhetoric and confrontational posturing to prevent an escalation of violence. Participants further emphasized the essential role of the International Mediation, including its development of a road map to reignite implementation of the agreement.¹⁰

The participants also highlighted that there is no viable alternative to the 2015 agreement and called on the mission to focus on reactivating its cease-fire monitoring mechanisms. Several noted that the endurance of the cease-fire since 2015 is an important achievement that should be held up and for which the mission's monitoring and good offices activities deserve credit. Some also argued that the parties' continued engagement outside of the agreement's formal mechanisms, despite the current impasse, reflects a modicum of mutual trust and commitment. At the same time, participants acknowledged that the agreement did not emerge from a democratic process and that some Malians, especially in the center and south of the country, see it as an instrument for partition that has failed to address their concerns and aspirations. One participant suggested that the mission could play a role in facilitating a more democratic process

around the peace agreement to reduce tensions between those who support and oppose it.

Regarding the national political transition, participants agreed that MINUSMA should maintain dialogue and engagement with the host-state authorities. It remains unclear whether authorities in Bamako will follow through with their commitment to restore civilian rule by March 2024, as they agreed with the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) in 2022. The transitional authorities have tightened control of civic space, and the transitional president has consolidated his political base. While the government's announcement that it will hold a constitutional referendum on June 18, 2023, is a positive development, doubts remain regarding the authorities' capability and willingness to organize the presidential election by February 2024.¹¹ Participants agreed that MINUSMA will play a critical role in the political transition, particularly through technical and logistical support to the independent electoral management body in organizing the referendum and elections.

Participants also considered how the mission can best support stabilization efforts amid increasing violence from extremist groups in the north and with a minimal state presence in the Ménaka region. Malian authorities have persisted with an essentially military response, with the Malian Armed Forces conducting large-scale operations with the support of the Wagner Group. Some participants urged MINUSMA to press the government to pursue a more holistic approach to insecurity, including by prioritizing dialogue with disaffected communities and potentially with extremist groups. One participant emphasized MINUSMA's need to "bring" peace in the absence of "a peace to keep," pointing to the sixty-four local-level peace agreements the mission has facilitated across the country since its deployment. Other participants encouraged the mission to work with civil society organizations, the UN country team, and Malian authorities to support the government's political stabilization strategy for central Mali, which the government adopted in

¹⁰ The International Mediation consists of Algeria, France, the US, MINUSMA, the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS), and the European Union (EU).

¹¹ International Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation," February 2023.

August 2022. To bolster stabilization efforts, one participant suggested the establishment of a UN trust fund dedicated to rebuilding infrastructure destroyed by extremists to restore the movement of goods and rebuild livelihoods, which could help extend the state's presence in rural areas.

Protection of Civilians and Engagement on Human Rights

Participants agreed that MINUSMA's protection of civilians (POC) mandate is more of a priority than ever considering the growing number of attacks against civilians. Incidents of violence against civilians continued to escalate in 2022, making it the most violent year on record.¹² Most of these incidents were perpetrated by or resulted from clashes between violent extremist groups, particularly the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), though the UN also attributed many attacks to the Malian Armed Forces.¹³ Participants particularly noted the increase in violence in the northeast, including in Ménaka, where violent extremist activity is on the rise.

This growing threat to civilians comes at the same time as a reduction in MINUSMA's ability to implement its POC mandate due to the withdrawal of uniformed personnel and increasingly hostile conditions for peacekeepers. One participant noted that the mission dedicates as much as three-quarters of its capabilities to a defensive posture and self-protection.¹⁴ Participants discussed how the mission could shift more resources from self-protection toward the protection of civilians. One participant suggested that a reduction in the number of bases could allow the mission to shift resources from static self-protection toward more mobile POC efforts. Similarly, another called for improving self-protection by prioritizing the identification of new TCCs that can deploy with

anti-IED capabilities. It was also suggested that the mission use strategic communications to emphasize that POC is the primary responsibility of the host state.

Participants acknowledged that MINUSMA's human rights mandate is a growing source of tension with host-state authorities. Movement restrictions imposed by the government continue to impede the mission's ability to conduct human rights reporting, and in February, the government expelled the director of the mission's human rights division. In May, the publication of a UN report finding that Malian troops, aided by foreign military personnel, were responsible for the massacre of more than 500 people in Moura in March 2022 led the government to accuse the UN of "espionage."¹⁵

Participants noted that the Moura report demonstrates the importance of the UN's POC and human rights mandates and highlights the growing tension between these mandates and the mission's support of the Malian Armed Forces. This tension underscores the importance of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP), which is meant to ensure the mission's support to host-state forces complies with human rights principles. As one participant noted, however, MINUSMA has fewer than four people working on implementing the HRDDP. Another participant argued that without the HRDDP and the mission's human rights mandate, MINUSMA would need to close because it would pose too big of a reputational risk to the UN.

Community Perceptions and Strategic Communications

Community perceptions and strategic communications were another focus of the discussion. Participants commented that many Malians do not understand the role of MINUSMA and feel that it is not doing enough, especially to address

12 ACLED recorded 630 incidents of violence against civilians in 2022, up from 498 in 2021, 297 in 2019, and just 39 in 2016. See: <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>.

13 MINUSMA, "Note trimestrielle sur les tendances des violations et atteintes aux droits de l'homme et au droit international humanitaire au Mali: 1er octobre-31 décembre 2022," March 2023.

14 See also: Jenna Russo, "75 Years On, the Uncertain Future of UN Peacekeeping," *IPI Global Observatory*, May 16, 2023.

15 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Rapport sur les événements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022," May 2023; Flore Monteau, "After Moura Report, Malian Government Accuses UN of 'Espionage,'" *Africa Report*, May 19, 2023.

terrorism, sparking widespread civilian criticism of the mission. This is in part a symptom of a broader anti-Western narrative in Mali and other countries in the region and a popular mobilization against the solutions the international community has been offering to the crisis in Mali. At the same time, participants emphasized that perceptions of the mission vary across the country and are more positive in some of the northern regions where the mission is more present.¹⁶

Participants therefore called for MINUSMA to focus on strategic communications and community engagement activities that socialize and help explain its mandate, including in parts of the country where it is less active. They also called on the mission to continue clarifying that it is not mandated to conduct counterterrorism and to explain its role vis-à-vis other security actors in the country focused on counterterrorism. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of creating space and opportunities to listen to Malians and respond to their priorities.

Conclusion

Despite challenging relations with the host state and a difficult security environment, MINUSMA continues to play a vital role in Mali. The mission provides necessary contributions to the country by supporting cease-fire arrangements in the north, assisting in stabilizing the center, protecting civilians in both the north and center of the country, supporting upcoming elections, and reporting on human rights violations, among other key activities. Participants therefore urged the Security Council to consider how it can best enable MINUSMA to fulfill these ongoing priorities effectively, particularly by bringing the mission back to its full force capacity, encouraging the mission to optimize its use of existing resources and increase its mobile posture and emphasizing the host state's responsibility to abide by the status of forces agreement without caveat. Toward this end, participants called on the council to build off Option 2 and the four parameters laid out in the internal review of MINUSMA to guide discussions during the mandate renewal.

¹⁶ In a poll conducted in February 2023, satisfaction with the mission was significantly higher in the north of the country (58% versus 23% for the population of Mali as a whole). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Mali-Mètre: Enquête d'opinion 'Que pensent les Maliens(ne)s?'" May 2023.

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777 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017-3521, USA
TEL +1-212-687-4300 FAX +1-212-983-8246

52-52 Harbour House, Bahrain Financial Harbour
P.O. Box 1467, Manama, Bahrain

www.ipinst.org