

Learning from United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali's Entanglement in Counterterrorism

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Abstract

As the United Nations (UN) and others reflect on the legacy of the recently closed UN Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), this article discusses one of the more controversial aspects of MINUSMA's deployment—namely, the mission's direct and indirect involvement in efforts to counter terrorism in the Sahel. The article first outlines how the mission navigated a complex operating environment in which other actors sought to defeat terrorism through the use of offensive force. It then suggests that in the future, UN peace operations should step away from providing support for counterterrorism activities.

Introduction

For over a decade, Mali, regional partners, and international forces have fought terrorist organisations in the north of Mali and the wider Sahel region. The region became a smörgåsbord of military operations, and international and regional cooperation. With initial interventions in Mali in Jan 2013 from the Economic Community of West African States and France, a United Nations Peace Operation (UNPO), the United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established in Apr 2013. In the following years, the United Nations (UN) forces worked alongside Malian Security Forces, French Operations Serval and Barkhane, the regional G5-Sahel Joint Force, the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali and European Union Training Mission in Mali, and the Takuba Task Force. Not all these missions

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLV, No. 639, January-March 2025.

were expressly mandated to combat terrorism in Mali and the wider Sahel region but these multifaceted operations have, nevertheless, worked in tandem to contribute to the stability of the Malian state and the region as a whole with varying degrees of support lent to counterterrorism efforts.

Activities that involve both states, regional and international organisations, and ad hoc coalitions produce complex relationships between those actors that can result in differing methods of countering terrorism and ultimately differing rhetoric on the conflict. This can be divisive where states and organisations are operating with different end goals in mind and different principles that govern their actions. For instance, in 2016, the UN Secretary-General presented a Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism to the General Assembly and in 2017, the UN established a UN Office of Counterterrorism to provide leadership on counterterrorism mandates and assistance. These initiatives have pressured the UN to engage with counterterrorism activities around the globe, with Mali a key example of how the UN sought to work with other actors on these issues. However, the UN has been reluctant to label particular groups in Mali and the Sahel as terrorist organisations so as not to undermine MINUSMA's support for peace agreements during its deployment.

As the UN and others reflect on the legacy of the recently closed MINUSMA, this article discusses one of the more controversial aspects of MINUSMA's deployment—the mission's direct and indirect involvement with efforts to counterterrorism in the Sahel. The article first outlines how MINUSMA navigated a complex operating environment in which other actors sought to defeat terrorism through the use of offensive force. Then, the article suggests that in the future, UNPOs must step away from providing support for counterterrorism activities. Instead, international and regional actors should cooperate to empower communities, pursue de-radicalisation, avoid alienating stakeholders, harmonise mandates, and carefully consider how exactly they work together in shared areas of interest in pursuit of similar targets.

United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali's Role in Counterterrorism

It is important to preface this discussion with a brief explanation of the three principles of UN peacekeeping. First laid down in 1958 by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, the traditional principles of UN peacekeeping include consent, impartiality, and minimal use of force.¹ These principles have been reinterpreted over time as the role and functions of peacekeeping operations have adapted and evolved, but at their core, they remain mostly the same. A UN peacekeeping operation will only be deployed with the host state's consent, in accordance with state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Without such consent, the UNPO would amount to an enforcement action, which is typically conducted by coalitions of the willing, as authorised under Chapter VII. Importantly, the UN explains that consent by the state(s) involved represents a "Commitment by the parties to a political process", which is key in the distinction between peacekeeping and other uses of military force.²

Another of Hammarskjöld's principles, impartiality, ensures that a UN peacekeeping mission is not used to force a political settlement in favour of one party to the conflict or influence the balance of power. The principle of impartiality again distinguishes the peacekeeping from, for example, a coalition of the willing authorised under Chapter VII that may involve military action directed against an aggressor state. In the case of the Sahel, a coalition of states may form an ad-hoc organisation to undertake joint operations and establish a Joint Force with the specific purpose of offensively countering terrorism and transnational crime.

The third principle of UN peacekeeping is that force must only be used for defensive purposes. The use of offensive force would be 'Beyond the competence' of an operation.³ With many modern missions holding Chapter VII mandates to protect civilians and use force in defence of the mandate, it has been interpreted to enable the UN forces to respond effectively and 'Silence a source of deadly fire that is directed at UN troops or at the people they are charged to protect'.⁴ Nonetheless, UN peacekeepers must not take the initiative in using force, as such action would risk the UN straying into enforcement operations, which are typically carried out by other actors.

As a consequence of these principles, MINUSMA was limited in several ways. It could operate only within the territory of Mali, not in other Sahelian states or G5 members, and had to adhere to its Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the Malian government. The SOFA served as the legal framework between the UN and Mali, defining the obligations of UN peacekeepers. Additionally, the principle of impartiality restricted MINUSMA's ability to differentiate between various groups involved in the conflict. The Malian authorities refer to the entire conflict, since 2012, as terrorism and does not distinguish between Tuareg rebel armed groups seeking self-determination and Islamic terrorists operating in the country.⁵ With the label of 'Terrorist Organisation' carrying particularly negative connotations, this poses a challenge for the UN, which must ultimately promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict among the various armed groups and the Malian government.

Finally, MINUSMA was mandated to protect civilians in Mali. Consequently, when a terrorist organisation threatened civilians, UN peacekeepers were permitted to intervene and use deadly force when necessary. However, MINUSMA could not employ offensive force in the manner of Operation Barkhane or the G5 Joint Force. The use of offensive force would not only contravene a core principle of UN peacekeeping, but UN peacekeepers are also typically not the most suitable actors for conducting offensive operations, as they are neither trained nor equipped for such engagements. Mali called for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to help government forces in countering terrorism by deploying a Force Intervention Brigade, similar to that in United Nations Organisation Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is specifically mandated to offensively use force and conduct joint operations with the host state, to combat terrorist groups.⁶ The UNSC refused to authorise such a force despite Malian officials believing that the 'UN should do its job and break these terrorists'.⁷

Nevertheless, MINUSMA supported Mali, Operation Barkhane, and the G5 Sahel in their fight against terrorism. MINUSMA gave technical assistance to Mali's Specialised Judicial Unit to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Organised Crime as well as to personnel in the criminal justice system on the housing of inmates 'Suspected or convicted of terrorism-related offences'.⁸ Importantly,

the UN recognised that the host state's counterterrorism activities have led to 'Repeated Allegations'. The allegations include executions, torture, enforced disappearances, various levels of ill-treatment, and arbitrary arrests. However, cooperation between the UN and the Malian authorities continued until the mission's departure.

MINUSMA further supported the international community's fight against terrorism in the Sahel through the identification of groups and individuals considered a threat to the mission, and included them in 'Targeting Packs'.⁹ MINUSMA had a sophisticated intelligence system that had, for example, made use of a German unmanned aerial vehicle unit and a Swedish reconnaissance company of armoured vehicles, amongst others.¹⁰ The targeting packs were compiled by MINUSMA's dedicated intelligence unit, the All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU) which was tasked with collecting actionable intelligence, and included personnel from the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway.¹¹ ASIFU also carried out non-military intelligence analysis on issues such as illegal trafficking and narcotics, ethnic and tribal dynamics, corruption, and bad governance.¹² ASIFU's targeting packs were informally shared with Operation Barkhane and this was reported to the UN as possibly having 'Serious operational, political and legal implications'.¹³ The legal implication being, MINUSMA becomes a party to the conflict under the law of armed conflict as a result of providing 'Actionable Intelligence' for the French Operation Barkhane.¹⁴ UN documentation openly discussed the importance of sharing information between MINUSMA and its international partners fighting terrorism in the region with a Coordinating Body for Mali being created in Jan 2019 to improve information sharing.¹⁵

In addition to ASIFU, two military units deployed as part of MINUSMA also engaged in intelligence gathering, namely the Special Operations Land Task Group and a helicopter detachment. Both units were Dutch and collected intelligence alongside their other objectives. A Dutch commander confirmed that, "The special forces went to Mali to kill people. Hunt people and arrest them ... This was the case even though we upfront agreed that the mission would be calm, shooting kept to a minimum, and wear the blue beret".¹⁶ Where MINUSMA is concerned, the divisions have at times become blurred with ASIFU and other military units working closely with non-UN forces fighting terrorism.

The UN rightfully states the fight against terrorism must not infringe upon human rights or marginalise communities.¹⁷ The UN itself has recognised that Malian counterterror operations have violated human rights law, 'Which compounded the communities' feeling of marginalisation from the peace process'.¹⁸ In addition, the UN has already begun investigations into serious human rights violations committed by the G5 Sahel Joint Force, including the killing of civilians.¹⁹ The G5 Sahel Joint Force does have civilian components tasked with human rights protection but these elements were not operational in 2019, two years after the creation of the Joint Force.²⁰

If, in the eyes of communities, the UN is perceived as part of counterterrorism efforts alongside the host state and international forces—both of which have committed numerous human rights violations—a peacekeeping mission's efforts to bring together the affected parties and reconcile the conflict would be undermined. As early as 2003, Ralf Bredel, Director and Representative to UN headquarters, warned that "The UN should be cautious about allowing counterterrorism to encroach unduly on the notion of long-term conflict prevention".²¹ For instance, the mandates of the UNSC could have led to further marginalisation in northern Mali, where they expressly supported a counterterrorism agenda. This resulted in MINUSMA forces operating alongside the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which has committed human rights violations. Consequently, the UN's position as an impartial arbitrator was naturally weakened. In such circumstances, it becomes more difficult to work with communities to identify what is vital for their rebuilding efforts and to implement peacebuilding programs that require bottom-up engagement.

Support for counterterrorism has also led MINUSMA to deploy specialised contingents from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries keen to support French and European Union (EU) efforts in the wider Sahel. This included the use of transport and combat helicopters, as well as drones. Much of this was to meet NATO requirements regarding the extraction of wounded troops, enabling its member states to contribute forces. As a result, the package has been described as establishing 'A new level of combat readiness'.²² Moda Dieng, Associate Professor in the School of Conflict Studies, has argued that it is necessary to support state institutions and provide space for populations to

take up responsibility for their development.²³ However, the encouragement of a security-focused strategy “Works to the detriment of other essential tasks such as state building and effective governance”.²⁴ For instance, by fighting terrorism in Mali, the UN supported the host state in devoting resources to ‘Excessive Militarisation’, which prevents and delays development and community work. The use of NATO forces meant German and Dutch contingents (deployed as part of MINUSMA) had agreements to provide transport for French forces conducting counterterrorism operations under Operation Barkhane.

With new relationships emerging in the Sahel between Sahelian states, European and NATO partners, and the UN, the UNSC remains far from reaching an agreement on the extent to which the UN should be involved in offensive counterterrorism operations. On one hand, the Secretary-General is of the view that “Stronger support to the Joint Force, including with predictable and sustainable financial resources, is critical to ensure the success of that initiative”.²⁵ States, such as China, have also called for continued support to the host state to build Mali’s capacity to fight terrorism. On the other hand, it was previously mentioned that the resolution welcoming the Joint Force, Resolution 2359, does not authorise the G5 Sahel Joint Force under Chapter VII, in fact the mandate makes no mention of enforcement action, due to the United States’ reluctance.²⁶ The UNSC previously used Chapter VII to not authorise force against terrorists and instead states typically use force in self-defence.²⁷ Therefore, MINUSMA found itself in a unique situation. It was mandated under Chapter VII to use robust force, provide logistical and operational support to the G5 Sahel Joint Force, share intelligence, and utilise forces contributed by NATO and EU member states, which were also providing financial or material support to EU and French missions in the region. Consequently, MINUSMA’s Chapter VII mandate became linked to supporting a regional counterterrorism operation that employed offensive force, with the explicit encouragement of the UNSC.

MINUSMA has also been shaped by the overlap between African and European troop contributing countries that share financial and political interests in the G5, French, and EU operations in the region.²⁸ That said, following the coups in 2020 and 2021, the security landscape in Mali changed significantly, presenting

MINUSMA with new security challenges. With Mali's withdrawal from the G5 and its Joint Force, the departure of Operation Barkhane, and the exit of the EU's Takuba Task Force, MINUSMA faced a riskier operating environment. The UN peacekeepers no longer had the protection of international and other forces willing and authorised to use offensive force. Already the UN's second most fatal peace operation in history, support for MINUSMA at the UN could have waned if the mission had suffered further casualties while operating independently in Mali.

However, less than a year after French forces withdrew, the Malian Foreign Minister, during a press conference in Moscow, asked MINUSMA to withdraw 'Without Delay' because "MINUSMA seems to have become a part of the problem in fuelling inter-community tensions".²⁹ As mentioned previously, the Malian government had wanted MINUSMA to offensively counter terrorism. The Russian Ambassador to the UN stated that "The real issue is not the number of peacekeepers but the functions, and one of the key tasks for the government of Mali is fighting terrorism, which is not provided for in the mandate of the blue helmets".³⁰ With the principles of peacekeeping preventing the UN from using offensive force to fight alongside the Malian government, Mali's turn to seeking Russian allies, such as the Wagner Group, inevitably made the UN's presence untenable.

Lessons to be Learnt from United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MINUSMA made great strides towards inclusive, bottom-up processes that saw the mission work alongside communities affected by violent conflict and radicalisation. The promotion of an inclusive peace process was a priority for the UNSC in Mali and those vulnerable to radicalisation had been singled out by the UN as a particularly vulnerable group.³¹ The UNSC consistently stressed the need to involve all Malian communities in peace negotiations, which showed a concern for ensuring Malian people are able to make choices for their future and demand improvements which improves their security.³²

MINUSMA had, on a number of occasions, undertaken and supported actions that created space for people to be empowered to act on their own behalf in identifying and implementing solutions to the crisis. This was evident in instances where MINUSMA

arranged workshops, supported government initiatives that empowered local communities, and consistently advocated for the active inclusion of women. These actions demonstrate an understanding within the mission and the UNSC that a successful peace process must involve local and regional negotiations and be inclusive, ensuring that individuals have the opportunity to 'Make better choices' and contribute to preventing future conflict. Particularly in the case of women, the Secretary-General directly recognised that the empowerment and participation of women contributes decisively to whether the peace process will be successful.³³ As a result, a strategy that empowers people was central to the mission's mandate, ensuring the inclusion of all communities in the peace process, promoting the participation of women, and supporting national reconciliation.

But for the UN in particular, engagement with counterterrorism must be distinct from its other work if it wishes to avoid the risk of undermining an inclusive peace and national reconciliation. Richard Gowan, the UN Director at Crisis Group, believes that the UN must be prepared to conduct robust operations to counter terrorism and if it does not, it risks irrelevance.³⁴ However, UN missions cannot work alongside offensive international forces, such as Operation Barkhane, if they genuinely aim to reconcile the differences among communities and groups that form the root causes of the conflict. If a mission gathers intelligence and designates certain individuals as terrorists for targeting purposes, it could easily undermine other mandated activities, such as supporting local peace committees. The UNSC must utilise its mandating function to provide clearer guidance on a mission's role when engaging with counterterrorism activities. A more transparent and well-defined approach to counterterrorism is essential to delineate the types of support UN forces can offer and, importantly, where the UN draws the line.

Conclusion

Perpetual war and excessive militarisation have long been at odds with efforts to establish bottom-up peace. International and regional actors must develop a clear framework for cooperation and delineation of their activities to ensure they can simultaneously empower communities, pursue de-radicalisation, avoid alienating stakeholders, and adapt to changes in the security environment.

When multiple operations pursue different agendas—particularly when one employs offensive force and supports state-led military actions while another seeks to engage with communities—it becomes crucial to carefully manage the relationship between these missions. For instance, if the UN assists in French or G5 counterterrorism activities that result in the targeting of specific communities by international forces, will local people still be willing to engage with the UN?

Endnotes

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