



Q&A

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By International Crisis Group

# MINUSMA at a Crossroads

*The UK, Côte d'Ivoire and other nations plan to pull their troops out of the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, clouding its future as it undergoes internal review. In this Q&A, Crisis Group experts discuss the mission's challenges and scenarios for what could come next.*

## **What is new with the UN mission in Mali?**

The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), deployed in 2013 to help stabilise the country in the wake of an insurgency led by jihadist and separatist groups, appears to be in trouble. On 11 November, Côte d'Ivoire informed the UN that it will start withdrawing its 900 soldiers from the mission. Three days later, the UK announced that its troops will pull out in the next six months, "earlier than planned". London says the Malian government has become uncooperative; it also thinks Bamako's alliance with the Wagner Group, a Russian private security company, is counterproductive. On 22 November, Germany also made official its decision to withdraw from MINUSMA, although officials stressed that they would maintain at least a part of their commitment until May 2024. Earlier in 2022, Benin and Sweden signalled their intent to leave before the end of 2023, withdrawing about 450 and 200 personnel, respectively. Meanwhile, Egypt, the mission's third-largest troop contributor, is sitting on the fence. In July, it temporarily suspended the activities of its over 1,000-strong contingent, citing the deaths of seven of their number in the preceding months. Cairo is reportedly talking with the UN leadership in New York about whether its troops will stay. Even if they do, the impending exodus of

others casts serious doubt on the decade-old mission's future.

The shrinking support for MINUSMA is due to several factors. First, Bamako has impeded troop rotations, suspending them for a month in July and August, and restricted UN staff's movement, creating tension with troop contributors. Secondly, the Wagner Group has been fighting jihadists in Mali since December 2021. Western troop contributors worry about getting into accidental confrontations with Wagner employees or incurring reputational damage should they be seen working alongside the Russians. Thirdly, and due partly to Wagner's arrival, France withdrew its Operation Barkhane, which was mandated to protect MINUSMA personnel facing an "imminent and serious threat". Fourthly, ties between Mali and West African neighbours have been strained since the military seized power in May 2021. In particular, Mali has riled Côte d'Ivoire by detaining 46 Ivorian soldiers whom it labels mercenaries (Abidjan says they were supporting MINUSMA). In September, Mali's interim prime minister angered Côte d'Ivoire further when, responding to what Bamako perceived as neighbours' provocations, he questioned the legitimacy of the Ivorian and Nigerien heads of state during a speech to the UN General Assembly. Finally, many troop contributors

are frustrated at continually losing soldiers to jihadist attacks while the mission achieves little in terms of stabilising the country.

### **What has been the mission's impact after almost a decade in Mali?**

MINUSMA deployed to Mali in 2013, after a French military intervention had pushed back jihadists who had overrun much of the country's north. The mission's initial mandate focused on stabilising key population centres and supporting the re-establishment of state authority throughout the country. It also had important provisions for facilitating implementation of a transitional roadmap, including a national dialogue between Malian authorities and communities in the north.

As Islamist insurgents started to regain ground two years later, the mission, faced with increasing attacks on its peacekeepers and constrained by its mandate, struggled to adapt. The UN does not allow its troops to offensively engage militants, though at the same time it requires that they "anticipate, deter and effectively respond to threats to the civilian population". Successive updates have gradually made MINUSMA's mandate more robust, but they never went so far as to include a clear offensive counter-insurgency component. Originally, MINUSMA was supposed to work in tandem with Malian and Barkhane forces, with the latter two in charge of counter-terrorism operations. MINUSMA was thus in the awkward position of having to contain the jihadist threat without being able to actively suppress it. Barkhane's withdrawal and Mali's growing reluctance to coordinate its activities with the UN mission have rendered that task even more difficult.

Furthermore, troop contributors are reluctant to put their soldiers at risk in Mali, site of the deadliest UN mission under way today, with 174 blue helmets killed in hostile acts. The mission spends more energy on keeping its own convoys and facilities safe than on protecting civilians, especially in the countryside. While most UN troops are stationed in towns, armed

groups of all kinds have mushroomed in rural Mali, leaving villagers to fend for themselves or seek alternative forms of protection from insurgents. A majority of Malians (particularly in the centre) see MINUSMA as ineffective in providing security, even if they appreciate its socio-economic and development-oriented projects, as well as the jobs it provides to locals.

Despite these limitations, MINUSMA has brought a measure of stability to areas where it is deployed. Its presence has helped deter insurgents from taking over cities and larger towns and somewhat eased the suffering of locals. No Malian city has suffered the fate of Djibo, in neighbouring Burkina Faso, where the population has been battered by a nine-month jihadist siege. Although jihadists have at times surrounded towns in the north, a siege similar to that of Djibo is difficult to imagine in Mali. Insurgents appear to have been deterred in part by the UN forces based in urban areas, as well as the jihadists' experience in 2012-2013, when they could be picked off by French airstrikes when in towns (whether Barkhane's withdrawal will affect their calculations is thus far unclear). More broadly, the UN soldiers have helped the state show itself in towns and cities, including by regularly flying government officials in and out.

MINUSMA also plays an important role using its good offices with key Malian stakeholders. For years, the mission has supported implementation of the 2015 Algiers peace accord between the Malian government and northern non-state armed groups, despite recurrent scepticism among signatory parties about the agreement. Additionally, MINUSMA chief El-Ghassim Wane is one of few remaining figures to enjoy sufficient good standing to serve as a political go-between for all parties, interacting daily with Malian politicians, civil society representatives and foreign diplomats. By contrast, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has repeatedly angered Malians, particularly in January 2022, when it imposed trade and financial sanctions in response to Bamako's failure to adhere to the agreed-upon calendar for the transition. A

month earlier, Malian officials had expelled the ECOWAS representative from Bamako on the grounds that he was hostile to the transitional authorities.

MINUSMA has also shed light on numerous abuses of civilians, although it is getting harder for the mission to fulfil this role. For example, in 2021, it published evidence that French airstrikes near the village of Bounti had killed nineteen guests at a wedding party. The French and Malian militaries joined forces to defend the strikes, dismissing MINUSMA's report but allowing its investigators to continue working. The army's collaboration with Wagner will likely stymie any similar investigations, however. In March, more than 300 people died during a military operation in Moura, a village in the country's centre. The army said all the dead were militants, but according to eyewitnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch, most were civilians whom the soldiers and Russian operatives had summarily executed. Mali subsequently blocked UN investigators from visiting the site. In June, as the UN Security Council extended MINUSMA's mandate by a year, the Malian government explicitly denied the mission the right of free movement to investigate alleged abuses, a core part of its job.

### **How do the Malian transitional authorities perceive MINUSMA?**

MINUSMA-government relations took a turn for the worse after the coup, mainly because the military leadership is unhappy with what it sees as the mission's weak mandate when it comes to fighting militants. In July 2021, Malian officials opposed a proposal by France and the UN secretary-general to raise MINUSMA's troop ceiling by around 2,000, arguing that an increase was pointless without a more robust counter-insurgency mandate (it also said it had not been consulted about the proposal). Moreover, Bamako believes that the mission's focus on human rights overstates abuses by security forces and therefore impedes the Malian army's operations against militants. As for its allegations of Wagner Group abuses, Malian officials

think these are little but a smokescreen for Western disapproval of Russia's involvement on political grounds.

Bamako's criticism does not necessarily mean it wants MINUSMA to fold. Authorities may have slowed down MINUSMA's troop rotations, but they have done nothing as drastic as disrupting vital logistical flows. Their nationalist rhetoric and sometimes confrontational attitude toward external partners are primarily meant to shore up domestic support. Diatribes against the UN, France, the West and ECOWAS states have boosted the transitional authorities' popularity with a citizenry worn out by a decade of violence and disappointed with the Western-led stabilisation system.

Still, important regime figures are divided on MINUSMA. Some hardliners are ready for its departure; moderate voices believe it still has a role to play. Yet all would probably welcome a MINUSMA with a robust counter-insurgency mandate that is more pliable on human rights issues and more willing to directly support – and possibly join – Mali's armed forces in offensive operations. The transitional authorities' complaint that MINUSMA's mandate is ill suited for reversing the jihadist advance is perhaps understandable, though it is far from clear that a more robust mandate that sees international forces fighting militants would weaken the insurgency rather than stoke resistance. Both parties tolerated the status quo as long as Barkhane soldiers were carrying out combat patrols. When Russia became Mali's preferred military partner, however, coordinating MINUSMA's activities with counter-insurgency efforts became more complicated.

### **What are the scenarios for MINUSMA's future?**

The withdrawal announcements come amid an internal review of MINUSMA, due in January (separate to the regular quarterly secretary-general's report to the Security Council on the mission) and led by the mission itself in Bamako with support from New York. Although no Security Council member or troop contributor

is advocating for a full exit, some would like to at least put the option on the table. The moment is opportune for evaluating MINUSMA's future. There are three potential scenarios, each of which comes with advantages and risks.

First, the Security Council could maintain the status quo unchanged or with minor tweaks to MINUSMA's mandate. The Council has thus far been averse to altering the mandate, except in 2019, when it added a second priority to address exploding violence in central Mali. It is unclear if the troop withdrawals and surrounding tensions will prompt significant change. That said, if MINUSMA runs into trouble replacing the departing troops, the mission might have to choose between the attention it pays to the country's centre (where the majority of human rights abuses allegedly occur) and its role in the north (where MINUSMA gives important support to the Algiers Accord and minimal state presence). In any scenario where the mission stays with largely the same mandate, the Council would need at least to engage with Malian authorities to define the minimum conditions – especially regarding access and movement – necessary for MINUSMA to carry out its primary tasks of protecting civilians and monitoring human rights. Whether Mali would compromise much is unclear. Indeed, a MINUSMA that is weaker and ever less able to take on militants could frustrate Malian authorities to the point that hardliners deliberately obstruct the mission's activities in order to force its departure.

A second option is that the Security Council, taking into account MINUSMA's waning support in both Bamako and New York, seeks to gradually hand over the mission to a non-UN force. The G5 Sahel force, made up of contingents from Sahelian states, seems an unlikely candidate, both because Mali has withdrawn from it and because it has struggled to demonstrate its efficacy. The African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, the latter of which has difficult relations with the transitional authorities, could have trouble mustering consensus on what role they would assume, but they still

seem more likely contenders. Their potential involvement has received attention, including from UN Secretary-General António Guterres. Something similar has been done before: in July 2013, MINUSMA itself replaced a joint AU-ECOWAS mission, which had come to Mali six months earlier to support the Malian army in rebuilding and to help security forces recover the lost territories in the north. Indeed, the AU has recently decided to reopen discussion of its previous plans to assemble a military brigade for the central Sahel, which in 2020 stumbled on a lack of resources and political support.

An African-led mission might more easily get a mandate to fight jihadists, but it would come with its own challenges. Such a mission would probably need to rely heavily on Western funding, at least for now. Frictions between Mali and Western donors might then arise, impeding the African mission's effectiveness in the same way that today's tensions cloud MINUSMA's future. Furthermore, Crisis Group has stressed that Mali and the central Sahel more broadly need a strategic reset that centres stabilisation efforts around improved governance and political engagement at the grassroots level, continuing to confront jihadists with force but not shying away from exploring dialogue with them as well. Only then can military deployments and development projects build tighter links between state capitals and rural populations. MINUSMA is sensitive to this message, though it has limited leverage to foster strategic change. It is unclear if an AU-led mission would be equally sympathetic to such a perspective; it might instead double down on the present military-heavy counter-insurgency strategy. Either way, Mali's leaders are unlikely to shift gears.

Finally, in the third scenario, the UN Security Council could decouple the future of the resource-intensive military force from a smaller and more versatile political mission focused on using its good offices. It may have little choice if more troop contributors pull out, leaving UN soldiers so exposed that the military component collapses. While this scenario is unlikely, it

cannot be ruled out. A UN political office might bring together the government, northern non-state armed groups and even jihadist leaders for talks – something that is difficult to envisage as long as jihadists are shooting at UN peacekeepers. This scenario would, however, also come with risks. For instance, it would undermine human rights enquiries, as the military force provides key protection for MINUSMA investigators. Additionally, the departure of UN forces – especially coming shortly after the French Barkhane mission’s withdrawal – could motivate jihadists to change their strategy and overrun cities in the north. Given these risks, Mali’s leaders may resist a drastic downsizing. Similarly, Western policymakers may fear that ending MINUSMA’s military activities would open the door to more Russian influence in Mali. For their part, most West African states view their troop contributions to MINUSMA as an investment in regional security that prevents jihadist violence from spilling across their borders. In light of the above, this scenario might get serious consideration only if an African-led AU mission replaces the UN troops.

MINUSMA is at a crossroads. Deep-rooted concerns about its impact are intersecting with a newly unfavourable political climate in Mali and a series of worrying withdrawals. The internal review, which the UN initiated against the backdrop of the French military withdrawal from Mali and growing tensions between Bamako and its main Western partners, is a useful tool for assessing the mission’s accomplishment and suggesting tactical improvements. But regardless of the recommendations it may make for improving operational efficiency, alone it has no power to reconfigure the mission’s mandate or structure. Only the Security Council can make such changes.

Whether or not MINUSMA finds new troop contributors, the Security Council will likely try to maintain the status quo. Even with MINUSMA’s impact in question, the Council will be loath to contemplate bold changes to the mission’s structure or mandate. Besides, there is no obvious fix. Perhaps, over time, an AU

force with a more robust counter-insurgency mandate combined with a UN political office would make more sense, but, even were there appetite among Council members to move in that direction, it would come with its own set of challenges. In Somalia, a similar mix of AU fighting force and UN political office has kept Islamist militants mostly out of major towns but has struggled for years to advance a sustainable settlement. Besides, arguably more important than the set-up of an international force is the approach it takes. The Sahel desperately needs a fresh approach, one less centred around military operations and in which such operations are subordinate to a wider political strategy, potentially including engagement with militant leaders. For now, Mali’s leaders appear to be in no mood for such a shift, instead wanting to test whether Wagner can help push back militants’ gains. But the limits of the military-first approach are ever clearer and, absent a change in that strategy, shifting command of or re-hatting the international military presence is itself unlikely to bring dramatic change. ■