

MINUSMA: Challenges on the Ground

Lotte Vermeij

Introduction

In recent decades, Mali has been confronted with several crises and armed conflicts, with serious implications for the security, political and socio-economic situation, as well as for human rights and humanitarian conditions. Armed conflict erupted again in early 2012, as noted by the UN peacekeeping mission,¹ stemming from structural problems like 'weak State institutions; ineffective governance; fragile social cohesion; deep-seated feelings among communities in the north of being neglected, marginalized and unfairly treated by the central Government; a weak and externally dependent, albeit vibrant, civil society; and the effects of environmental degradation, climate change and economic shocks.'. Mali was hit by a coup d'état by military officers in March 2012, while Tuareg rebels and Islamic armed groups simultaneously seized control of Northern Mali.

Since these events, the country has been in the grip of armed conflict and political turmoil, plunging it into a deep crisis that has alarmed the international community. When Islamic armed groups such as Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) advanced southwards in January 2013, this led to a military intervention by the French forces and the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Peace negotiations aimed at achieving an accord between the Malian government and armed groups followed, unfortunately without success. Then, on 1 July 2013, AFISMA was replaced by a UN peacekeeping mission: the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Until today, the lack of a peace agreement and the ongoing conflict have posed severe challenges to MINUSMA.

Based on field research conducted in Mali during 2013 and 2014 as part of the Sahel project funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence, this policy brief highlights some of the main challenges faced by the MINUSMA, and indicates

its opportunities as regards supporting the achievement of Mali roadmap goals – including inclusive political dialogue, national and local reconciliation, democratic governance, protection of human rights, and protection of civilians.³

MINUSMA's Mandate and Capacity

MINUSMA officially deployed to Mali on 1 July 2013. Based on Security Council Resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013, the UN peacekeeping mission was to 'support the transitional authorities of Mali in the stabilization of the country and implementation of the transitional roadmap, focusing on major population centres and lines of communication, protecting civilians, human rights monitoring, the creation of conditions for the provision of humanitarian assistance and the return of displaced persons, the extension of State authority and the preparation of free, inclusive and peaceful elections'.⁴ A rocky first year and deteriorating security situation showed that the mission required greater capacity as well as a more robust mandate. Hence, on 25 June 2014 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) renewed and amended the mandate by unanimously adopting Resolution 2164. The new mandate focuses on duties such as 'ensuring security, stabilization and protection of civilians; supporting national political dialogue and reconciliation; and assisting the reestablishment of State authority, the rebuilding of the security sector, and the promotion and protection of human rights'. Notably, the UNSC requested MINUSMA to expand its presence in Northern Mali beyond key population centres such as Gao and Timbuktu, with the aim of improving the physical protection of civilians. As a result, over 80 per cent of all MINUSMA staff and 90 per cent of uniformed personnel are now based in the northern regions.⁶ Additionally, MINUSMA's efforts at the

1 MINUSMA. United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/background.shtml>

2 Ibid.

3 During 2013/2014, interviews were conducted with MINUSMA leadership, military, police and civilian staff, and UN DPKO. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of the Malian government, security forces, civil society, and population, as well as various international organizations present in Mali.

4 MINUSMA Mandate. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/mandate.shtml>. For further information, see United Nations S/RES/2100.6 United Nations S/2014/692.

5 MINUSMA Mandate. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/mandate.shtml>. For further information, see United Nations S/RES/2164.

6 United Nations, S/2014/692.

political level remain a key priority, in particular the facilitation of inclusive peace talks.⁷

In order to achieve its goals, MINUSMA has been working together with the Malian government and its security and defence forces, the French forces, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), EUCAP Sahel Mali, UN agencies, the humanitarian community in Mali, and a range of other local and regional organizations. Given the particularly fragile security situation and activity of armed groups, the mission operates under robust rules of engagement. Thus, MINUSMA's mandate allows for the use of 'all necessary means to address threats to the implementation of its mandate, which would include protection of civilians under imminent threat of physical violence and protection of United Nations personnel from residual threats, within its capabilities and its areas of deployment.'⁸ So far, MINUSMA has an authorized strength of 12,640 uniformed personnel, of which 11,200 military and 1,440 police. However, on 28 February 2015 the mission had not yet reached full deployment, with only 8,831 military personnel, 1,052 police and approximately 1,000 local and international civilian personnel deployed in Mali.⁹

MINUSMA's Challenges

Ever since its deployment, MINUSMA has faced a complex set of challenges that have prevented the mission from achieving its full potential and successfully implementing its mandate. One of the main challenges concerns mission capacity: even though MINUSMA has a robust mandate, it needs more personnel and greater material capacity in order to be able to implement this mandate. Interviews with MINUSMA's leadership indicated that the mission faces a lack of commitment by UN member states to contribute troops. Partially because of high security risks and asymmetric attacks from armed groups in Northern Mali, troop-contributing countries (TCCs) have been extremely cautious regarding areas to deploy to. As a senior MINUSMA staff member explained, 'TCCs see Mali as training ground. Most of the TCCs are not willing to expose their troops to the security threats in Northern Mali and run the risk of getting them back in body bags. There are a number of caveats coming from the capitals, limiting the possibilities for deployments in Mali.'¹⁰ Ever since its start-up phase the mission has suffered from a lack of staff as well as technical and logistical support. This has implications for MINUSMA's ability to tackle the deteriorating security situation, which currently poses severe threats to its personnel and the civilian population in Mali. The lack of a comprehensive peace agreement and heightened activity by various armed groups has made Mali into one of the most complex settings for a UN peacekeeping operation.¹¹ Trying to combat these armed groups, MINUSMA has been involved in military operations against insurgent and extremist groups alongside the French

military operations 'Serval' and 'Barkhane', and the Malian army.¹² This has led to direct reprisal attacks against the UN mission. According to UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous, these reprisal attacks have turned MINUSMA into the deadliest UN mission, 'peacekeepers face assaults on a virtually daily basis, in the form of rocket attacks on bases and targeted attacks with improvised explosive devices'.¹³ As of February 2015 the mission had experienced 46 fatalities, and over 100 Blue Helmets had been wounded in reprisal attacks, while peace negotiations have still failed to find a comprehensive solution.¹⁴ The increased risks induced by the mission's lack of impartiality may also scare away some of the major TCCs.¹⁵ In addition, interviews conducted with MINUSMA leadership indicated that TCCs are less willing to deploy their troops to high-risk areas, as many lack the support, training background, and capabilities for forceful action against insurgent groups.

A further challenge is the lack of infrastructure throughout the country, causing delays in the distribution of supplies and material, building camps and hence deployment of troops. When the mission deployed there were very few facilities available, so entire camps had to be shipped into the country. The lack of transport planes and helicopters has forced the mission to transport much of its material and personnel by road, with the poor infrastructure causing significant delays in deployment. This is especially the case in the northern regions of the country, giving armed groups the chance to thrive in an area that already has little to no state control.

Despite some innovative efforts by MINUSMA to stabilize the conflict, the security situation has deteriorated in Northern Mali since early 2014. Insurgent groups affiliated with al-Qaeda have stepped up their terrorist activities. Many armed groups now show signs of fragmentation,¹⁶ making it more challenging to assess threats. In addition, rocket, suicide and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) attacks, abductions, and inter-communal violence are increasing. Although the current mandate addresses some of the complex issues UN forces face on the ground, peacekeeping doctrine does not provide much guidance in this situation. Guided by an ambitious mandate and limited military capabilities, MINUSMA has little room for manoeuvre in an environment which poses serious security risks to its personnel. To sum up: 'with a decrease in security and no progress in negotiations, let alone in dialogue or reconciliation, MINUSMA is moving further rather than closer to the implementation of its mandate'.¹⁷ Overcoming these challenges

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7 United Nations, *S/RES/2164*.

8 MINUSMA. United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/background.shtml>

9 MINUSMA: Facts and Figures. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/facts.shtml>

10 Interview with senior UN staff member, MINUSMA Headquarters in Bamako, May 2014

11 A UN-brokered preliminary peace deal was signed by the Malian government in March 2015. However, the proposed peace deal was rejected by the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), on the grounds that it did not reflect the aspirations of their people in northern Mali, and needed to be discussed further. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/16/us-mali-talks-idUSKBN0MCOWD20150316>

12 Security Council Report, 'Mali: October 2014 Monthly Forecast,' 30 September 2014, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2014-10/mali_14.php.

13 United Nations News Centre, 'Peace Process in Mali at 'crucial Stage' UN Peacekeeping Chief Tells Security Council,' 6 January 2015, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49740#VMkQ8C4X4x>.

14 United Nations News Centre, 'With Mali Peace Talks Set to Resume, Security Council Urges 'Spirit of Compromise'', 17 October 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49110#VEUVpMm5T5M>; United Nations News Centre, 'Mali: Ban Voices "outrage" as UN Peacekeeper Killed in Second Deadly Attack This Month', 8 October 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49028#VE46S8m5T5M>.

15 Richard Gowan, 'Diplomatic Fallout: Frustrations Mount for India at the U.N.', *World Politics Review*, 15 April 2013, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12870/diplomatic-fallout-frustrations-mount-for-india-at-the-u-n>.

16 For further information, see Morten Boås (2014), 'Guns, money and prayers: AQIM's blueprint for securing control of Northern Mali', *CTC Sentinel*, 7(4): 1-7.

17 Emmanuel Bombande and Peter van Tuijl (2014), 'Can MINUSMA's Mandate Include the People of Mali?' | IPI Global Observatory, *IPI Global Observatory*, 24 June, <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/06/minusma-mandate-include-people-mali/>.

will require revised doctrinal guidance and new practices that put the peacekeeping principles under considerable strain.

Disapproval and mistrust from the Malian population as well as complex working relationships with the Malian authorities and security forces add further complexity to the situation. Differing views on the way forward have led to a tense relationship between the Malian government and MINUSMA leadership. In a recent interview, a senior MINUSMA official said that ‘limited commitment by the government to establish dialogue and reach a political solution with the parties in Northern Mali hampered progress towards a peace agreement and further complicated the working environment for MINUSMA’.¹⁸ Another key concern is how to prevent the UN mission from becoming a tool for the Malian government to clear out armed groups, with no ensuing political dialogue with populations in the North. Mali’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdoulaye Diop, recently requested the UN Security Council to consider the establishment of ‘a rapid intervention force capable of effectively combating terrorists’.¹⁹ At the same meeting, Hervé Ladsous stated that ‘the lack of Malian security forces in the northern part of the country has created a situation where, in effect, MINUSMA is the main international presence on the ground. That makes us a target for all those spoilers – extremists, jihadists and traffickers – who would like to have the ground exclusively to themselves so as to be able to continue their nefarious activities.’²⁰

Furthermore, by supporting one of the conflicting parties, MINUSMA is caught in a *counter-insurgency logic* where it is no longer just a question of protecting the population from violence but also of winning their support and trust alongside and in support of the Malian government. MINUSMA aims to support the process of the Malian state’s return to Northern Mali. So far, the mission has not made progress in this respect. In fact, the population of Northern Mali expressed serious concerns regarding their safety and security in relation to MINUSMA’s presence on the ground, resulting in violent demonstrations against the mission. Several residents of Gao moved away from areas close to the MINUSMA base, for fear of being attacked by armed groups.²¹ MINUSMA’s ineffectiveness has been utilized by insurgent groups, as violence has been used to make the population turn against the mission. Being close to MINUSMA is perceived as increasing the risk of being attacked, and many residents expressed the wish to see the mission leave.²² The lack of protection has further worsened relations between the government, population, and MINUSMA, leading to stalling peace talks and lack of political dialogue.

As MINUSMA is a multidimensional mission with a large humanitarian component, humanitarian assistance is part of its mandate as well. This has proven to be a challenging task. The increasing number of attacks by insurgents in Mali has brought greater risks for the humanitarian community, and casualties among NGO staff.²³ All this has complicated the dynamics within MINUSMA. Parts of the humanitarian

community are very hesitant when it comes to collaborating with MINUSMA. As a representative of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) observed:

...the humanitarian community in Mali generally finds it problematic to work with MINUSMA due to different views on the use of armed escorts. As a general rule these organizations only approve the use of armed escorts as a last resort and they have a strict no weapon policy. This makes the cooperation with the military component of MINUSMA quite difficult as they advocate a different view. In addition to that many of the humanitarian organizations are not comfortable associating with MINUSMA as the armed groups increasingly target the mission. Besides their principle of remaining neutral and impartial actors, the humanitarian community does not want their own staff to be exposed to the risks of working alongside MINUSMA.²⁴

Ever since its deployment, the mission has been confronted by internal challenges as well. Interviews with military, police and civilian personnel indicated that many staff members have experienced problems regarding MINUSMA’s leadership. In most cases this was due to the lack of communication with staff, and the impression that leadership focused most of its attention on external players and factors. Staff also felt there was no clear strategy or vision, as well as a lack of guidance from MINUSMA’s leadership. This led to confusion about job responsibilities and rapidly decreasing motivation amongst personnel. As the mission consists of a range of different nationalities and cultures, with different norms, values, and work ethics, this has often led to problems related to cross-cultural issues and misunderstandings.

In addition, short-term contracts were often used for personnel, leading to either a lack of commitment or encouraging rivalry, as people felt they had to defend their turf and fight to get their contracts renewed. Interviews indicated that the resultant knowledge drain and the need to constantly train new recruits was frustrating for MINUSMA’s personnel and placed additional strains on the already limited capacity of the mission. Training in itself was a major challenge: many TCCs had not provided their troops with specific training to face terrorist groups, resulting in a lack of preparedness and ability. In-mission, staff felt that training was not well organized by MINUSMA. For many it was unclear how the system works, and there was not sufficient time available to participate in training. When in-mission training did take place, many participants experienced a lack of commitment, often due to short contracts with the mission and varying language skills. Interviews indicated that limited language skills of MINUSMA’s personnel have also led to communication problems, making it difficult to improve relations with the local population. Many Troop- and Police Contributing Countries (TCCs and PCCs) have deployed staff who lack proficiency in French. Relatively few people in Mali speak English, complicating the working relationship with the Malian government, security forces as well as the relationship with the general public.

Opportunities and Recommendations

MINUSMA is currently facing several challenges that prevent the mission from achieving its full potential and implement-

18 Interview with senior MINUSMA official in Mali in 2014.

19 United Nations, *S/PV.7274*.

20 Ibid.

21 Interviews with residents of Gao in 2014.

22 Findings from interviews the author conducted with residents of Northern Mali in 2014.

23 Jan Egeland, ‘Northern Mali Risks Becoming Forgotten Protection Crisis’ (Norwegian Refugee Council, June 19, 2014).

24 Interview with OCHA-representative, Bamako, May 2014.

ing its mandate. Many of these are related to the deteriorating security situation in Mali, the lack of a peace agreement, disapproval and mistrust on the part of the Malian population, complex working relationships with the Malian authorities and security forces, internal problems within MINUSMA, a lack of capacity due to insufficient numbers of personnel as well as technical and logistical support, and the unreliable infrastructure in the country. The mission's main opportunities lie in the creation of a security umbrella that would enable negotiations to take place in order to reach a peace agreement, better leadership, trust-building initiatives with the Malian population, improved collaboration with the Malian government and security forces, and better preparation, training and guidance of its staff. On the basis of interviews with MINUSMA leadership, mission staff, UN DPKO representatives, as well as representatives of the Malian government, security forces, civil society, population, and various international organizations present in Mali, it is therefore recommended that:

- MINUSMA should continue to work towards a peace agreement with the involved parties of the conflict in Mali, in order to create an environment in which MINUSMA can fulfil all aspects of its mandate. Specific attention should be paid to northern Mali in order to enable MINUSMA to operate in these areas safely.
- MINUSMA should ensure that facilities, technical and logistical support are available in order to actualize deployments and enable implementation of the mandate.
- Trust-building efforts should be stepped up, to improve collaboration with key stakeholders as well as the local population. Greater emphasis should be given to intercultural communication and cooperation skills when training of staff that are (to be) deployed to MINUSMA. Trust-building concerning the Malian security and defence forces is essential to improve relations between MINUSMA and the Malian authorities.
- In addition, MINUSMA should prioritize the restoration of confidence in the mission on the part of the Malian government and the populace, in order to increase the mission's capacity and ability to fulfil its mandate. MINUSMA should increasingly interact and communicate with the Malian population, particularly in the northern regions. In view of the deteriorating security situation, it is essential to build relationships based on trust and to retrieve and share information with the Malian population, the government, and the country's security and defence forces.
- As MINUSMA lacks the capacity to offer extensive in-mission training, it is important for staff to arrive as well prepared as possible. Context-specific pre-deployment training should be offered in order to prepare for potential confrontations with terrorist and insurgent groups.
- Language skills should be thoroughly tested by TCCs and PCCs before officers are recruited and deployed to MINUSMA, language training should be offered to those recruited who are yet not proficient in French. In mission it is important to take language skills into account when tasks are assigned. In particular, training tasks should be assigned according to proficiency, in order to prevent loss of capacity and impact.
- Coordination efforts should be improved and needs assessments be conducted, in order to prevent overlap and duplication of activities between MINUSMA, its partners and international organizations – a problem currently undermining the already scarce capacity of MINUSMA.
- Technical and logistical support should be increased, particularly in the northern regions. The development of a reliable infrastructure between Bamako and northern Mali, as well as throughout the northern regions, is necessary for MINUSMA and the Malian security and defence forces to be able to perform properly.
- Communication between MINUSMA Headquarters in Bamako and the mission's regional offices should be improved and made more regular, to enable information-sharing, the development of realistic strategies and sharing of lessons learned/best practices. In addition, communication within the mission as well as with external partners should be improved. This would increase awareness of the efforts being made by the mission, in turn fostering better relations with the Malian population. Within the mission this should lead to greater clarity regarding leadership and strategy, and a better understanding of staff roles and responsibilities.
- TCCs and PCCs should use officers who have served their term in MINUSMA to brief staff to be deployed to the mission. Such sharing of expertise and experience is likely to contribute to better preparation, better expectation management and improved risk analyses, in turn facilitating the development of higher morale among MINUSMA staff.

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Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

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About the Author

Dr. Lotte Vermeij is the Head of the Peace Capacities Programme and a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). She holds a PhD in Disaster Studies from Wageningen University, the Netherlands, focusing on child soldiers and African rebel groups. Other areas of expertise include peacekeeping, peacebuilding, civilian capacities, conflict related sexual violence, disarmament-demobilization-reintegration (DDR), and socialization within armed groups.