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Sahel (in)security

Since 2013, several international missions have supported counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel — with mixed results

Mali has been in turmoil since January 2012. Back then, a Tuareg-led rebellion tried to create the independent state of Azawad in the regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu in northern Mali. But the so-called National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was soon outpowered by a coalition of Islamist groups, which initially fought the Malian defence and security forces alongside the MNLA. They then forcibly imposed Sharia law for nearly ten months.

At the request of the Malian government, France then provided military assistance in January 2013 to stop the advance of these Islamist groups towards the centre of the country. In the end, French, Malian and African countries' troops succeeded in removing them from the country's north. A peace agreement was signed in 2015, but its implementation has been slow, owing to divergences among signatories and to the strong opposition of political and civil society organisations. Moreover, though Mali has received significant international support, it hasn't yet born fruit.

To support the implementation of the peace agreement and protect civilians, the United Nations deployed close to 13,000 military and police personnel for its peacekeeping mission MINUSMA. Mali also received assistance from the European Union through its Training and Capacity Building Missions. France deployed a 4,500 strong military force as part of Operation Barkhane, which includes other Sahel countries too.

In February 2014, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger joined forces to create the G5 Sahel with 5,000 soldiers, as the Malian rebellion developed into a major security threat to the whole Sahel region with the extension of Islamist groups beyond Mali's borders. Until now, Barkhane is the main military force combating terrorism in the Sahel, together with national armies.

The limited effect of international support

Yet while Mali benefited from the support of several international missions to restore state authority and security throughout the country, the massive international presence has not succeeded in curbing threats to human security.

Extremist attacks disrupting lives and socio-economic activities have continued unabated not only in the northern regions, but also increasingly in the region of Mopti at the centre of the country. A complex nexus of Islamist groups with fluctuating alliances but a common objective to create an Islamic state in the Sahel has spread throughout Mali and neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. The two main groups are Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin affiliated with Al Qa'ida, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara linked to ISIS. These groups also exploited long-lasting ethnic tensions in the centre of the country, especially between Fulani, Bambara and Dogon communities to fuel ethnic and intercommunal violence.

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The combination of ethnic and terrorist attacks took a heavy toll on civilians and military alike. Human Right Watch indicates in a report that 2019 has been the deadliest year for Malian civilians since the beginning of the crisis in 2012, with some 456 people killed. The United Nations Secretary-General mentioned in his December 2019 report that the number of internally displaced people has tripled in one year to reach nearly 200,000 people. A total of 1,051 schools are closed and some 3,2 million suffer from food insecurity. Aggrieved by the mounting massacre and the apparent inability of national and international forces to put an end to it, large numbers of Malians have repeatedly demanded the departure of MINUSMA and Barkhane.

Mali needs to assert itself

Despite their citizens' grievances, the five Presidents of the G5 Sahel countries reassured President Macron that they still need Barkhane at the Pau summit of January 2020. But with mounting hostility towards international forces – judged as inefficient and biased towards Tuaregs –

and the increasing losses inflicted by terrorist groups, the Malian government aims to show strength and demonstrate its central role in the fight against terrorism. In January 2020 it announced the recruitment of 10,000 additional soldiers. But even with this planned 50 per cent increase of its armed forces, would Mali be in a position to succeed in the fight against terrorism and ethnic violence without the support of international forces?

Most probably not. The security situation would worsen if the Malian armed forces were to face alone Islamist groups. Despite their superior knowledge of the terrain, Malian armed forces are terribly handicapped by their limited technical, logistical and operational capacities and the novelty of the fight against terrorism. This unfavourable state of affairs is a major weakness likely to continue in the medium term, until efforts underway to re-equip Malian forces, restore chains of command and strengthen their capacities start to bear fruit. Until then, Mali can simply not do without international military forces.

There are however measures that the country must take sooner rather than later, if it is to reassert its role in the fight against terrorism and, more importantly, prepare to take over from international forces. These measures pertain to security, on one side, and to governance on the other.

How Mali can achieve security

The Malian security forces need to become more strategically proactive. To achieve that, at least four actions should to be taken: first, they need to formulate a well-designed counterterrorism strategy with clear objectives and regional components. Mali mounted several counterterrorism operations, the latest of which is Operation Maliko launched in February 2020. Without a clear strategy in which these operations are embedded, however, it is difficult to assess if measurable progress is being made towards objectives. A key to strategy formulation is to reflect lessons learned from previous shortcomings in order to avoid their reoccurrence.

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Second, the capacity of security forces in using human and technical means to collect, analyse and exploit information and intelligence for counterterrorism should be increased. Third, the capacity of security forces to be on the offensive, anticipate attacks and possibly diffuse them must be increased. This would require high quality training (perhaps initially for an elite or dedicated troop), equipment fit for

purpose, coherent planning and organisation and adequate logistical features to support troops deployed in the field. Fourth, security forces must have the capacity to pursue and bring to justice facilitators and perpetrators of ethnic violence and terrorist acts. This aspect is crucial to reduce the perception of impunity for crimes committed that is eroding the trust between populations and the government.

Regarding governance, considerable efforts must be undertaken to end corruption, including in the security and defence forces. Corruption has had negative impact on the ability of the state to provide security and justice, to re-establish its presence throughout the national territory and to provide basic social services to populations. It has weakened the state's credibility and accountability, internally and externally, and has given a window of opportunity for Islamist ideology to emerge as a credible alternative.

This deficit has also allowed criminal activities to flourish, including organised crime such as trafficking in persons, arms and drugs. Proceeds from these activities are in turn sustaining terrorist groups. It is therefore urgent for the country's leadership to put an end to corruption, and uphold exemplary governance supportive of inclusive and sustainable development.

Counterterrorism can never be successful on a military basis alone and it cannot be accomplished in isolation. Success requires internal coordination, international cooperation and national commitment in the long-term. Success could even require dialogue with terrorists – a polarising prospect in the making.



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