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# MINUSMA leaving Mali is no good news

## The end of the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali has serious consequences — for the security in the region and for humanitarian engagement on the ground

It came as a surprise. When, on 16 June, the quarterly report on the situation of the 'United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali' (MINUSMA) was presented in New York, nothing new was expected. In the final session before the annual mandate extension, the Malian Foreign Minister, Abdoulaye Diop, was the last to take the floor. At first, his speech adhered to the well-known position adopted by the Malian transitional government: dissatisfaction with the mission, criticism levelled against France and parameters for cooperation. But the end of his speech triggered shock waves: Mali called for the end of MINUSMA, *sans délai* – with immediate effect.

Experts had expected Mali to use the upcoming mandate negotiations to reposition itself. But for many, calls for a withdrawal came out of the blue. Two weeks later, the UN Security Council convened to vote on the issue. Following long negotiations, it was agreed to discontinue the mandate. The peace mission is scheduled to be phased out by the end of December 2023.

## Four key issues

The abrupt withdrawal is a Herculean task. More than 13,000 UN soldiers will have to leave the country, together with 3,000 civilian staff. Until the end of September, the mission can still perform isolated tasks from its previous mandate, in particular securing areas immediately surrounding its camps and supporting transport convoys. While the last three months are merely intended for the withdrawal. After 2024, only a core team of the UN will remain on the ground to remove the mission's last materials from the country: 'liquidation', in UN jargon.

The withdrawal must go hand in hand with a transfer of MINUSMA's services to the Malian state and other UN organisations in the country. The underlying idea is to ensure that, above all, civilian services

(including humanitarian aid, the transportation of government officials as well as construction works) and projects provided by the mission will continue to be available. In light of limited resources – and the lack of will– on the Malian side, it is however doubtful whether this can succeed.

The withdrawal will leave a gaping hole that cannot be filled by Malian actors alone. Apart from Russian aid, which cannot be relied on, the Malian government will probably not accept any support, at first. These four aspects will be particularly affected:

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Firstly, the peace agreement of 2015 between armed groups in the north and the government in Bamako has only been preserved thanks to the influence of the international community and MINUSMA, above all. Without the mission, the peace process is most likely doomed to fail. Although both sides have indicated their interest in continuing the peace process, it is unclear how this can succeed. A violation of the peace agreement and a renewed flare-up of the conflict cannot be ruled out. There are already increasing reports about incidents in the north of the country.

Secondly, it is fair to assume that insecurity will continue to grow, especially in the north and at key points in the centre. The regional offshoots of *al-Qaeda* as well as the Islamic State will exploit the opportunity of the MINUSMA withdrawal to capture more territory. Increased activity can already be observed in some regions of the country. We can therefore expect the security situation to deteriorate following the withdrawal of MINUSMA. It is very likely that the capital city will remain the safest place in the future, whereas its surroundings will become increasingly unsafe.

Thirdly, a withdrawal of the mission will have negative repercussions on the country's already fragile economy. After the state, the mission is the largest employer in the country. The mission's almost 3,000 civilian staff, rent housing and bring foreign currency into the country. The regions surrounding the large military bases in Gao, Timbuktu and Mopti will probably bear the brunt of these repercussions. Since announcing the German withdrawal (see below), trade unions and civil society associations in Gao have held discussions on how to contain these repercussions.

Fourthly, MINUSMA ensures most of the still important humanitarian

work in the country. Without the mission, it will be far more difficult to implement development projects and provide humanitarian aid. Without the high profile Blue Helmet mission, as well as debates in European capitals on mandates and deployments, the country may rapidly fall out of the global spotlight, which could result in a decline in external humanitarian aid. The humanitarian situation in the country is thus at risk of intensifying further. Yet, these issues not only affect Mali alone, but also the surrounding states. With the precarious security policy situation in Burkina Faso and, most recently, the crisis in Niger, even more is at stake.

## The German withdrawal

Already in May this year, the German Bundestag decided to end its military participation in MINUSMA. Originally planned until spring 2024, the German withdrawal must now be carried out by the end of the year. This is logistically challenging, but should be feasible. For Germany, successful conclusion crucially depends on the situation in the neighbouring country of Niger, since most of the withdrawal is to take place via Niamey. Owing to the currently volatile situation and closed air borders, the withdrawal will have to take place differently; potentially via the neighbouring state of Senegal or with smaller aircraft directly from the camp in Gao.

Military involvement is not the only form of cooperation Germany has with Mali. Since the 1960s a German development cooperation has been present in the country. The withdrawal of MINUSMA is likely to make this work more difficult and yet more necessary at the same. This is a dilemma, as staying in the regions already poses a great risk. Without UN support and protection, the work will become even more challenging.

The Malian population's reaction to the withdrawal reveals a mixed picture: propaganda by the transitional government is proving effective. Many, especially in the capital, hold MINUSMA (partly) responsible for the precarious security situation in the country. On the other hand, many people see what MINUSMA has actually brought to the country. The annual population survey *Mali-Mètre* conducted by FES Mali, clearly illustrates that attitudes towards MINUSMA are more positive in areas where it has a greater presence. In the cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Mopti, along with many smaller towns in the country, the mission has been an essential actor and employer for a decade. Many people are fearful of what will happen when the mission leaves the country. Private discussions therefore repeatedly confirm resentment about the fact that the government has taken this decision without consolidating the population.

## How to proceed?

Mali will need international support even after the withdrawal of MINUSMA. Cooperation with the transitional government, which is still a difficult partner, is not easy but still necessary in order to help the population. Even though the situation in Mali will worsen following the withdrawal of MINUSMA, certain fundamental assumptions remain the same. And according to surveys, the population also has clear preferences regarding the next steps. The majority advocates dialogue with armed groups on the one hand and a robust approach against terrorists, on the other.

Dialogue with specific armed groups will be a prerequisite for stabilising the country over the long term. These groups will mainly be those that have joined the *al-Qaeda* network but are primarily pursuing national or local goals and are firmly established in Mali. Having said that, dialogue partners cannot be representatives of the Islamic State, the prevalence of which is increasing. The latter have proven to be hard-nosed and committed to a rigid Islamist ideology, whereas *al-Qaeda* is closer to the population and does not always appear dogmatic. Yet, the present government rejects all forms of dialogue with these groups, relying solely on military solutions.

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Support for Mali also requires robust components, however. The Malian army, even with support from Wagner troops, can do little to counter Jihadist groups. It is unable to stabilise its national territory nor to protect the civilian population. It actually exacerbates the security situation because human rights violations on the part of the army facilitate recruitment by Jihadists. Therefore, a robust component should ideally come from the African security architecture. Germany, Europe and the Western states should work to ensure that the Malian regime considers military support with this in mind, while also offering financial support to this end.

In view of the current mood in the country, the Malian transitional government is unlikely to focus on dialogue at the moment, but rather a hard, military approach. This could change though. It is therefore important to raise awareness in the country itself on the benefits of multilateral, international commitment and to openly advocate the support of regional or continental initiatives. At the same time, relevant

stakeholders in (civil) society need to be established for long-term stability.

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