

The logo for the International Peace Institute (IPI), consisting of the letters 'IPI' in a bold, white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background.

INTERNATIONAL  
PEACE  
INSTITUTE

# Prioritization and Sequencing of Security Council Mandates: The Case of MINUSMA

JUNE 2021



## STIMSON

On May 20, 2021, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a virtual workshop to discuss the mandate and political strategy of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This series examines how the activities included in peace operations' mandates can be better prioritized, sequenced, and grounded in a political strategy. This meeting note was drafted collaboratively by IPI, Stimson, and Security Council Report. It summarizes the main points raised during the discussion under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants. This project is funded with the support of the German Federal Foreign Office.

## Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in June 2021. In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), Stimson, and Security Council Report organized a virtual workshop on May 20, 2021, to discuss MINUSMA's mandate and political strategy. The workshop offered a forum for member states, UN staff, and outside experts to develop a shared understanding and common strategic assessment of the situation in Mali. The session was intended to help the Security Council make informed decisions with respect to the strategic orientation, prioritization, and sequencing of MINUSMA's mandate and actions on the ground.

This workshop took place before the detention of civilian leaders of Mali's transitional government by military officers on May 24, 2021, and the subsequent suspension of the country from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU). The meeting note does not reflect these developments or subsequent responses.

Participants highlighted that the mission's current strategic priorities—supporting the implementation of the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation (i.e., the peace agreement) and facilitating the implementation of a comprehensive, politically led national strategy to stabilize central Mali—remain relevant to the UN's engagement in the country.<sup>1</sup> Participants also suggested that the mission's support to Mali's governance transition, as requested in UN Security Council Presidential Statement 2020/10, should be integrated into MINUSMA's primary strategic priority to support implementation of the 2015 peace agreement rather than as a new, standalone priority.

Acknowledging Mali's challenging political context and deteriorating security environment, participants stressed that the Security Council and MINUSMA should pursue an overarching, strategic approach to political engagement with the Malian authorities. They also emphasized avenues through which the mission can improve its collaboration with national stakeholders and international partners to address the protection of civilians, human rights, justice, and service-delivery issues, which are central to a people-centered approach to peacebuilding and stabilization.

---

<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council, Resolution 2531 (June 20, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2531, para. 19.

### Box 1. Key considerations for MINUSMA's mandate renewal

Participants raised several points for consideration during the upcoming negotiations on MINUSMA's mandate renewal. On the mandate in general:

- Provide a strong political vision in which the mission can anchor its strategic engagement, ensuring coherence of action with other UN, national, regional, and international actors.

On support to implementation of the peace agreement:

- Integrate support to the political transition into the mission's existing primary strategic priority on supporting implementation of the peace agreement.
- Review and integrate the secretary-general's proposed benchmarks for the political transition, balancing ambitious objectives with feasible, Malian-owned commitments.<sup>2</sup>
- Emphasize the need for ongoing dialogue and engagement between the transitional authorities and diverse stakeholders, including political movements, civil society organizations, and non-state armed groups, to ensure civilians are included in and consulted during ongoing peace and political processes.
- Ensure that bilateral and local initiatives to support Mali's peace process are aligned with the 2015 peace agreement.

On support to the stabilization of central Mali:

- Encourage Malian authorities to articulate a clearer political framework and plan for stabilizing central Mali.
- Encourage member states to contribute military personnel trained for high-risk operations, military air assets, and communications technology for use in early warning so the mission can deliver on its Force Adaptation Plan.
- Scale up support to justice and accountability efforts at the subnational and national levels, such as through the deployment of more mobile courts and technical support to judicial magistrates.
- Reiterate MINUSMA's support to the protection of civilians, human rights, justice, and rule of law when supporting national actors and international partners alike.

## Context Analysis

Mali's political transition, set in motion by the August 2020 coup d'état, has transformed its governance landscape since the Security Council last negotiated MINUSMA's mandate in June 2020. Attention continues to gravitate toward Mali's National Transitional Council and other transitional institutions as they begin to implement the provisions of the February 2021 national roadmap and action plan, building to presidential and legislative elections in February 2022. Nonetheless, implementation of the peace agreement remains an integral feature of the country's strategy to sustain meaningful political progress. These intertwined

dynamics are unfolding against the backdrop of rising protection challenges throughout Mali and the Sahel, exemplified by intercommunal violence, banditry, crop destruction, and attacks by extremist groups and self-defense militias.

### Political Dynamics and Mali's Governance Transition

Implementation of the peace agreement remains a pillar of Mali's political transition and central to MINUSMA's efforts in the country. The Peace Agreement Monitoring Committee (CSA) convened meetings in Northern Mali (Kidal) and Western Mali (Kayes) in the first half of 2021 (the

<sup>2</sup> See: UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 25 March 2021 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council—Annex*, UN Doc. S/2021/300, March 29, 2021; UN Security Council, *Situation in the Sudan and the Activities of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in the Sudan: Report of the Secretary General*, UN Doc. S/2021/199, March 1, 2021, paras. 5 and 49.

first meetings held outside of the capital), which some participants noted are symbolic displays of growing trust between the transitional government and signatory parties. Nonetheless, nearly six years since the adoption of the peace agreement, progress has been hindered by slow implementation of core provisions, including the establishment of decentralized governance structures; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform; and justice and reconciliation efforts. Further, implementation of the agreement and constitutional reforms are, for the most part, failing to follow an inclusive and consultative process.<sup>3</sup>

Recent events have also complicated the dynamics of the peace process. One participant pointed to the assassination of Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) leader Sidi Brahimi Ould Sidati in April 2021 as a development that could destabilize relations between the transitional authorities and the Azawad movements, which are closely monitoring the government's investigation into his death. Another participant noted that the recent joint declaration signed in Rome in May 2021 by the CMA and the Platform, a prominent coalition of signatory armed movements, adds to the risk of a "patchwork of local agreements" that do not align neatly with the Algiers peace agreement.

Developments on the peace process are also unfolding alongside a fragile period in Mali's political transition. The country's National Transitional Council initiated a cabinet reshuffle on May 14, 2021, asking Prime Minister Moctar Ouane to resign temporarily in order to begin forming a more inclusive transitional administration—a proximate spark for the May 24, 2021, coup d'état.<sup>4</sup> The political transition is anchored in an eighteen-month transition roadmap, with a constitutional referendum scheduled for October 2021, local and regional elections in December 2021, and presidential and legislative elections in February 2022.<sup>5</sup> Given recent events, however, it remains to be seen whether the new Malian transitional

authorities can meet this timeframe.

Participants highlighted that continued dialogue between the different political factions, including the signatory parties to the peace agreement that were appointed to the transitional government in October 2020, are important for garnering wider public buy-in. But the general strike initiated by the National Union of Malian Workers (UNTM) on May 17, 2021, underscores the heightened tensions and the high expectations that the population has for the transitional authorities.<sup>6</sup>

Participants underscored that Malian transitional authorities face growing pressure to deliver on the commitments made in both the transition roadmap and in the peace agreement. They also highlighted that, with just ten months remaining, the transition roadmap comprises many institutional reforms yet to be undertaken, in addition to the organization of multiple elections by early 2022. Delays or impeded progress would further set back the restoration of civilian governance in Mali, which has already been negatively affected by the slow pace of decentralization and investments in local state capacity to provide basic services.

## Security Situation and Impact on Civilians

Mali's vacillating political dynamics are amplified by urgent protection threats across the country. Local self-defense groups and armed groups that the Security Council has designated as terrorists continue to perpetrate attacks in northern and central Mali, particularly in the Mopti region and, more recently, the Ségou and Douentza regions.<sup>7</sup> Intercommunal clashes now account for more violence in central Mali than fighting between extremist groups and security forces.<sup>8</sup> This has led to a surge of internal displacement, which increased by 67 percent between the end of 2019 and the end of 2020, with nearly 350,000 internally displaced people as of January.<sup>9</sup> Participants also highlighted the rise of transnational criminal

3 Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA's 2021 Mandate Renewal in Uncertain Times," Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON), May 2021, p. 19.

4 A new government was announced on May 24, 2021. See: "Mali to Form New 'Broad-Based' Transition Government," Al Jazeera, May 14, 2021.

5 "Mali Sets February Date for Presidential, Parliamentary Elections," Al Jazeera, April 15, 2021.

6 "Mali Union Calls Five-Day General Strike Next Week over Pay Claim," Reuters, May 15, 2021.

7 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2021/299, March 26, 2021, paras. 22–25.

8 International Crisis Group, "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali," December 13, 2018.

9 UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "Operational Data Portal: Mali," accessed June 7, 2021, available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/ml>.

organizations throughout much of Mali's southern region, which has increased violence in Mali and neighboring countries.

Persistent security threats in central Mali reflect, in part, the government's limited progress on establishing state institutions and providing basic services, including those that protect human rights and promote justice and accountability. Participants further argued that the country lacks a national vision for security sector reform and a comprehensive strategy for addressing internal and external threats. These challenges are compounded by what some described as an overly militarized approach by national and international actors to confront armed groups affiliated with terrorist organizations, often leading to excessive and indiscriminate use of force against communities.<sup>10</sup>

Widespread impunity for crimes committed against civilians remained a prominent concern for participants. One participant pointed to the abrupt termination of the national trial against Amadou Sanogo (one of the leaders of the 2012 coup d'état) in March 2021 as detrimental to this fight against impunity given the case's national prominence. Violence against civilians has also come under renewed scrutiny following the recent release of investigative reports by MINUSMA and the UN's International Commission of Inquiry for Mali that found evidence of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by Malian security forces, international operations, and extremist armed groups.

Over the past year, MINUSMA has furthered its efforts to implement the second of its mandated strategic priorities: support to the stabilization of central Mali. The mission's Force Adaptation Plan, developed in December 2019, set a path for MINUSMA to better address this priority within its existing resources.<sup>11</sup> To enable the mission to have a more mobile posture and to respond more quickly to early-warning alerts, participants underscored that it needs more military air assets, better information and communications

technology (ICT) infrastructure, and troop contingents with greater capabilities to take on dangerous operations. While MINUSMA has relied on civilian contractors for certain air assets over the past year, some participants emphasized that this approach is unsustainable.

## Regional Dynamics

Political and security dynamics in Mali are inextricably linked to those in the broader region. The security situation in the Sahel continues to deteriorate, with extremist groups operating across central Mali and along the borders with Burkina Faso and Niger; insecurity is also spilling southward into countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>12</sup> National, regional, and international counter-insurgency forces are struggling to contain the expansion of extremist groups in the region. Developments in Chad, particularly after the military takeover following the death of former President Idriss Déby in April 2021, may have ripple effects in Mali and the region over the coming months if Chadian authorities reconsider their troop contributions to both MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

MINUSMA's work is unfolding in a complex landscape of regional and international actors. The mission's senior leadership has worked closely with ECOWAS and the AU Mission in the Sahel (MISAHEL) to support Mali's political transition, encapsulated by the joint communiqué issued on May 17, 2021.<sup>13</sup> The UN mission has also worked bilaterally with many envoys for Mali and for the Sahel region.

The mission and national security forces are working in the same space as many operations that aim either to support the Malian Defense and Security Forces (MDSF) or to undertake counterterrorism operations. To ensure coherence of action, MINUSMA is mandated to convene a coordination platform for regular exchanges between the mission, the MDSF, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and French and European forces.<sup>14</sup> Coordination and division of responsibilities is a

10 International Crisis Group, "A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy," February 1, 2021.

11 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2019/983, December 30, 2019, paras. 60–66.

12 People's Coalition for the Sahel, "The Sahel: What Needs to Change," April 2021, p. 8.

13 MINUSMA, "Communiqué du Comité local de suivi de la transition (CEDEAO-UA-MINUSMA)," May 17, 2021.

14 UN Security Council, Resolution 2531 (June 20, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2531, para. 30.

critical issue for MINUSMA, as some of these other operations are conducting counterterrorism operations that fall outside of the UN mission's mandate and capabilities. Nonetheless, these operations impact MINUSMA both directly and indirectly: local populations and armed groups often cannot easily discern between different international operations and, as a result, MINUSMA peacekeepers have been targeted because of the actions of other forces, as well as, in some instances, in response to their own operations.

Participants debated MINUSMA and the European Union's support to the G5 Sahel Joint Force, building on discussions convened in the Security Council on May 18, 2021. MINUSMA is currently mandated to provide life-support consumables to the G5 Sahel Joint Force, as well as some additional technical support when the force is operating on Malian territory.<sup>15</sup> Some participants argued in favor of the UN mandating a stand-alone support office to the G5 Sahel Joint Force to enhance the range and flexibility of support. Others felt that a new model of support would not resolve the difficult normative, policy, and logistical questions inherent to UN support for a non-UN operation.

## Prioritizing and Sequencing MINUSMA's Mandate

Participants felt that MINUSMA's current mandate, laid out in Security Council Resolution 2531, continues to offer a valuable framework for UN efforts in Mali. But debates during the workshop suggested an emerging sentiment that member states and the UN system need to reassess their strategic approach. These debates focused on, *inter alia*, the intersection of UN support to the political transition with the mission's current strategic priorities; the positioning of MINUSMA vis-à-vis other bilateral and multinational security partners; the mobility and capacity of MINUSMA's uniformed contingents to address instability and attacks against civilians in central Mali; and MINUSMA's strategic role in linking national and

local peace agreements.

Participants suggested that the upcoming mandate renewal process should provide MINUSMA with more unified backing not only to articulate a more comprehensive political vision but also to strengthen how it implements the pillars of its current mandate, particularly with the arrival of new mission leadership.

## Support to the Peace Process and the Governance Transition

Participants discussed the ways in which the Security Council could evaluate MINUSMA's strategic priorities given the ongoing governance transition, which could now be thrown into question by the May 2021 coup d'état. The upcoming mandate renewal negotiations will be the first since the coup d'état in August 2020 and the adoption of Security Council Presidential Statement 2020/10 two months later.<sup>16</sup>

Most participants expressed the view that the mission's support to the political transition should be integrated into its existing primary strategic priority—support to the peace agreement—rather than designated as a stand-alone task. One participant observed that implementation of the peace agreement and transition roadmap are intertwined: they argued, for example, that the successful organization of regional elections (as per the transition roadmap) would be difficult to accomplish without implementing the decentralization provisions of the Algiers peace agreement. Another participant felt that mandating a stand-alone priority on support to the transition could risk diverting resources and attention from implementation of the peace agreement or from stabilization efforts in central Mali. Others felt that the peace agreement provides an ample framework that allows room for support to the governance transition.

These points were also considered when discussing ways to use the mandate renewal to encourage stronger Malian ownership of these political issues. Some participants emphasized that MINUSMA

<sup>15</sup> UN Security Council, Resolution 2391 (December 8, 2017), UN Doc. S/RES/2391, para. 13(a)–(d); UN Security Council Resolution 2480 (June 28, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2480.

<sup>16</sup> Presidential Statement 2020/10 requested that MINUSMA support the political transition in Mali “within its mandate and existing resources.” See: UN Security Council, *Statement by the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PRST/2020/10, October 15, 2020, p. 2.

should support inclusive dialogue during the coming months of the transition, particularly as the transitional authorities undertake more sensitive reforms related to the upcoming elections. They felt that the upcoming mandate renewal could continue to encourage this dialogue, particularly by maintaining the buy-in of the signatory parties to the peace agreement.

Participants specifically discussed whether (and how) Security Council–mandated benchmarks could support this objective. In March 2021, the secretary-general proposed benchmarks to inform how the Security Council and MINUSMA could engage on Mali’s political transition.<sup>17</sup> Some participants encouraged the Security Council to integrate some of these benchmarks alongside the benchmarks already built into MINUSMA’s mandate.<sup>18</sup> While most participants welcomed the role of benchmarks in clearly conveying the Security Council’s expectations, some emphasized the importance of balancing the ambition of the targets with what Malian authorities can realistically achieve.

## Protection of Civilians

Participants agreed that MINUSMA should continue improving its efforts to protect civilians in northern and central Mali. Despite the mission’s efforts to redeploy some of its assets to adopt a flexible posture in central Mali over the past year as part of its Force Adaptation Plan, some participants emphasized that MINUSMA’s protection efforts could not be successful without meaningful leadership from the Malian authorities.

Some participants highlighted MINUSMA’s civil affairs work in central Mali and the impact of these efforts in reducing community-level tensions. This work supports the former Malian government’s stabilization strategy for central Mali, which is integrated into MINUSMA’s second strategic objective. Nonetheless, participants felt that a clear, nationally owned vision for the protection of civilians and state building in the center of the country has not yet been articulated. While the

secretary-general’s March 2021 report notes a relative reduction in attacks against civilians, some participants emphasized that this reduction would not be sustainable absent the provision of basic services, justice, and security by the state. It was also noted that local political and mediation processes need to be linked to a broader political strategy to ensure they complement each other and to avoid a patchwork of peace agreements.

Participants also discussed the utility of MINUSMA’s informal geographic division of strategic priorities, as its mandates to protect civilians and reduce intercommunal violence are focused on central Mali. While MINUSMA’s current mandate encourages the mission to conduct protection of civilians activities in both northern and central Mali, it has concentrated its efforts in the latter on the rationale that civilians there are more under threat.<sup>19</sup> Some participants felt that this geographic prioritization was also attributable to the mission’s limited resources as well as its greater added value in central Mali. Other participants noted it is important that the Security Council not mandate the mission to expand into additional geographical areas, as current staffing does not allow for a whole-of-Mali protective presence. One participant, however, encouraged the mission and other operations in the country to take a more active role in preventing the deterioration of security conditions in southern Mali in light of growing attacks by transnational armed groups.

Although unlikely to be a feature of this year’s Security Council negotiations, participants directly linked MINUSMA’s effectiveness in protecting civilians with the need for more physical assets and financial resources. These include military air assets and ICT for early-warning efforts to strengthen MINUSMA’s mobile task force.

## Human Rights, Justice, and the Rule of Law

Participants called for the upcoming mandate to continue affirming MINUSMA’s role in promoting

<sup>17</sup> These benchmarks were requested by the Security Council in Resolution 2531, para. 64. For proposed benchmarks, see: UN Doc. S/2021/300, paras. 7-15.

<sup>18</sup> UN Security Council, Resolution 2531 (June 29, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2531, paras. 3, 14.

<sup>19</sup> MINUSMA, “Notes sur les tendances des violations et abus de droits de l’homme au Mali (1er Janvier–31 mars 2021),” May 2021, paras. 19, 21.

human rights and supporting access to justice for Malian citizens. Over the past year, the mission has undertaken a multidimensional approach to these issues, including through human rights monitoring, technical assistance, political good offices, and programmatic initiatives alongside the UN country team. This focus on human rights and justice is integral to the mission's support to Malian defense and security institutions, its civil affairs work with communities in northern and central Mali, and its mandated cooperation with the G5 Sahel Joint Force and other international security initiatives.

Participants specifically called for stronger UN support to strengthen access to justice and fight impunity at both the national and community levels, which could be reiterated in the mission's mandate. Some emphasized the successes of mobile courts deployed by MINUSMA and the UN country team, encouraging the scaling up of this initiative, as well as the continued need for technical advice to judicial authorities. One participant pondered how MINUSMA could undertake a more prominent role in supporting the implementation of recommendations made by the International Commission of Inquiry for Mali. Mission leadership is drafting an action plan to guide its implementation of the commission's recommendations over the coming months. Participants asserted that implementation of these recommendations would increase accountability and could work against the factors motivating civilians to join armed groups.

Participants also spoke to the UN's valuable programmatic activities on human rights and against transnational crime, including human trafficking. MINUSMA provides a valuable political entry point for civilian engagement on these issues. However, some cautioned that entities such as the UN country team and the UN panel of experts established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) are better positioned than the mission to monitor and address transnational organized crime.

Others advocated for the Security Council to reevaluate the strategic approach underpinning its sanctions regime on Mali. They observed that some of the individuals currently listed under the

sanctions regime continue to participate in Mali's political process without any repercussions. This dynamic detracts from the credibility of the sanctions regime overall and limits the UN's ability to promote human rights across all areas of its work.

## Conclusion

MINUSMA continues to play a vital role during a fragile period of Mali's governance transition. The overall approach of its current mandate and its priorities align with the areas where the mission can make the most valuable contributions across the country: support to the political transition, intertwined with backing of the peace agreement, and support to stabilization efforts in central Mali.

Participants, however, urged the Security Council to use this mandate renewal as a moment to ask fundamental questions about the mission's overarching political objective and current strategy given the escalation of threats against civilians, the regionalization of violence, and the lack of significant progress on the peace agreement—points further underscored by the May 2021 coup d'état.

To that end, several participants encouraged the Security Council and MINUSMA to articulate a clearer strategic vision for their engagements in Mali, underscoring the importance of grounding mandate delivery in a political strategy. Some felt that stronger engagement in Mali over the coming months would require not only possibly changing mandate language but also reinvigorating the mission's political drive, including by leveraging the energy of new mission leadership.

In this context, participants suggested opportunities to press Mali's transitional authorities on their political strategy and vision for the center of Mali and for the country as a whole. They also called for critical reflection on how the international community can effectively support stabilization in the Sahel, including through MINUSMA, without undermining its work on human rights, justice, and the rule of law. Participants further underscored that the successful implementation of the peace agreement and political transition depends on the transitional government leading an inclusive and consultative process.

The **INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE** (IPI) is an independent, international not-for-profit think tank dedicated to managing risk and building resilience to promote peace, security, and sustainable development. To achieve its purpose, IPI employs a mix of policy research, strategic analysis, publishing, and convening. With staff from around the world and a broad range of academic fields, IPI has offices facing United Nations headquarters in New York and in Manama.

The **STIMSON CENTER** is a nonpartisan policy research center working to solve the world's greatest threats to security and prosperity. Stimson's Protecting Civilians in Conflict program engages policymakers, practitioners, and communities on the ground to identify protection gaps and develop tailored strategies to protect civilians in war-torn societies.

**SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT**'s mission is to advance the transparency and effectiveness of the UN Security Council. We seek to achieve this by making available timely, balanced, high-quality information about the activities of the Council and its subsidiary bodies; by convening stakeholders to deepen the analysis of issues before the Council and its working methods and performance; by encouraging engagement of the Council with all member states and civil society; and by building capacity on Council practice and procedure through assisting incoming members and other training and assistance programs. SCR is independent and impartial; it advocates transparency but does not take positions on the issues before the Council.



**777 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017-3521, USA**  
TEL +1-212-687-4300 FAX +1-212-983-8246

**52-52 Harbour House, Bahrain Financial Harbour**  
**P.O. Box 1467, Manama, Bahrain**

[www.ipinst.org](http://www.ipinst.org)