

Security Concerns in Mali – 2018

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Several jihadi organizations have been operating in the Northeast of Mali for close to a decade, but some are now moving closer to the central part of that country; impacting even the capital city of Bamako. In the Sahel region, the communities of Timbuktu, Goa and Kidal have been dramatically affected by this fighting.

Jihadi Organizations Operating in Mali

Al-Qaeda

This terror group was initially formed in Afghanistan in the 1980s but later moved into Western Africa calling itself the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This group has operated in the Sahel since 2007.

In 2013, several AQIM splinter groups were established. One under Mokhtar Belmokhtar was called Al-Mourabitoun. Recently, AQIM announced they had reabsorbed both of these splinter groups.

Islamic State (ISIS)

Based in its original caliphate in Syria and Iraq in 2014, this significant terrorist group has expanded operations into West Africa taking on al-Qaeda as the legitimate terrorist organization in Mali. In this country they call themselves Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin.¹

Military Forces Operating Against the Jihadi Terrorists

France

France, in 2014, came to the northeast of Mali to confront, at first al-Qaeda, and then ISIS, in destroying and terrorizing the population and properties in these communities. The French military saved Mali from being overrun by the various militant groups and assisted the Malian Army in attempting to take control of the region from the terrorists.

Barkhane is the name of France's counter-terrorism operation in the Sahel which has its' headquarters in Chad.² The aviation hub of this French force is located in Niamey Niger, allowing it to operate across Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger.

¹ *The Economist*, "Jihad's next battleground," 14 July 2018, p. 41.

² *The Economist*, "Sahel or high water," 22 September 2018, p. 44.

An American airbase is also located close to the French airbase at Niamey while another is being built to the north of Niger at Agadez. Barkane is manned by 4,500 troops and costs \$700 million a year to run. Twelve French soldiers have been killed in combat since 2014, including four French soldiers in Gao on July 1, 2018 by ISIS.³

General Bruno Guibert, Barkane's former commander stated that French forces have killed or captured 150 jihadists in 2018 both in Mali and Niger and they have kept the jihadist groups scattered and denied them further territory to establish more permanent bases in the Sahel.

G-5-Sahel

This regional counter-terrorism force consisting of five West African countries was created on 6 February 2014. It consists of troops of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Its headquarters is located in the town of Sevare in central Mali. In late June 2018, a suicide-bomber attacked the headquarters, killing two Malian soldiers and several civilians.⁴

Western powers, including France and the United States have provided funding to the G5 to tackle the jihadists, but they have also argued that the force has been slow to get off the ground, hobbled by delays in disbursing the money and a lack of coordination between the five African countries.⁵

AFRICOM (US)

AFRICOM is the US military command for Africa, which conducts raids and drone strikes from Somalia to Libya.⁶

³ *The Globe and Mail*, "Al-Qadea-linked groups claims attack against French troops in Mali," 2 July 2018, p. A10.

⁴ *The Economist*, "Democracy's shifting sands," 28 July 2018, p. 34.

⁵ *CBC*, "Mali car bombing kills 4 civilians, wounds 31 other, including soldiers," 1 July 2018.

⁶ *The Economist*, "Sahel or high water," p. 44.

The purpose of AFRICOM is to encourage and support African leadership. Its mission “is to build defence capabilities, respond to crisis and deter and defeat transnational threats in order to advance US national interests and promote regional security, stability and prosperity”.

The command was founded in 2007 and its only permanent base in Africa is Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. United States Army Africa (USARAF) is the US Army service component command of AFRICOM with its headquarters located in two locations in Italy. The headquarters of AFRICOM is in Stuttgart, Germany.

AFRICOM attempts to work and train with various African militaries that were often ill-equipped to deal with emerging extremist threats. US troops have carried out such missions in Libya, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Somalia.⁷ The death of four American soldiers in an ambush in Niger in October 2017 is raising doubts about the scale of the US involvement in Africa.⁸ American soldiers, as a result of this incident, have been ordered to go on fewer missions and to take fewer risks. Earlier this year, the Pentagon told AFRICOM to plan for a possible 50% cut in the number of special forces in Africa over three years. To fill this gap, it is likely that France and Britain and their allies would have to put more of their troops on the ground to fill this vacuum.

MINUSMA – UN Peacekeeping Force

Canada in the summer of 2018 joined the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali called the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This mission was established in 2013, three months after the French-led counterterrorism operations took place. Similar to Barkane, MINUSMA is attempting to stabilize Mali amid the jihadist and ethnic insurgency.

The UN mission consists of about 13,000 authorized international troops from 57 nations. According to the UN, 170 peacekeepers have been killed in Mali since 2013, making it one of the organization’s deadliest peacekeeping missions to date.⁹ [9] When

⁷ G. Myre, *NPR*, “The Military Doesn’t Advertise it but US troops are all over Africa,” 28 April 2018.

⁸ *The Economist*, “Jihad’s next battleground,” p. 43.

⁹ *The Economist*, “Jihad’s next battleground,” p. 41.

the call goes out by the UN for peacekeepers, it often attracts troops from economic disadvantaged countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and other African countries because the pay for their troops is relatively high.¹⁰ The operation in Mali costs the UN approximately \$1 billion per year.

The Canadian government announced in 2018 that our contribution to MINUSMA will consist of 250 troops and aircrew and last for one year, taking over from the German helicopter contingent in Gao. The Task Force consists of three CH-147F Chinook helicopters from 450 Tactical Helicopter Squadron, based in Petawawa, Ontario and five CH-146 Griffin helicopters from 408 Tactical Helicopter Squadron, based in Edmonton. The primary role of the Canadian Task Force is medical recovery and evacuation of wounded troops in the field.¹¹

The year-long Canadian mission is scheduled to be completed by July 2019. As of November 2018, the Canadian contingent have conducted four emergency evacuations in Mali and have also delivered 77 tonnes of cargo and transported more than 1000 UN personnel since the beginning of August 2018.¹²

Professor B. Charbonneau of Laurentian University suspects the Task Force will have little interaction with people on the ground although he does anticipate the separation of roles might be difficult between MINUSMA and French operations.¹³

Other issues which he considers could be applicable to these operations is the climate, such as the heat and dust storms, and the constant threat of violence and attacks at the base. The recent monthly report by the UN Security Council on MINUSMA stated that the security situation in Mali remains “a grave concern” (June 2018). A documentary for the German network DW looked at the experience of Germans who took part in the Mali mission. A sergeant who had served in Afghanistan compared the two missions in terms of threat: “There we had the Taliban – the one

¹⁰ *The Economist*, “Looking the other way,” 28 October 2017, p. 56.

¹¹ A. Arsenault, *CBC*, “Canadian troops in Mali prepare for daunting, dangerous UN peacekeeping mandate,” 24 June 2018.

¹² L. Berthiaume, *The Globe and Mail*, “Ottawa reluctant to extend Mali peacekeeping mission past July, sources say,” 16 November 2018, p. A5.

¹³ *The Economist*, “Jihad’s next battleground,” p. 5.

enemy that attacked us. Here we have several groups, and you lose track of who is who, and that's what makes Mali so dangerous."¹⁴

Malian Domestic Security Problems

Ever since Mali, a former French colony, became independent in 1960, the northeast of the country has remained unstable politically. The Tuaregs in this remote desert area of Mali, consisting of the communities of Timbuktu, Kidal and Goa, have often felt disenfranchised from the capital Bamako. Tuaregs, related to the Berbers of North Africa, were often forgotten when it came to political decisions reached by officials in the capital city. For that reason the Malian Army was sent out to quell unrest in this region in the 1990's. Again in 2012 the Tuaregs rebels waged an insurgency against the Malian government and initially joined forces with al-Qaeda operatives.¹⁵ In the same year, the Malian Army took over the government and deposed President Amadou Toumani Toure for not putting an end to the Tuareg rebellion.

As noted by Professor Charbonneau, various local groups signed a 2015 peace agreement.¹⁶ These signatories included the Malian government; Platform, a pro-government coalition; and Azawad Movements (CMA), a pro-separatist alliance which included the Tuaregs. As noted, Platform and CMA are armed groups without representation in the Malian legislature. Charbonneau remarks also that the non-signatory groups to the agreement include militias, jihadists and bandits, making counterterrorism efforts very difficult. In addition, while the various jihadist factions have seemed to unify in their terrorist activities, Platform and the CMA have continued to splinter. The Tuaregs have also seemed to distance themselves from al-Qaeda in the northeast region of the country.

¹⁴ A. Arsenault, *CBC*, "Canadian troops in Mali prepare for daunting, dangerous UN peacekeeping mandate," 24 June 2018.

¹⁵ *The Economist*, "Jihad's next battleground," p. 2.

¹⁶ B. Ahmed, *Globe and Mail*, "Maliens vote in presidential runoff amid security concerns," 13 August 2018, p. A11.

Prior to the Malian presidential election in the summer 2018, jihad extremists began carrying out bold attacks in central Mali and the capital city Bamako itself.¹⁷

The Malian government also during the summer of 2018 said they would investigate the grave sites of 25 civilians, purportedly executed by the Malian Army.¹⁸ [16] This is the same body which is being trained by MINUSMA. It was also reported in May 2018 that the Malian Army had also executed 12 civilians in retaliation after a soldier was killed in an attack in that month at the Boulkessy cattle market.¹⁹

Besides the human rights allegations against the Malian Army, there has been fighting between ethnic groups in central Mali. In June 2016, 16 people were killed in an attack on a Fulani village after their alleged links to al-Qaeda militants.²⁰ The leader in the village stated that a community militia had attacked Koumaga in central Mali and put the death toll closer to 32 civilians. The United States also expressed concern that in the week before militants also entered the Fulani village of Nantaka and killed 25 men.

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in a recent report in October 2018 says the security situation in Mali has deteriorated over the past three months.²¹ Mr. Guterres noted that “the country is at war with itself as various ethnic and extremist groups targeted each other as well as the Malian military, international forces and even civilians. The result has been 287 civilians killed in a three month period – the largest number since the UN peacekeepers arrived in Mali in 2013.”

In this report, he states that “much of the fighting was between two different ethnic groups in the centre of Mali while groups linked to al-Qaeda and ISIS were also responsible for a great deal of violence. Intercommunal conflict, exacerbated by violent extremist groups is fraying social fabric and is deeply concerning,” he wrote. “Too high a human toll has accrued as a result of the ongoing spiral of violence. The number of human-rights violations in Mali, which was already troubling high, was similarly worse

¹⁷ Arsenault, “Canadian troops in Mali prepare for daunting, dangerous UN peacekeeping mandate.”

¹⁸ Ahmed, “Maliens vote in presidential runoff amid security concerns,” p. A11.

¹⁹ *CBC, Thomson Reuters*, “Malian forces kill 12 civilians in retaliation for fellow soldiers’ death; UN mission says,” 26 June 2018.

²⁰ *CBC*, “Attack on ethnic Fulani village in Mali kills 16, government says,” 24 June 2018.

²¹ Berthiaume, “UN report suggests Mali’s security crisis worse since Canadians’ arrival,” p. A6.

because of hundreds of new extrajudicial killings, disappearances, tortures and rapes across different parts of the country”.

Malian On-going Security Issues

At the present time, it is difficult to foresee in the near future that the security concerns in Mali will be resolved soon, for the following possible reasons:

- The lack of training of the Malian Army and its’ poor human rights record towards various ethnic groups residing in the country;
- Coordination problems between the French Barkane military counterterrorism operations and MINUSMA;
- The lack of implementation of the 2015 peace agreement with all the signatories to the document;
- The lack of the Malian government recognizing the ongoing concerns and issues of the Tuareg living in the northeast of Mali;
- The lack of an impartial justice system in Mali and the rule of law throughout the country;
- Limited services and infrastructure in the northeast of Mali;
- After five years in Mali, how effective has MINUSMA been in helping to counter the security problems of the country? Is it possible to co-ordinate the military operations of 57 nations under one command structure? Have there been human rights abuses against any of the force national members? It is likely that the UN should conduct an evaluation of MINUSMA, sooner than later, to determine its effectiveness and whether it is actually fulfilling its’ mandate;
- It is clear that the effectiveness of G-5 operations has been in default for over a year. Does its’ mandate interfere with the counterterrorism operations of both Barkane or MINUSMA?

- The possible reduction of US forces in AFRICOM and several African countries in fighting jihadi terrorist groups throughout the continent. Which country will step up to the plate to fill this military vacuum?
- The resulting terrorist activities in the country has led to rural residents fleeing to the capital city Bamako, resulting on increasing demands on its services and resources.²² [21] In its report, the Financial Times stated that Bamako may become the fastest-growing city in Africa. Professor Issa N'Diaye of the University of Bamako referred to the city's untrammelled growth as a time bomb. "Bamako lacks the resources and institutions capable of coping with this explosive growth. Skyrocketing land prices has led to rampant corruption", he said. "Rapid urban expansion has also left people bereft of services. There has been no planning whatsoever of the road system, water drainage, electricity or urban transport. The city is becoming more and more unliveable".
- Whether there is leadership in the Malian government to stabilize and confront the security problems throughout the entire country?
- In the Sahel region, 6 million people are unable to feed themselves without help, due to the changing climate, resulting in an increase in conflict and unproductive farming.²³

²² D. Pilling, *Financial Times*, "Africa battles with rapid urbanization as its cities top global growth league," 12 September 2018.

²³ *The Economist*, "The forever famine," 27 October 2018, p. 47.