UN Peacekeeping stretched to its limits.

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3 Main Points

UN Peacekeeping stretched to its limits. Civil security in the wake of MINUSMA and its withdrawal.

" What we cannot accept – what we mušt not accept – is that war deštroys the lives of countless civilians. The protection of civilians lies at the heart of international humanitarian law and at the heart of both the UN's and the ICRC's missions. " **Peter Maurer**President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (Ret.)

The year 2025 marks the second anniversary of the United Nations (UN) withdrawing its troops from Mali. A state which, up to this day, is exposed to instability, volatility, and fragmentation of its population as an inherent root for recurring violence and conflict.

Alongside the imposition of MINUSMA's (UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali) withdrawal by a disenchanted Malian transitional government in 2023, high numbers of both military and civilian casualties during the operation's timeframe, as well as reports of persisting violence after MINUSMA's departure, have ignited a debate about the effectiveness and legitimacy of UN peacekeeping missions.

This article contributes to this debate by examining the state of civil security – whose protection was a key objective of the mission – before, throughout, and post MINUSMA. The annual number of civilian deaths due to one-sided violence will provide the primary parameter in this regard. While one could argue that a focus on casualties provides a limited perspective regarding the evaluation of a multilayered peacekeeping mission like MINUSMA, it is to emphasise that the Protection of Civilians (PoC) epitomises a – if not the – key necessity towards a peacekeeping mission's success.

Peacekeeping missions' components – from minimalist to maximalist tasks, from peace agreements to, e.g., judicial reforms and elections – rely on and build upon the fundamental need for protection of civilians' physical and mental integrity; otherwise, they become meaningless. This premise is statutorily regulated in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and was reemphasised by the retired president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer.

Long-standing factors like structural deficits on state level, neglect in governance, marginalisation, weak social cohesion in course of postcolonial state-making, abuse of power, and corruption had engulfed Mali in an extensive political, security, socio-economic and humanitarian crisis.

Rebellions by Tuareg groups aiming to achieve autonomy and independence from Malian authorities had been a recurring phenomenon in the past, when persisting tensions climaxed again in January 2012. The Tuareg movement Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) joined forces with multiple Islamic groups and deserters from the Malian armed forces to attack and seize key positions in northern Mali.

Continuous aggression ultimately led to a military coup d'état in course of which Amadou Sanogo and his military junta, the Comité national pour le redressement de la démocratie et la restauration de l'Etat, seized power. The junta's imminent suspension of the institution and the dissolution of the Malian government finally catalysed the collapse of the Malian state.

While the MNLA commenced their attacks and proclaimed the independence of the "Republic of Azawad" in April 2012, an initial international response emerged with the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) deployment of a mediation team to Mali. Consequently, a framework agreement was signed between the junta and ECOWAS, paving the way for a transitional government. However, progress towards eased tensions and a reestablishment of the constitutional order came to a halt when Islamic groups Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO violently separated themselves from the MNLA after doubting a sufficient consideration of their concerns in future coalitions. As aggression resurged, ECOWAS envisioned advocacy within the framework of a regional peace support operation. However, due to the junta's aversion towards foreign forces and the refusal of support by regional neighbours like Algeria, a respective mission could not be implemented. Instead, the UN Security Council issued the authorisation of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) after the African Union (AU) enabled ECOWAS to overcome the mentioned obstacles and a Malian government of National Unity had been formed in August 2012.

Nevertheless, as Islamic groups issued further attacks and pushed MNLA out of northern Mali, a military intervention by France had to break up violence before the Malian National Assembly was able to adopt a roadmap for the transition of the Malian state – including the request for a transition of AFISMA into a UN peacekeeping mission. Consequently, MINUSMA received its initial mandate by the UN Security Council on 01.07.2013.

MINUSMA was issued with the key objectives of stabilising the country and supporting the political transition following the coup d'état by MLNA in January 2012. In order to achieve these objectives, MINUSMA pursued various tasks of which the protection of civilians is of central interest to this article.

Disenchanted with MINUSMA's accomplishments and its stagnant progress on key objectives, the Malian government requested the mission's termination in 2023, which led to its drawdown and formal withdrawal on 31.12.2023.

Note: Data considered in this analysis stems from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Besides being frequently consulted by scholars for its reliable consistency and globally transparent data coding, the UCDP's definition of one-sided violence benefits this article explicitly. According to the UCDP, one-sided violence is defined as the use of armed force by a state or non-state armed group against civilians that causes at least 25 civilian deaths during a year. By setting the threshold at $\geq$ 25 annual civilian deaths,

data is cleared from singular incidents and focuses on recurring patterns of violence consciously targeted against civilian life. Inevitably, these patterns must be averted in order to sustainably establish civil security, which was destined to become MINUSMA's most challenging objective in Mali.

3.1 1989 – 2013: The years before MINUSMA

As previously stated, weak social cohesion and ambitions by Tuareg factions to achieve autonomy and independence, particularly in northern Mali, had posed a continuous threat to civil security in the country. Furthermore, many Tuaregs had migrated to and received military training in Libya before being forced to return to Mali. Growing instability in the wake of aggression during Tuareg rebellions led to **1029 civilian deaths due to one-sided violence in the years from 1989 until 2013**.

3.2 2013 – 2023: Civil security in course of MINUSMA

While civilian casualties due to one-sided violence remained comparatively low in the early years of MINSUMA's deployment, the state of civil security in Mali was set to deteriorate drastically in 2017 and the following years. Consequently, a drastic resurgence of aggression and conflict, not limited to but including violence against civilians, hit Mali in a dimension that vastly exceeded MINUSMA's capability of containment.

One driver of surging violence was posed by Islamic groups consolidating their forces under the umbrella of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). Describing themselves as the official branch of Al-Qaida in Mali, JNIM initiated multiple attacks in central and northern Malian territories primarily against – but not limited to – Malian government and MINUSMA's forces.

Simultaneously, Tuareg movements formed a new alliance, the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement (CSP-PSD), causing the eruption of a new state-based conflict with the Malian government forces in the Kidal region. These conflicts were accompanied by the uprise of communal militias of self-defence and acts of revenge between conflicting ethnic groups, frequently resulting in civilians being caught in crossfire. Developments which led to the state of **civil security in Mali reaching its all-time low in 2022 with 1,450 civilian deaths due to one-sided violence**. Ultimately, this resulted in an accumulated number of **3,818 civilian casualties** due to one-sided violence in Mali **throughout MINUSMA's operational timeframe** from 2013 until 2023.

3.3 2023 – Today: Mali in the wake of MINUSMA's withdrawal

MINUSMA's troops are withdrawn – tensions and conflict persist. Inter alia, this became observable in course the Battle of Tinzaouaten in 2024 in which both JNIM and CSP-PSA engaged in attacks against the Malian government troops which, in turn, were reinforced by mercenaries of the Wagner group. Simultaneously, the state of civil security in Mali remains dramatic as all belligerent factions are continuously perceived to be perpetrators of one-sided violence. Reaching an excruciating climax when 65

civilians fell victim to executions and massacres in the Malian Albeibara and Nera cercles in 2024.

In 2024 the number of civilian casualties due to one-sided violence reached 619 which, on the one hand, is significantly lower than the all-time high in 2022. On the other hand, it provides the second-highest record since 1989 while showing another increase in comparison to 2023.

While data for 2025 will be accumulated by the end of the year, recent reports offer little reason for optimism towards eased tensions in Mali. Continuous insecurity towards the state's political future, persistent aggression between government forces and separatist movements, and civilians being exposed to crossfire.

Considering the rising number of civilian deaths due to one-sided violence throughout MINUSMA's operational timeframe and following its termination, it has become evident that the mission had failed one of its key objectives: the stabilisation of Mali by establishing civil security.

After one decade of MINUSMA in Mali, weak social cohesion, patterns of organised violence (against civilians) as well as separatist ambitions remain. Ethnic separatist movements continue to engage in conflict with the Malian government. One-sided violence against civilians recurs among all belligerent factions, aggravating the vast extent of civil insecurity in Mali. Finally proving that the various lines of conflict imbedded in the Malian state, its population, and its history were too extensive and drastic to be contained in course of MINUSMA.

Furthermore, the Malian government's imposition of MINUSMA's termination vividly displayed UN peacekeeping's reliance on the hosting state and respective limits.

Following the record of MINUSMA and considering fundamental challenges for peacekeeping, in course of globally rising tensions, decision-makers are compelled to reevaluate the potentials and especially risks and limits of future UN peacekeeping missions.

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