

Mali's Fragile Peace

Despite a large international civilian and military presence, Mali continues to struggle with widespread insecurity and Islamist extremism. These issues are linked to chronic problems of poverty, ethnic tensions, and a weak state apparatus. With broad efforts in peacebuilding and development cooperation, Switzerland is trying to support the fragile peace.

By Allison Chandler and Benno Zogg

Mali, a vast country of desert and savannah in West Africa, is home to some 18 million people. It suffers from a range of chronic issues. Mali consistently ranks among the world's very least developed countries; 90 per cent of the population earns less than USD 2 a day. The Malian state suffers from a severe lack of capacity to deliver security and basic services. Widespread inequality exists, particularly between the south and the marginalized north, and the country is rife with tensions between its various ethnic groups. Such protracted problems generally do not make the headlines. Events in 2012, however, brought these structural issues to a global audience, when they led a violent uprising in the north and a coup against the sitting government. Despite a peace agreement negotiated in 2015, the Malian population, the state, and its international supporters have continued to struggle with armed conflict, ethnic clashes, religious extremism, organized crime, and terrorism.

In the following, we give an overview of events that led to the present day and an analysis of the ongoing conflict that further maps underlying issues that may hinder development efforts, followed by an examination of Swiss involvement. Mali is an interesting case where a range of Swiss tools of international engagement come into



The Great Mosque of Djenné is protected by UNESCO and a prominent cultural symbol of Mali. It is situated in the increasingly insecure region of Mopti in Central Mali. *Benno Zogg*

play: diplomacy, fostering of dialog and reconciliation, deployment of experts in international peace support operations, and substantial development cooperation.

A History of Rebellion

Perhaps surprisingly, the international community considered Mali an “aid darling” for much of the 1990s and the 2000s thanks to a reputation of stability following independence from France in 1960. This

reputation was largely undeserved. Democracy has been quite stable in Mali, yet secessionist ideology runs deep through the Tuareg populations in the north; and this rift has manifested itself in no fewer than three rebellions in support of the autonomous Tuareg state of the “Azawad” prior to 2012. Dramatic inequalities and cultural differences between the sparsely populated north and the fertile, resource-rich south exacerbated secessionist senti-

International Security Actors Present in Mali

MINUSMA: The UN peacekeeping mission employs roughly 16 500 personnel, comprising mostly African troops. European countries traditionally reluctant to engage in UN missions, notably Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, provide 1000 troops. MINUSMA has the dubious honor of being labelled the world's deadliest peacekeeping mission. The lightly-armed African contributors, who carry out riskier missions while lacking adequate equipment, suffer the brunt of casualties. MINUSMA's primary mandate is to support all parties to the conflict in implementing the 2015 peace agreement and the "gradual restoration of state authority". MINUSMA and affiliated UN agencies are among the few international actors still present in the north. However, a majority of their efforts relate to self-protection and logistics.

EUTM-Mali: While the European Union is technically present, their activities in Mali are largely limited to funding and improving the capacity of Malian security institutions through the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM-Mali). There are widespread reports of the limited efficacy of this organization.

EUCAP Sahel: The European Union also operates a civilian mission designed to bolster the Sahel more broadly, though it too focuses primarily on fighting terrorism and crime.

Operation Barkhane: The French national armed forces maintain active military engagement in the Sahel, including 1000 troops permanently operating in Mali. The Security Council has mandated Barkhane to act separately of MINUSMA and carry out majority of combat against armed and terrorist groups. Operation Barkhane was the follow-up to France's Operation Serval, which, with Chadian participation, reconquered territory occupied by the Islamists in 2012 and 2013.

G5 Sahel force: This transnational deployment, set to comprise 5000 soldiers from Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger, works alongside the French and is tasked with tackling the threat from terrorists and organized crime across the region. The joint force indicates growing recognition throughout West Africa that transnational threats require a strongly coordinated response.

ments. Northern communities are largely nomadic and have built strong trading networks across the Sahara, irrespective of borders. The remoteness of communities in the Malian north minimized state activity and contact with the south, and limited the resources and aid available in times of crisis. An economy of smuggling was born out of necessity: trade in subsidized food from Libya and Algeria and contraband cigarettes, and more recently the business of aiding migrants as well as trafficking drugs and weapons, have been a welcome source of income in the north and helped strengthen armed groups.

The northern rebellions were quelled with peace deals that purported to give greater autonomy and provide more resources to northern communities. These aims were never fully realized, and the unfulfilled promises worsened the distrust many Malians in the north felt towards the government. In turn, many southern Malians were opposed to concessions towards the north. The government in Bamako, meanwhile, was frequently accused of using the decentralization process to bolster chosen local elites and divide political movements in the north, rather than fully respecting the spirit of the peace agreements. Members of the Malian security services and Bamako's political elite have purportedly benefit from the illicit economy, leading to further allegations of corruption and the

erosion of the legitimacy of state institutions.

The most recent rebellion began in January 2012. This time, regional conditions exacerbated the potency of the uprising beyond past levels. After the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011, entire units of heavily armed Tuareg fighters native to northern Mali returned home and reignited the conflict in support of their self-determination. Islamists driven from Algeria after the end of its civil war in 2002 had permeated throughout the Saharan region and provided another source of well-armed, well-trained fighters. Such radical Islamism was largely new to Mali, where an overwhelming majority practices Sufism, a moderate version of Islam.

In March 2012, a group of Malian soldiers seized power in Bamako. They accused then president Amadou Toumani Touré of failing to quell the rebellion in the north and of corruption. Meanwhile, the disparate rebel groups in the north formed a loose alliance with extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine. Together, they managed to conquer more than half of the country. Soon after, the divergent ideologies of the rebel movement and the extremist groups caused the alliance to splinter, leaving ma-

nor cities like Timbuktu and Gao in the hands of extremist forces.

In light of further attacks in Central Mali and reports of abuses under jihadist rule, the Malian government called upon France for help, which intervened militarily in January 2013, followed by African forces. They drove extremist groups north, and rebel groups entered into protracted peace negotiations with the government. The UN deployed the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), a peacekeeping mission, and elections led to the return of a democratic government. Under considerable international pressure, the government and the two major rebel coalitions, the separatist "Coordination" and the pro-unity "Platform", finally signed the Algiers Accord in June 2015, ostensibly putting an end to the conflict.

The Situation Now

Despite the peace agreement and a significant international civilian and military presence, meaningful progress towards peace remains elusive. Several armed groups, most notably the extremist groups, are not included in the peace process. Implementation of the ambitious provisions of the Accord has been slow and ineffective. For example, the installation of interim authorities in the northern regions as stipulated by the agreement was not successfully carried out until spring 2017. The continued delays and perceived ineffectiveness of the state in realizing this peace plan,

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like previous peace plans, has undermined faith in the agreement among the opposition parties and the civilian population.

Ethnic tensions between the various peoples of Mali regularly result in small-scale conflicts, and there is widespread racism, especially between the north and the south. On top of the well-known north-south divide, recent developments in Central Mali raise new concerns. The wide availability of arms and the retreat of the Malian state over the course of 2012 led to a growing number of self-defense militias and exacerbated ethnic tensions between herders and traditional local authorities. The return of the Malian state was allegedly accompanied by abuses on the part of its army, particularly against nomadic ethnic groups.



construction and medium-term conflict stabilization efforts. Agriculture and food security are the largest concerns for many development agencies, though they are also supporting several programs to foster education, health, and women's empowerment. Nevertheless, development efforts in Mali continue to be critically underfunded.

Broad Swiss Commitment

Swiss engagement in Mali is remarkably comprehensive, addressing a range of issues related to peace and stability. Swiss diplomacy played an important role in the early stages of the peace process, notably concluding the Ouagadougou Agreement of 2013. After that, Algeria came to the fore, leading up to the Algiers Accord. The Swiss Federal Council responded to a UN request for specialized personnel for MINUSMA in 2013, when the conflict in Mali was in full force. There are 14 Swiss staff in international missions in Mali, which makes Mali the second-largest Swiss engagement outside of Europe. The Swiss Armed Forces currently contribute seven staff officers, intelligence analysts, and humanitarian demining specialists, while the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) oversees two police officers stationed in Mali. Switzerland has also seconded one expert on civilian police to EUCAP Sahel, and one expert to the *Ecole de Maintien de la Paix* in Bamako. The FDFA's Human Security Division promotes dialog, conflict prevention and transformation across the region, including providing support to Burkina Faso's mediation efforts and deploying a human security advisor. Switzerland further advises institutions on dealing with the past, as stipulated by the Algiers Accord, to foster dialog and reconciliation. However, their work is hampered by the lack of political commitment and ongoing insecurity in Mali.

As one of the Swiss Development Council's (SDC) focus countries for bilateral cooperation, Mali has received development aid for 40 years. The SDC takes pride in having maintained a constant engagement in Mali, adjusting development programs during the crisis from 2012 and prioritizing humanitarian aid, and never retreating from Mali altogether, as some international agencies have done. Swiss contributions, increased after the crisis from some USD 20 million to currently around USD 30 million per year. However, the SDC had to cancel most of its development activities in the heavily disputed regions of Gao and Kidal, and has not returned since. The SDC maintains a presence in the northern re-

Across the country, extremist groups regularly stage ambushes and high-profile suicide attacks. They attacked a resort popular with Westerners as recently as June 2017. A devastating attack inside a military compound near Gao in January of the same year killed 70 people, including Malian army soldiers as well as fighters belonging to the Platform and the Coordination assembled as part of the peace agreement. As of mid-2017, the effects of radicalization in Mali have largely been confined to the country and its neighbors; however, the popularity and influence of these groups outside of the peace process is steadily increasing. In March 2017, four major jihadist organizations announced their merger to create *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM). Since its formation, JNIM has prioritized bold high-profile attacks against army bases, UN camps, and citizens throughout Mali. Additionally, Islamist militants are increasingly targeting religious and community leaders in Central Mali to exert influence over the population. Such attacks, alongside widespread banditry and occasional ethnic clashes, prompted MINUSMA to move troops further south to the Mopti region this year.

Frequent violations of the ceasefire between signatory groups to the Algiers Accord have compounded instability. Pro-government militias have exchanged gunfire with anti-government militias on multiple occasions each year. This September though, the two main Tuareg alliances

claim to have settled most of their issues. Adding to the complexity of the situation however, alliances and group affiliation are continuously, and often opportunistically, shifting.

Outside of city centers, the far north remains effectively outside government control, and its population feels little allegiance or connection to the Malian state. Trans-Saharan trade and organized crime remain largely uninhibited and provide funds to the myriad armed groups. Further restricting Mali's development is the large-scale displacement of civilians due to violence, which started after the coup in 2012 and is now worsening after a recent spate of violent incidents in more populous regions. This mass migration of people will further strain the capacity and resources of both the Malian government and neighboring states.

The uncertain security situation, issues of humanitarian access, and the state's critical lack of capacity are complicating international development. NGO activities are largely concentrated in the southern half of Mali, further deepening existing inequalities in service and resource delivery. Where northern programs exist, they rarely stray from the banks of the Niger. Rapid urbanization and a booming adolescent population – often unemployed – strain state capacity. International NGOs generally implement projects concerning long-term growth and prosperity; few engage in re-

gion of Timbuktu and the central region of Mopti, both of which are highly insecure. Most visibly, Switzerland contributed to the reconstruction of the UNESCO heritage mosque in Timbuktu, which Islamist militants had destroyed.

Switzerland's commitment in Mali has not been without setbacks. In 1994, the head of the SDC in Mali, Jean-Claude Berberat, was assassinated. A Malian court found that a patrol of the Malian army had perpetrated the attack in retaliation for Berberat being too friendly with Tuareg communities, and thus allegedly supporting secessionism. Switzerland has always denied such claims, yet it has maintained contacts with non-radical elements of the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the largest separatist armed group, for several decades. In response to the assassination, Switzerland ended all support for the Malian government and retreated from northern Mali. The Malian government blocked investigations for many years and only apologized in 2001 for its handling of the issue. Similar accusations against Switzerland re-surfaced in 2012, when several Malian news media reported on the FDFAs logistical support for a meeting of the MNLA leadership in Burkina Faso. Both the MNLA and the Malian government have called on Switzerland for mediation several times in the past. Switzerland is no longer engaged in such efforts.

To coordinate efforts better, all Swiss agencies across ministries involved in Mali have met twice a year in the "Sahel Committee" since 2012. However, given the diversity of activities and varying approaches, a broad concerted effort is difficult to achieve, yet the Committee has been able to set some main objectives.

Overall, Switzerland's commitment to Mali seems comprehensive and ticks many boxes. It has a long-term focus, given the lasting contacts with Tuareg groups and continuous development efforts during the past 40 years. It aims at addressing many of Mali's structural issues by fostering dialog, reconciliation, and dealing with the past, and supporting decentralization, state capacity, water supply, vocational training, rural development, and food security across the country – many of which are common

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niches of Swiss development cooperation. The Swiss presence further aims at flexibility and conflict sensitivity, and at coordinating all Swiss activities within the country as well as across the Sahel.

Mali's Way Forward

If implemented well, these principles of Swiss engagement will prove beneficial for Mali and Switzerland. After all, insecurity and underdevelopment in Mali affect the wider Sahel region, and stabilizing it is in the best interest of Europe and Switzerland if the spread of violent extremism, illegal trade, and migration is to be curtailed. The presence of such issues in Mali has helped re-engage many European states in UN peacekeeping, and Switzerland tries to augment efforts by providing specific expertise to international missions. Demand for international assistance and cooperation in Mali is likely to remain high for decades to come. Mali continues to suffer from an acute lack of capacity in all areas of society, from governance to funding to human security. High-level engagement by

actors like the UN and the EU focuses to a large degree on strengthening military capacity and on combatting terrorism. While the efforts are important in the immediate term, they may be undermined in the long run if a comprehensive transition and adequate efforts to prevent violent extremism are not implemented effectively. International funding for peace and reconciliation efforts dropped drastically after the Algiers Accord was signed in 2015. Comprehensive support for stabilization cannot end with the inking of a piece of paper. Rather, NGOs and civil society tend to focus their efforts on long-term development projects, like increasing agricultural productivity to help combat food insecurity. In situations like that in Mali, international engagement by all actors must help build a stronger bridge between immediate and long-term engagement. Putting greater resources into lasting reforms, like effective security sector reform and increasing governance capacity, could help bridge the current divide. All international actors, including Switzerland, must seek the correct moral and financial balance between impactful short-term projects and longer-term, comprehensive development efforts if meaningful change is to be achieved.

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