



[International Reports \(Ai\) 2|2018, pp. 23–32](#)

An African Afghanistan?

On the German Troop Deployment in Mali

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A lack of state structures, more frequent attacks by Islamic extremists, persistent poverty, and a steady expansion of military involvement on the part of Europe – in German public debate, the mission in Mali is often compared to the situation in Afghanistan. Despite all efforts, strong words and support from Western nations, so far nothing has helped to significantly weaken the Islamists. Vast swathes of the country are beyond the control of the central government, allowing the Malian desert to become a haven for terrorist groups. Why is Germany involved, what is the situation today, and what does the future look like?

On 26 April 2018, the German Bundestag decided to continue the *Bundeswehr*'s mission in Mali as part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In a roll-call vote, 496 members of parliament voted in favour of the German government's motion, with 156 against.¹ This decision means the troop ceiling for the new mandate has been increased to 1,100. In early December 2017, Germany also assumed responsibility for managing Camp Castor in Gao, Mali. This will require more personnel, as will the additional protection measures and the planned expansion of the air base in Niamey, the capital of Niger. The EU-led training and advisory mission EUTM Mali will also continue its involvement. Germany plans to take over command of the EUTM Mali mission once again from November 2018 (as was the case in 2015/16). The German Parliament extended the mandate until 31 May 2019 and raised the troop ceiling from 300 to 350.² In theory, this would allow up to 1,450 German soldiers to serve in the two missions in West Africa; alongside Afghanistan, the Mali mission would thus be the *Bundeswehr*'s largest foreign military engagement.

Beforehand, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that Germany would "spend 1.7 billion euros on the Sahel region and its development between 2017 and 2020 alone" as part of a reorganisation of its development cooperation.³ Merkel also called for more international

support, stressing the importance of a coordinated approach to security and development policy. She remarked that combating illegal migration would require not only security but also development in the regions.

Germany's military engagement is intended to supplement development assistance and foreign policy initiatives for Mali. As recently as late February 2018, comprehensive military and development assistance was discussed with France and the EU during the G5 Sahel Conference.⁴ As a core country of the Sahel zone, according to the German government, Mali plays a key role in the stability and development of the entire Sahel region, not least because of the cross-border nature of challenges such as terrorism, organised crime, irregular migration and smuggling. The German government estimates that additional expenditure for the period from 1 May 2018 to 31 May 2019 will amount to some 268.6 million euros. It identifies the stabilisation of Mali as a priority for Germany's engagement in the Sahel region and a key goal of the government's Africa policy. 2018 will be a decisive year for Mali as it faces presidential and parliamentary elections. It would therefore be vital to stabilise the country with the help of MINUSMA and EUTM. It is also envisaged that the missions in Mali will cooperate with the new regional force set up by the G5 Sahel states. In the future, German soldiers may also be deployed in Niger, Mauritania and Chad in



Military presence: French soldiers already engaged in battle in Mali prior to the official start of EUTM and MINUSMA.
Source: © Joe Penney, Reuters.

order to offer advice and training, particularly to the new G5 Sahel Joint Force. The plan is to provide logistical assistance in developing infrastructure, support with the transportation of consumer goods, as well as help with transporting casualties within the country. Mali in West Africa is about three and a half times the size of Germany and has approximately 10,000 regular soldiers.⁵

The Genesis of Military Engagement in Mali

By 2012, Mali was already in a state of severe crisis. The ongoing conflict between the Tuareg rebels in the north and the Malian government had been smouldering for decades. It reached

a new peak in the spring of 2012, a direct result of the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, as Philippe Hugon, Africa expert at the IRIS political institute in Paris, observed at the time: “When the Libyan government fell apart, rocket launchers and anti-tank mines went with them. All kinds of groups had access to these weapons. They included the Tuareg, who fought for Gaddafi. Suddenly these people were left empty-handed because of course it was impossible to join the Malian or Libyan army. That’s why they joined the rebellion”, says Hugon.⁶ The struggle of the so-called National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement pour la Libération de l’Azawad*, MNLA), a Tuareg movement for an independent Berber state called

Azawad, received new impetus when heavily armed Tuareg returned to Mali from Libya.

Just a few months later, in April 2012, the Tuareg overran the weak Malian government troops in the north in the space of a few weeks and declared territorial independence. The advance of the rebels was favoured by a military coup in the capital. In Bamako on 22 March, a group of officers seized power and forced President Amadou Toumani Touré to flee. The soldiers claimed to be unhappy with the government's feeble attempts to tackle the crisis in the north. As a result, Mali effectively split in two: the rebel state in the north, which was not internationally recognised, and the territory in the south of the country that was still under the control of the central government.

The UN Security Council addressed the situation in Mali in December 2012. It passed Resolution 2085, authorising the deployment of an African-led International Support Mission to Mali. However, by the beginning of January 2013 the Malian army visibly deteriorated after many months of fighting. The rebels were advancing on the strategically important city of Mopti, which provides access to the capital, Bamako. This led the president of Mali's transitional government, Dioncounda Traoré, to formally request military support from France to prevent the jihadist offensive.

On the evening of 11 January 2013, French President François Hollande announced that French troops had, that afternoon, actively engaged in the conflict in Mali. He said the objective was to support Mali's government troops in their fight against "terrorist elements". He noted that the operation would last as long as necessary. A few days later, at a press conference in Dubai, Hollande stated that French troops would not leave Mali and terminate the operation until Mali was secure and had a legitimate government and electoral process. He added that the terrorists would no longer be allowed to threaten Mali's territorial integrity. He outlined three main objectives of the operation:

- Stop terrorists trying to control the country;
- Ensure that Bamako is secure, along with the several thousand French nationals who live there;
- Enable Mali to restore its territorial integrity, with the help of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), supported by France.⁷

On 20 January, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian declared that the aim of what the French had now named *Opération Serval* was the complete end of any Islamist control over parts of the country. So France was now using military force against the Islamists. The decisive factor here was the realisation that not only were the Islamists committing large-scale murder, they also had the potential to destabilise the entire region over the long-term. Commenting on the French intervention, President Hollande said that the very existence of this "friendly state, the security of its people and that of our compatriots" was at stake. He said Mali was facing a "terrorist aggression from the north" of the country, which was notorious for its "brutality and fanaticism".⁸

However, Hollande initially only wanted to help train Malian soldiers, saying the direct deployment of troops to Mali should be left to African countries. France would only intervene in the wake of an international resolution – this was the message from Paris just a few days before troops were deployed. Nevertheless, the advance of the Islamists led Hollande to change his mind. This unilateral decision initially attracted international criticism.

According to Merkel, terrorism in Mali is also a threat to Europe.

In January 2013, in the course of the EU's internal discussions on how to support AFISMA, German Chancellor Merkel met with Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara, who at the time

was Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). She pledged initial support for the mission that was planned to involve some 3,000 troops, by supplying two German Transall transport aircraft. Following talks with François Hollande, the Chancellor also stressed “we are under a lot of time pressure”, saying: “Terrorism in Mali is a threat not just for Africa, but also for Europe.” She added that every country “must determine its capacity to contribute without endangering the safety of its soldiers involved in other missions”⁹.

EUTM and MINUSMA

An extraordinary summit of EU foreign ministers was held on 17 January 2013, also attended by Mali’s foreign minister Hubert Coulibaly. This officially approved the launch of EUTM Mali, the EU’s military training mission in Mali. The German government agreed to provide personnel to support EUTM Mali. The objectives of EUTM Mali were defined as follows:

- To provide training and advice at key Malian military locations with a particular focus on command personnel;
- To advise Mali’s Defence Ministry and the Malian armed forces’ command staff and training institutions;
- To support and encourage cooperation between the armed forces of the G5 Sahel states to increase their cross-border capabilities;
- To advise personnel deployed by the G5 Sahel states at their headquarters;
- To train formations deployed by the G5 Sahel states in Mali.¹⁰

On 28 February 2013, the Bundestag for the first time approved the deployment of German troops to support AFISMA based on UN Security Council Resolution 2085 (2012). Germany directly supported AFISMA by providing air transport capabilities for conveying supplies from neighbouring countries to and within Mali and carried out air transport and air refuelling for French forces. After the UN Security Council’s decision on 25 April 2013 under Resolution

2100 (2013) to establish the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), German support for AFISMA was transferred to MINUSMA following approval by the German Bundestag on 27 June 2013.¹¹

More than 50 nations are currently participating in the stabilisation mission in Mali with around 11,000 blue helmets, 1,500 police officers and civilian personnel.¹² Germany is also providing personnel for the Forces Headquarters (FHQ) in Bamako and is operating an air transport base in Niamey, the capital of neighbouring Niger, to supplement material and personnel transport and medical care for casualties. The German contingent is supporting MINUSMA’s mission, which at present includes the following aspects:

- Maintaining the ceasefire;
- Supporting the implementation of the peace agreement;
- Protecting the civil population;
- Stabilising key population centres;
- Helping to restore state authority;
- Supporting the political process and protecting human rights;
- Helping to secure humanitarian aid;
- Protecting cultural heritage and sites in cooperation with UNESCO.

In January 2016 the German Bundestag approved the extension and expansion of the mission, which involved raising the troop ceiling from 150 to 650. This expansion of Germany’s contribution was partly used to relieve the Dutch forces on the ground and was primarily focused on reconnaissance capabilities.

The disagreement between Germany and France in the wake of France’s unilateral action in Mali was resolved with a joint statement by Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande at the EU-Africa Summit in Brussels. They both stated their intention of working together in Africa. Hollande said that, through their friendship, the two countries make a stronger joint contribution to security policy in Europe than is the case between other states. “In addition, we



Counting votes: The persistent weakness of state structures inevitably leads to legitimization crises.

Source: © Joe Penney, Reuters.

want to ensure that this friendship also extends to, and develops on, the African continent.”¹³ The Enable and Enhance Initiative (E2I) played a major role at the summit. With this, “we want to enable Africans to build up their own security structures and then equip them with the necessary materials,” explained Merkel.

Military Alliances

In addition to Mali’s national armed forces, the international community is striving towards a military alliance with the G5 states’ new

regional intervention force. This 5,000-strong multinational force has been created largely because of the sluggish implementation of the African Standby Forces. The aim is to bring together units from the G5 states of Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Chad under one single command. This new joint force will enable a fast military response to regional crises. The countries’ five leaders established the *G5 du Sahel* (group of five) in February 2014. At the G5 summit in February 2017, it was decided to establish the G5 Sahel Joint Force under a joint high command, to be operational by



spring 2018. In April 2017, the African Union's Peace and Security Council approved the strategic deployment concept, and the UN Security Council also finally welcomed the deployment of the joint force with Resolution 2359 (2017). The soldiers and police officers from the G5 nations are spread across seven battalions. They are commanded from a joint headquarters in Mali and three regional commands (West, Central and East) focusing on the three interstate borders on the north-south lines between Mauritania and Mali, between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and between Niger and Chad.

The G5 Sahel states will provide ten million US dollars each to develop the force, while the EU will contribute 50 million US dollars for infrastructure, equipment and training. France will contribute eight million US dollars, 70 vehicles and communications equipment to relieve *Opération Barkhane*. The total estimated cost of the G5 Sahel Joint Force is 432 million US dollars. Germany is supporting the establishment of the regional command in Niamey in Niger as part of the infrastructure measures. The German government is providing equipment for the G5 Defence Academy in Mauritania and is financing the establishment of a regional training network in the area of biosafety with funds from the upgrading initiative.¹⁴

The Political and Economic Situation in Mali

Ever since Mali was founded, the central government has never had full control of the north of the country. The lack of state structures and hence the guarantee that the central government is able to assert itself, is not a problem caused by the 2012 rebellion, but has instead existed for decades. As a result, in large swathes of the country the government is incapable of safeguarding security or meeting the basic needs of its people in terms of legal certainty, education, health and infrastructure. This encourages the formation of armed groups of all kinds, whether that be religiously motivated terrorism or for criminal reasons.

The immense military efforts and expenditure on the part of the international community have so far failed to bring any sustained improvement to the security situation in Mali.

The lack of state structures is also particularly noticeable with regard to the future prospects of Mali's fast-growing population. High unemployment, rising food prices, an inadequate

education system – this is clearly an ideal breeding ground for economic, political and religiously motivated conflicts, with corresponding implications for the security situation. The massive military efforts and expenditure on the part of the international community have so far failed to bring any sustained improvement to the security situation in Mali. Although the country elected a new president, Ibrahim B. Keita, following the international military intervention in 2013, the north of the country remained unstable. Islamists continued to attack, while the Tuareg minority was subjected to retaliatory action. At the end of 2013, the Tuareg ended the ceasefire with Mali's central government. After the rebels had recaptured many cities on the borders with Algeria and Niger at the end of May 2014, a new peace agreement was negotiated in March 2015; not all parties involved signed it, however. Extremist groups in the north are still committing violent acts today. The situation remains tense and has deteriorated in some areas over recent years, which is a key reason why the international community has extended and expanded its military engagement.

Mali's internal economic and political problems should not be underestimated as contributing factors to the security crisis. Mali is one of the world's poorest countries. Agriculture is effectively its only economic sector, despite the fact that only a small part of the land can be cultivated. According to a government study published at the end of 2017, 4.1 million Malians will be affected by food insecurity by mid-2018. Around 800,000 people, mainly in northern and central Mali, are in need of humanitarian aid.¹⁵ Focusing the international debate on the security sector, that is to say the threat posed by terrorism and rebel groups from the north, has pushed the domestic, home-grown dimensions of the situation in Mali into the background, as Africa expert Denis Tull of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) notes in his analysis.¹⁶ He sees the "logic of the evacuation of endogenous political factors" as an attempt by the Malian government to ignore social and political factors in the Mali crisis and in this way negate its own responsibilities.

Few states in the Sahel region are able to retain a monopoly on the use of force in their own territory.

Indeed, the generally widespread weakness of state structures is not a new phenomenon in Mali, but it is one that persists today. Like its neighbours in the Sahel region, few state structures are able to assert a monopoly on the use of force in their own territory. This means their sphere of influence becomes limited to a few provinces, and often only to the regions in the immediate vicinity of the capital and seat of government. This inevitably creates a problem of legitimacy among the population. When state institutions are unable to guarantee a minimum level of security and social services, it leaves a gap for other actors to fill. In March 2015, Annette Weber and Guido Steinberg of the SWP produced a study of jihadism in Africa, which shed light on this vicious circle of eroding structures and the rise of terrorist groups.¹⁷ According to this, the people of Mali lack confidence in state bodies, and indeed often perceive them as a threat. Moreover, Mali's peripheral populations are often closer to their neighbours on the other side of the border than to their own governments – an explosive long-term consequence of arbitrarily drawn state borders during the colonial era.

Conclusion

Europe's security is increasingly threatened by the consequences of developments in Africa. Particularly since the beginning of the refugee crisis in mid-2015, this long neglected fact has finally reached those who make decisions on security policy in Germany, too. The effects of civil wars and other conflicts, corruption, mismanagement and overpopulation are primarily mass refugee movements towards Europe (with Germany a favoured destination), but also the growth of Islamist terrorism, which finds fertile ground for recruiting new members in the dissatisfaction of the masses. Ungoverned regions provide havens

for terrorism and organised crime. In turn, terrorism and crime are having a detrimental effect on the majority of the population's living standards, such that people are increasingly seeking a brighter future outside their own country. This downward spiral of war and economic decline has been evident in Mali since 2012. Even then it was clear that it is in Germany's interests to make an active contribution to the ceasefire and to restoring stability in Mali. Not only are German interests affected when it comes to avoiding mass illegal migration, which would overwhelm Germany's overall capacity and willingness to accept foreigners; it is also a matter of drying up breeding grounds for international terrorism, securing trade routes and helping to make West Africa a region where people have a chance of living in dignity. The protection of Mali's natural resources and people's livelihoods is therefore also in the vital self-interests of Germany and Europe.

The weakness of state institutions in Mali is primarily due to the ruling elite's lack of political will as regards taking effective steps to introduce reforms over the past decades, which would have legitimised political power and encouraged stronger economic development. This also – and particularly – applies to the security sector. Policymakers may call for a sustainable security architecture, but at the same time, they are extremely cautious when it comes to actually satisfying this demand by providing the adequate resources and skills.

By focusing on security, other urgent topics such as employment and education will fall by the wayside.

Faced with the bleak situation in 2012 – to quote Denis Tull once again – the international community has, since then, rightly responded with a range of political, military and development-related assistance.¹⁸ However, in view of the government's lack of initiative, it is time to set new standards for external aid. We must ensure

that the status of being an international security risk is not used to outsource urgently needed reform projects to foreign actors – in this case the French and German military – so as to avoid having to do something themselves. There is also a danger that, by focusing the discussion on security, other equally urgent topics such as health care, education and employment will fall by the wayside.

The causes of the ongoing crisis in Mali lie not primarily in the security sector, but rather in the lack of rule-of-law structures, inadequate infrastructure and high unemployment. Even the most ambitious military support mission can do little to tackle these persistent problems in the long term – a lesson that should have been learned from the disappointing results of the Afghanistan mission. Therefore, civilian and military instruments available for peacekeeping and development cooperation should be used in a systematic, coordinated way, including by Germany. This requires a well thought-out strategy that is adequately based on one's own political and economic interests. In light of the above-mentioned threat that African wars and conflicts pose for Europe, it is obvious that Germany's own interests are largely congruent with those of African nations. Political and financial engagement in Mali of course requires the willingness to enter into long-term commitments too, and if necessary in the face of public opposition at home. The situation in Mali and neighbouring countries will not change drastically in just a few years – neither in the security sector nor any other sector.

Another aspect to consider is the evaluation of the existing military engagement. To date, there have been a lack of opportunities to determine exactly who the Malian armed forces nominate in order to benefit from German military training assistance (such as EUTM). Moreover, at the end of their training, the participants are not followed up, and no checks are made to see whether the training was successful. The question of whether the quality of Mali's army has actually improved owing to the international training remains largely unanswered. And last

but not least, the question must be asked at the political level in Germany as to whether the *Bundeswehr* will be able to cope in the long term with the material and personnel demands of Mali in terms of equipment and training levels. The security policy challenges facing Germany have increased significantly over recent years. It does not take much political foresight to predict that this trend is likely to continue. The development of a coherent strategy and intensive coordination and communication with potential partners – inside and outside the European Union – should be a top priority when making foreign and security policy. This particularly applies to the difficult political and economic climate in the Sahel states in the medium term – and above all to Mali.

–translated from German–

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