

**Mali's Fractured Landscape Between Imposed Securitization and Localized Resistance****Introduction**

Mali is an ethnically diverse, landlocked West African country, which has been best known for its Trans-Saharan imperial past and rich architectural and musical legacy. In the 1990's Mali was considered one of the most politically and socially stable countries in Africa, due in part to its democratically elected president. Since then, the political and security situation has deteriorated rapidly and, in 2012, escalated to violent conflict. Mali has become a theatre for international peacekeeping forces and terrorist groups. The latter operates under the cloak of religion. This brief seeks to highlight the underlying reasons that dominate the security conditions on the ground and which hamper peaceful developments in Mali. Understanding these factors may prove relevant to determining important preconditions for a future path towards political settlement, greater social justice, and positive peace. The brief argues that inner social cohesion and trust, not a foreign military presence, is key to reconciliation.

**The UN's Mali engagement is said to be the most dangerous peacekeeping mission in the world**

As Mali's security situation is currently deteriorating further, the UN's MINUSMA Peace Operation (Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission of the United Nations in Mali) is considered to be one of the most dangerous operations globally. Citing MINUSMA's Force Commander, Danish Major-General Michael Lollesgaard, in seeking to stabilize the vast Sahelian country, the 53 troop-contributing nations face casualties and threats to a degree never known before in a UN mission. In 2016, the number of attacks has dramatically increased compared to last year. Those targeted are mainly soldiers of both the Malian army and MINUSMA. Just in early July, a UN patrol north of Gao was attacked by militant groups. The mission has suffered 101 casualties since its establishment in 2013, making it the deadliest

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deployment for blue helmets in the last years (Newsweek 2016 and Verdens Gang (2016). MINUSMA is overstrained and unable to cope with the actual situation on the ground in order to stabilize Mali. This becomes clear when further following Lollesgaard:

“There were more terrorist attacks, more criminality and more lethal conflicts between the different ethnic groups than ever before. We have almost 11,000 soldiers in the north, and the Malian government itself has powerful forces. But Mali is huge, we simply cannot control the entire territory” (Newsweek 2016).

### **From separatism and deteriorating governance**

It is important to understand there are domestic and regional causes for the current political strife, social conditions and rise in armed violence in the Malian theatre. The conflict is shaped by a complex combination of the historical factors and contemporary circumstances, including spill-over effects of the 2011 Western-imposed regime change in Libya, which resulted in the return of numerous insurgent fighters to Mali. However in 2012 it was Tuareg-Islamists that exploited the power vacuum left behind by the absence of national governance in northern Mali. They took control over significant parts of land in the north, at the same time - because of this territory's ongoing marginalization and relative poverty as manifested in the lack of good governance, income opportunities, basic public services and security provision - a proclamation of an independent state seeking self-determination of the northern regions was declared by armed Tuareg separatists (Nyirabikali/Diarra/Maiga 2014). Over time, the core conflict between the Tuareg and the Malian government has degenerated and fragmented along inter-ethnic lines resulting in conflict and violence between communities. Thus, great and complex mix of inter- and intra-community conflicts has developed in the Malian north (Sköns/Nyirabikali/Palmgren 2016). The outbreak of armed conflict not only provoked violent abuses including the recruitment of child soldiers, but also several hundreds of cases of gender-based violence. In the north of Mali specifically, a region that borders Algeria, Niger and Mauritania, the conflict has damaged the already weak social fabric, and further undermined the foundations of Malian society (Human Rights Watch 2014).

One has to acknowledge key facets of the social demography which underpin a skewed political representation. In Mali females make up half of the population and

about 65% are under the age 25. However, both of these social categories have limited public representation, access to power and basic human rights, since older men dominate the social and political spheres (Ndaye/Mohamed 2015). Not only is this a source of inter-generational tension, but most young people are struggling to find work and are therefore especially prone to recruitment by armed groups, who offer income and a sense of peer-based community (SIPRI Lecture 2016). This dynamic is exacerbated by economic conditions. Despite being among Africa's largest cotton producers, Mali is one of the world's poorest countries. The complicating facts of mass youth unemployment, their liability to join armed groups, and that women lack representation in peace negotiations, significantly hamper the potential of a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration process. Malian youth are indeed important actors in advocating for the peace agreement and democracy as they are the country's future leaders (SIPRI Lecture 2016).

### **No success without a military component?**

Even though the UN has increasingly had to confront the scourge of terrorism, its Mali mission marks the first time a significant peacekeeping contingent has been sent to help a state regain control over areas contested by armed groups. But to prevent youth from being recruited by armed groups, the fight against armed struggle under Islamist banner must have a soft civilian-based approach. This brings institution building and the creation of prospects and work into focus. However, without a complimentary military component and dramatic security sector reform, this is not going to work. Having as main aim to overthrow governments they deem apostate and to spread Islamic law, the sharia, by installing fundamentalist regimes, armed groups such as al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, MUJAO or Ansar Dine are highly advanced militarily and have little or no interest in dialogue or a settlement (CTC 2011).

Even though the Malian parties involved signed a peace agreement in 2015, this is only a political settlement and interlinkages between armed political conflict, Islamist violence, and organized crime are still rampant and pose a major barrier to national development, peace and reconciliation (International Peace Institute 2016). UN's MINUSMA peace operation is providing security in some parts of the country, with a concentration on the capital area of Bamako. However, grievances persist and new actors emerge as the conflict develops further into new phases. Prior to the

involvement of radical Islamist groups within the Tuareg rebellion in the north, political and economic marginalization drove the conflict, instead of religious beliefs and ethnicity. Today, however, there are new religious, ethnic, and societal dimensions to the crisis (The Guardian 2012).

### **The disappointment over the absence of reform is palpable**

Listening to Lollesgaard it becomes clear that the large size of the country is but one reason why the struggle cannot be solved by military action alone. Even though the December 2015 “Mali Mété” poll stated that 82% of the Malian respondents do not exactly know about the peace agreement’s content (FES 2015), it is this agreement’s slow implementation, and therefore delayed political and social reforms, that are actually the main cause for reignited tensions, this has been reflected by both the MINUSMA commander and political observers. However, the situation is not hopeless – this summer parties signed an agreement on the implementation of the 2015 peace accord. With this, the stakeholders reaffirm what was already agreed on the year before: The creation of Municipal Transitional Administrations in the north and the disarmament and quartering of armed groups to then carry-out joint patrols with the Malian army. Even though this is not the answer to the complex array of challenges it can be seen as a chance to prevent the worsening of the crisis. In order to stabilize the situation, a fundamental reform of the Malian state is necessary. The population is frustrated with the current state of central governance that originally triggered the rebellion and has, since then, become even worse. "If the government does not soon implement a change, many will pick-up arms." In Mali, a local said, only the one who is violent is heard. Obtaining a weapon in Mali is easy, as “they are sold like peanuts here” (IPG 2016). Great numbers of people in the north are dissatisfied and threaten with renewed violence. As recent clashes between demonstrators and police forces have shown, this kind of rhetoric should be taken seriously. Hundreds gathered to protest against the set-up of the Transitional Government in northern Mali, however, the appointment of these Interim Governments is part of the peace agreement that rebel groups together with the government negotiated in summer 2015. The intention is that Interim Governments will hold executive power until the situation is safe enough to carry-out free elections for regular regional governments.

## **Conclusion**

The reason for Mali's deep crisis is only partly linked to the emergence of Islamist groups. Other reasons are the mutual alienation between the populace and the government and growing distrust in the leaders. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, once promisingly elected in August 2013, is also to blame for the growing alienation between the Malian population and his government. His questionable handling of the national budget has even attracted the attention of the International Monetary Fund (Ndaye/Mohamed 2015).

The international community strives in various ways to support a positive development in Mali. This is being done by deploying soldiers and observers with MINUSMA as well as granting development aid on a grand scale. The international community also leads negotiations between the national parties involved. When "action to combat the causes of flight to Europe" became the slogan of European politics, money for relief projects became quite easy to obtain. Europe is trying everything to prevent more refugees heading west. These would be important approaches, granted the UN mission is appropriately equipped with both a solid mandate and the right quality and quantity of staff, weapons and civilian expertise. Currently, however, according to the mission requirements and actual situation on the ground, the UN mission has too little of everything (Newsweek 2016). In northern Mali, the use of funds and donations is impossible to control due to the poor security situation. Therefore, it is important that aid is not blindly being distributed simply to assure voters in Europe that their governments are committed to prevent further refugee streams. The consent to further foreign support to the Malian government is accompanied by a caveat – despite intensive international, especially European, engagement there is only little improvement in the security condition and the fight against hunger, poverty and lack prospects for the country's youth.

"Justice" is the buzzword from the local population in answer to the question what is needed to stabilize the country (Newsweek 2015). Even for Malian conditions Law and Justice in Mali is currently exceptionally corrupt. However, "peace" is only possible if the ruling elite does not keep power and wealth for its self but shares according to basic democratic rules. In addition to the provision of weapons and

funds it is rather consistent political actions by the international community that can have an impact to promote democracy.

The reasons for the Malian crisis are multifaceted and are both rooted in the society itself, but also in the region's volatile ethnic and geopolitical landscape. Spurred on by politics of inequality and neglect, especially in the north, the absent of governance and lack of trust in authorities triggered the 2012 armed rebellion. It is important to understand that sending western troops and money does not simply lead to a peace-enabling environment in Mali. It may even contain a no peace no war situation. Western powers presence is also controversial. One should not forget that Mali was a French colony. This historical colonial backdrop has to be handled with a great amount of understanding. Institutions such as EU and UN have certain tools on hand which can be crucial to both support good-governance and institution building and to ultimately restore a basic level of trust in authorities. A sustainable and effective migration and development policy would much more contribute to abated flight to Europe than border controls or policies of deterrence do, as people usually flee West Africa from social and economic misery. Local-ownership and citizens satisfaction are key to cooperation and a brighter future in this hard-trying West African nation. Of equal importance is it to break-down aged men's monopoly of power in the public and private domain, and to open up the society and state apparatus for full participation and political influence of disfranchised women, youth and marginalized ethnic groups.

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