



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 7614, 8 June 2016

Mali: June 2016 update

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1. Background: the 2012-13 crisis

In March 2012 the military overthrew the government of Amadou Toumani Touré in Mali. Within weeks of the coup, a coalition of separatist Tuareg rebels and militant Islamist armed groups with links to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) pushed the national army out of the north of the country. The coalition split up quickly, leaving the militant Islamists largely in control.

Political negotiations began to try and draw parts of the rebel coalition into a political process. However, in January 2013, a sudden military push southwards by rebels appeared to open up the possibility that the entire country might fall to them in the near future. This provoked an urgent French military intervention (Operation Serval) to stop the rebel advance and, indeed, roll it back. This was achieved.

However, the rebels regrouped and turned to insurgency. With the heavy involvement of the international community, a ceasefire agreement with the main Tuareg nationalist group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was achieved in June 2013 and a presidential election was held in August, resulting in a victory for [Ibrahim Boubacar Keita](#) (IBK), who remains in office to this day. In July 2013, the UN Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) began operating on the ground.

These developments were intended to act as the foundations for the stabilisation and reconstruction of Mali over the years that followed.

2. What has happened since then?

Progress towards the stabilisation and reconstruction of Mali since then has been halting. In the North, arguably it remains premature to describe the situation as 'post-conflict' in character.

On the plus side, after several false starts, a comprehensive peace agreement (the [Algiers Accord](#)) was finally signed in June 2015 and there have been significant local initiatives to promote "[peace from below](#)". However, many of the provisions of the peace deal are yet to be implemented and some local Islamist armed groups remain outside the ambit of the agreement – most notably Ansar Eddine and the Macina Liberation Front.

The Malian opposition groups that are involved in ongoing negotiations with the Mali Government have come together in a coalition called the Coordination of Azawad Movements. The MNLA is the largest group in this coalition. The government also has the

broad support in the negotiations of a number of private militias, which have organised themselves into a coalition called the Platform.

While French forces – which are now operating in the country under the Sahel-wide [Operation Barkhane](#) – have struck some serious blows against these insurgent groups, attacks against them, the national army and MINUSMA continue to claim casualties too. An [attack](#) on a hotel in Bamako in November 2015, in which at least 20 died and for which different groups have claimed responsibility, received considerable international media attention.

Also still operating in Mali are jihadist groups with a more global agenda such as Al Mourabitoun, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and AQIM.

In his March 2016 report on the situation in Mali, UN Secretary-General Ban ki-Moon [said](#):

I remain concerned [...] that actual progress in the implementation of the peace agreement remains limited [...] the northern and central parts of Mali remain threatened by criminal, violent extremist and terrorist groups [...]

Three years on, most independent analysts remain cautious in their assessment of Mali's future prospects. Critics argue that the international community is still not doing enough to encourage a "genuine change of governance in Mali". They assert that Mali's structural problems stem not so much from the fact that it is a weak state that is unable to control significant parts of its own territory, but from the violent and unjust actions of that state during the period leading to the 2012-13 crisis. One former French diplomat (he was reportedly fired) has [described](#) the state in the North as "predatory, even murderous".

Similar arguments have been extended to the Sahel region as a whole. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year, one analyst has [argued](#):

[...] the administration of President François Hollande has taken a highly militarized and proactive approach to counterterrorism in Africa's Sahel. In military terms, the results of France's efforts have been remarkable. Serval and its successor mission, Operation Barkhane, have managed to overcome substantial obstacles of distance, climate, and lack of infrastructure to achieve impressive successes against armed groups across the region.

Despite these military successes, however, Operation Barkhane may be doing more harm than good, since it provides crucial support to the repressive governments that are at the heart of the Sahel's problems. A lighter French footprint focused on local peace-building efforts would cost less and be more effective in bringing real stability to the region.

Defenders of the international response to Mali's crisis respond that 'changing governance' in Mali is a long-term challenge – and that there is a limit to what can be achieved unless the security situation further improves.

3. What has been the UK's role?

There was considerable British parliamentary and media attention on the Mali crisis during 2012-13 – particularly when British military personnel briefly provided [logistical and technical support](#) to the 2013 French military intervention. However, British forces were never involved in combat roles and the crisis quickly receded into the background.

But successive UK governments since then have certainly not forgotten about Mali, viewing developments there very much as part of a single regional (and multi-dimensional, embracing issues such as terrorism, migration, narcotics and the illicit trade in small arms)

security challenge. In practice, a 'division of labour' has emerged, with France taking the lead on Mali and the wider Sahel region and the UK doing the same on Nigeria.

An important distinction remains, however: France (with the consent of the Mali Government) continues to have a combat military force operating in Mali and across the Sahel more widely, while Britain does not in Nigeria.

UK aid is currently being spent on Mali and the Sahel through the following projects:

[Support to conflict prevention initiatives in Mali through community level conflict reduction and technical support to multilaterals](#)

[Addressing conflict risks to development in Mali](#)

[Providing Humanitarian Assistance in Sahel Emergencies \(PHASE\)](#)

[Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters \[GB-1-202921\]](#)

The EU has large-scale humanitarian and development [programmes](#) in Mali and the Sahel region.

The Prime Minister has not appointed a new Special Envoy to the Sahel since Stephen O'Brien left the position in 2015. There is an EU Special Representative for the Sahel, Mr [Angel Losada](#).

The British Peace Support Team (South Africa) has recently been involved in training UN peacekeepers deployed to Mali. In Financial Year 2015/16, the UK is [contributing](#) £37.5 million towards the cost of MINUSMA. Two British military personnel have been [deployed](#) with MINUSMA each year since 2014.

The EU has a support mission ([EUCAP](#)) to Mali's police, gendarmerie and national guard and also operates a training mission ([EUTM](#)) to support the rebuilding of the armed forces.

The UK Government has [welcomed](#) the recent decision of the International Criminal Court to open a case against [Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi](#) for allegedly ordering and participating in the destruction of cultural sites and artefacts in Timbuktu in 2012.