

THE LIPTAKO–GOURMA AUTHORITY'S JOINT TASK FORCE: THE SOLUTION TO RISING INSECURITY IN MALI, NIGER, AND BURKINA FASO?

By Dr. Ashley N. Bybee

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Niger's president reads a statement announcing the formation of new joint task force to fight insecurity in the Liptako-Gourma area. (Source: <http://www.presidence.ne/article/discours-de-son-excellence-monsieur-issoufou-mahamadou-president-de-la-republique-du-niger#sthash.eDSN4vXg.LNUWAFfc.dpbs>.)

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THE UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING MISSION IN MALI ENTERS ITS FIFTH YEAR

By Richard J. Pera

As the United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali ([MINUSMA](#)) prepares to enter its fifth year in April 2017, challenges abound: peacekeepers have sustained heavy losses and implementation of peace accords remains elusive. Still, improvements in training, tactics, and materiel, as well as new relationships with former rebels, appear to be showing positive results. With new leadership in place, where does MINUSMA stand after four years? [more...](#)



German defense minister Ursula von der Leyen, center spoke with German soldiers at Camp Castor near Gao, Mali Tuesday April 5, 2016. Von der Leyen stayed in Mali for a three-day visit and met soldiers of the German army stationed there as part of the Mission ASIFU-MINUSMA. (Source: Michael Kappeler/Pool Photo via AP)

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Background: Rising Insecurity Over the Past Year

An October 2016 attack on Nigerien security forces guarding a camp for Malian refugees [killed 22 soldiers](#) and prompted hundreds of refugees to [flee the border area](#) and relocate further north in the desert. On March 6, attacks killed [five gendarmes](#) in the Bankilare department near borders with Mali and Burkina Faso. On the same day, jihadists from Burkina Faso [attacked a Malian military post](#) in Boulkessi, killing at least a dozen Malian soldiers. In a village in northern Burkina Faso, jihadists, having warned weeks previously of attacks if schools taught anything other than the Quran, [killed two people](#), including a school official. Regrettably, these types of attacks have become common in the region over the last year, so much so that on March 4, 2017, the Government of Niger declared a [state of emergency](#) in the area near its border with Mali.

Three Sahelian terrorist groups – Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb – recently [announced](#) that they have merged under the name “Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen” (Support of Islam and Muslims) and pledged allegiance to al-Qaida. Looking ahead, this suggests that terrorist groups in the region will continue to pose a threat into the future.

A Military Mission for the Liptako-Gourma Authority

In response to this heightened insecurity, the governments of the three affected countries announced their intention to establish a joint task force under the purview of the Integrated Development Authority of the Liptako-Gourma Region (or Liptako-Gourma Authority). This organization was established in 1970 to promote development of mineral, energy, water, agricultural, grazing, and fishery resources within the Liptako-Gourma area (the contiguous areas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger). Adding a military mission to this organization represents a new concept for countering growing violence in the neighborhood. According to Nigerien President Issoufou Mahamadou, the [idea](#) is to “pool resources and efforts and information in order to achieve tangible results in the fight against terrorism, gangsterism and cross-border crime that affect the countries permanently of the subregion and hamper their development efforts.”

Lessons from the MNJTF

The experience of the MNJTF, which is a regional force countering Boko Haram, offers potential lessons for the Liptako-Gourma Authority. Although MNJTF troops planned to conduct operations that required joint coordination and planning, the [consensus](#) has been that the fight has been characterized more as individual operations by contributing countries than

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as a truly joint campaign. Chadian president Idriss Déby was [critical](#) of his Nigerian counterpart, citing a “definite deficit of coordination and lack of common action” when Nigerian troops failed to relieve Chadian soldiers after they liberated a Nigerian town that had been occupied by Boko Haram.

Command and control of the MNJTF also proved to be a contentious issue, with Nigeria [demanding](#) that it exert overall command of the joint force. Concerns over sovereignty also have the potential to affect operations and limit effectiveness. For example, Nigeria was initially reluctant to have foreign forces on its soil, which resulted in [lengthy deliberations](#) concerning the area of operations and whether neighboring countries would be permitted to conduct cross-border operations. These deliberations ultimately delayed the force’s deployment and [restricted](#) the ability of troops to pursue Boko Haram.

Conclusion

On the surface, the Liptako-Gourma Joint Task Force is a logical arrangement. First, it involves only those countries that are affected by the threat of terrorism in the region, thus promoting unity of effort and a common vision. Second, it recognizes the transnational nature of the threat and seeks to combat it with a concept that permits cross-border activities by the partners. Third, pooling resources to achieve a common goal is a sensible strategy for three countries with limited national resources. Last, such a force removes some of the bureaucracy and constraints associated with operations authorized by the UN or existing regional bodies. There are also, however, challenges that will affect the Task Force’s ability to conduct truly joint operations. Unless the governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have the means—in terms of resources and political commitment—to overcome potential issues related to sovereignty and command and control that the MNJTF faced, an alternative use of the Joint Task Force might be to provide a venue for the three countries to facilitate intelligence sharing, negotiate authorities to operate across each other’s borders, and coordinate the activities of existing forces on the ground.

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Background: The UN and Mali

[UN efforts in Mali date back to 2012](#), following a rebellion in northern Mali, during which ethnic Tuaregs, supported by al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other Islamist groups, declared independence and overran government positions. France intervened militarily, pushing rebels northward and stabilizing the government. A cease-fire and preliminary peace agreement were negotiated in April 2013, and [MINUSMA was established](#) to protect civilians and implement the agreement. The cease-fire broke down, and by the end of 2013 UN peacekeepers found themselves in the middle of an active insurgency. [Since 2013](#), 114 UN personnel have been killed—72 by what the UN calls “malicious acts” (e.g., improvised explosive devices (IEDs)). Fatalities in [2016](#) exceeded those of 2015. [The Washington Post](#) recently described MINUSMA as “the world’s most dangerous UN mission.”

In June 2016, the UN extended [MINUSMA’s mandate](#) through June 2017 and tasked peacekeepers to “support implementation of the political and institutional reforms . . . and to support the Government’s efforts for the effective restoration and extension of State authority and rule of law . . .” In response to increasing terrorism, [MINUSMA was directed](#) “to take robust and active steps to counter asymmetric attacks.” This directive did not include a counterterrorism mission. The UN requested member states to provide intelligence capabilities, counter-IED training and equipment, and additional armored vehicles. It also authorized an increase in personnel by 20 percent to 15,209.

MINUSMA’s Current Capabilities

UN efforts so far in Mali in 2017 have had mixed results. [On the positive side](#), much of the force has received counter-IED training, and more armored vehicles have arrived. Also, [intelligence](#) is being integrated into operations, and surveillance capabilities, including unmanned aerial vehicles, have been introduced. Nonetheless, member states have not fulfilled all UN requests for personnel and equipment. For example, current [MINUSMA manning](#) remains nearly 2,000 below the UN-authorized ceiling. The total number of armored vehicles is also well below the target level.

Western European contributions, while small in number, are critical because they include professional personnel and sophisticated equipment. The [Netherlands announced](#) late last year it would redeploy four AH-64/Apache attack and three CH-47/Chinook heavy-lift transport helicopters from Mali in 2017. Dutch troop strength would be reduced from 400 to 290, but the Netherlands would continue to man and lead MINUSMA’s intelligence cell. These redeployments would have left MINUSMA with only three Salvadoran attack and three Bangladeshi utility helicopters. Fortunately, [Germany later announced](#) it would contribute attack and transport helicopters as well as additional troops. [The Canadian government signaled](#) it may rejoin UN peacekeeping efforts by contributing up to 600 troops and equipment to the UN mission in Mali. The addition of Canadian forces would boost UN capabilities.



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Recent Attacks

So far in 2017, there has been only one UN fatality: on January 24, [a Chadian peacekeeper was killed](#) and two others were injured during a mortar attack on a UN base near Kidal. If the trend continues, MINUSMA fatalities in 2017 would represent a decrease of over 75 percent compared to [2016](#). The question remains whether improvements in UN military capabilities, processes, and training are starting to have an impact.

But attacks on Malian targets have proven more deadly. For example, on [January 18](#), an AQIM suicide bomber detonated an explosive-laden truck at the [Malian Army garrison in Gao](#), killing 76 and wounding over 100 Malian soldiers and former rebels who had joined the peace process. The garrison was [protected](#) by “a few Bangladeshi peacekeepers” who were outside a “flimsy metal gate.” Hervé Ladsous, Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, [said](#) “... the suicide attack ... was clearly aimed at derailing the peace process.”

On March 5, at least [12 Malian soldiers](#) were killed in an attack on an Army outpost near the Burkina Faso border. The jihadist group [Ansarul Islam](#) reportedly was responsible. Note that this same group claimed to have killed 12 Burkinabe soldiers in December 2016.

Key Developments

On March 2, three Islamist groups (AQIM, Ansar Dine, and al-Mourabitoun), which previously attacked UN positions in Mali, announced that they had [merged into one organization](#) under the al-Qaida banner, with an apparent goal of enhancing their future ability to oppose UN efforts.

Since 2014, about 3,000 French troops have been engaged in counterterrorism operations across the Sahel as part of [Operation BARKHANE](#). On February 6, the Sahel G5 group (Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania) [announced](#) that it would seek European funding to establish a [combined counterterrorism force](#). All five states currently contribute to MINUSMA, and it is not clear if any of the five would withdraw UN peacekeepers in order to support the new force.

The UN reached a milestone in late February 2017 when about 50 former Tuareg rebels donning distinctive turbans joined Malian soldiers to execute their first joint patrol in Gao, in northern Mali. These joint patrols, first proposed in 2015, began despite the AQIM attack in Gao noted above. [A UN spokesman said](#) the patrols were aimed at “building confidence and curtailing insecurity in northern Mali pending full restoration of state authority.”

Leadership Changes

On January 1, former Portuguese Prime Minister António Guterres replaced Ban Ki-Moon as Secretary General, a change that could affect the Mali mission. In his first report to the Security Council, [Guterres declared](#), “The peace process in Mali is at a critical juncture.” He added that renewed fighting was preventing implementation of the 2015 peace agreement, and he urged members to consider imposing sanctions on the obstructionists. However, sanctions are not a new idea, and it is not clear the Security Council will endorse them. Thus, the significance of the new Secretary-General’s interest in improving security in Mali remains to be seen.

On March 2, Secretary-General Guterres appointed a native French speaker, [Major General Jean-Paul Deconinck](#), Belgian Army, as MINUSMA Force Commander, replacing Danish Major General Michael Lollesgaard. In his final [interview](#), Lollesgaard was optimistic about MINUSMA’s long-term prospects, stating that MINUSMA would indeed be able to implement its mandate after it reached authorized troop strength. He concluded by saying that the most important thing MINUSMA brings to the people of Mali is hope.

Conclusion

The UN mission in Mali remains a significant challenge, but there has been improvement in some areas and promise in others. It remains to be seen if positive trends will continue during MINUSMA’s fifth year.

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