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Protecting Civilians in the Context of Violent Extremism: The Dilemmas of UN Peacekeeping in Mali

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Cover Photo: MINUSMA's Nigerian contingent secures and assists a health assessment operation near the border with Niger to detect possible cases of Rift Valley Fever, Tamalet, Mali, October 29, 2016. Sylvain Liechti/MINUSMA.

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Abbreviations

AQIM	Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb
CAR	Central African Republic
CVR	Community violence reduction
DDR	Demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DPKO	UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations
GATIA	Self-Defense Group of Imghad Tuaregs and Allies
HCUA	High Council for the Unity of Azawad
IDP	Internally displaced person
IED	Improvised explosive device
IHL	International humanitarian law
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MSA	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
OHCHR	UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
POC	Protection of civilians
PVE	Prevention of violent extremism

Executive Summary

UN peace operations need to be increasingly creative to implement their mandate to protect civilians in non-permissive environments. When deployed to protracted conflicts, peacekeepers often face continued violence and hostile actors, hampering their ability to operate. These challenges have proven to be particularly acute in contexts marked by violent extremism, such as Mali, where attacks by terrorist groups have greatly constrained the capacity of peacekeepers to protect local populations. This paper explores the operational challenges that the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) faces in implementing its protection mandate. It offers an analysis of protection threats related to violent extremism in Mali, explores the protection strategy, tools, and activities developed by the UN mission to address those threats, and highlights some of the practical constraints of operating in a hostile environment and added complications related to the mission's proximity to non-UN counterterrorism forces.

In an environment marked by violent extremism and counterterrorism operations, MINUSMA has to protect civilians from a wide range of threats and risks. In addition to collateral damage resulting from their attacks against Malian and foreign forces, terrorist groups prey on civilians through targeted retaliatory acts, indirect psychological threats, and societal pressure. Counterterrorism operations can also put civilians at risk of physical violence and abuse. Moreover, violent extremism and counterterrorism operations can exacerbate intercommunal violence, which has become a major threat to local populations.

Despite these threats, which are particularly acute in central Mali, the UN mission has not adequately prioritized its protection of civilians mandate. It continues to focus its attention on the implementation of the peace process in the north—the only strategic priority defined by the Security Council—as well as on protecting its own peacekeepers from attacks by extremist groups. Even though it has a robust mandate linking the protection of civilians (POC) to stabilization operations and efforts to counter asymmetric threats, MINUSMA is still in the process of strengthening fragile structures and integration mechanisms to implement its protection mandate.

Beyond these structural challenges, MINUSMA faces a shrinking space for protecting civilians. Both the hostile environment in which it operates and its ambiguous position in relation to counterterrorism have hampered or reduced the relevance of the protection tools usually at the disposal of UN missions. The modus operandi of violent extremist groups has undermined protection strategies based on a deterrent presence and community engagement. As the mission itself has become a target, such strategies can put civilians at greater risk of collateral damage or retaliation. The mission's support for and proximity to counterterrorism forces have also affected its ability to use protection strategies based on public human rights monitoring and engagement with armed groups. Paradoxically, in an effort to distinguish itself from counterterrorism forces, the mission has also refrained from undertaking robust military operations against extremist groups threatening civilians or engaging proactively in the prevention of violent extremism.

The Malian case demonstrates that each peacekeeping theater needs to be its own laboratory for POC and that approaches, tools, and mechanisms are not necessarily directly replicable from one UN mission to another. This report makes three recommendations to improve the delivery of MINUSMA's protection mandate:

1. **Explore the full spectrum of military, police, and civilian tools:** The mission should use the full spectrum of relevant protection tools across all its components. This requires joint planning to ensure that civilians drive military operations, increased use of UN police where security permits, and greater operationalization of civilian expertise and unarmed strategies, including community liaison, dialogue and engagement, mediation, human rights monitoring, analysis, and strategic communication.
2. **Ensure the independence of MINUSMA's POC activities from counterterrorism agendas:** While continuing to coordinate with counterterrorism actors, the UN mission should clarify the distinction between its peacekeeping role and its support to counterterrorism operations, without dismissing its protection responsibili-

ties. By preventing the POC agenda from being annexed to counterterrorism, MINUSMA should prioritize mitigation of the protection risks over which it has the most leverage—those posed by its partners conducting counterterrorism operations—and make POC the main rationale and principle of collaboration with these partners. It should also better articulate its role in preventing violent extremism and, where appropriate, open opportunities to engage with members of terrorist groups.

3. **Design and articulate a political strategy that prioritizes POC:** The mission's overall strategic objective of supporting the Malian political process should be implemented in a manner that prioritizes the protection of civilians. The mission should articulate and defend a protection-centered strategy, even when that strategy does not align with the strategies or priorities of the mission's partners. Anchoring MINUSMA's political strategy in protection considerations would enable the mission to reinforce its impartiality, capitalize on its comparative advantages (political and prevention tools), better link diplomatic efforts related to the peace process ("high politics") with social grievances and governance ("low politics"), and adopt a victim- rather than a perpetrator-based approach.

Introduction

While UN peace operations are expected to deliver on their mandate to protect civilians effectively, many are also deployed to non-permissive environments marked by protracted conflicts, high levels of violence, and hostile actors that limit their ability to operate. In contexts marked by violent extremism, such as Mali, these challenges have proven to be particularly acute, and the capacity of peacekeepers to protect local populations seems greatly constrained.

This paper examines the challenges facing the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), mandated to protect civilians in a context marked by violent extremism and counterterrorism operations. Because MINUSMA is regularly targeted by terrorist groups and struggles to protect itself, its outreach and operational capacity to protect civilians in the north and center of the country has been greatly limited. In some instances, its very presence constitutes a risk rather than a deterrent, as it is more likely to expose civilians to violence than to secure them. Retaliatory action against civilians who are believed to have cooperated with MINUSMA and collateral damage when blue helmets are attacked by extremist groups are especially detrimental to the protective capacity of the UN in the country.

The mission's close cooperation with counterterrorism forces, including Malian, French, and G5 Sahel forces operating in the region is an added complication. MINUSMA has been working alongside the French Operation Serval and its successor, Operation Barkhane, and is supporting Malian forces and the G5 Sahel joint force. Although it is not a counterterrorism force,[1] MINUSMA also has a mandate that links protection of civilians with stabilization and robust action to counter asymmetric threats, which risks conflating the protection of civilians (POC) and counterterrorism agendas.[2]

This has raised questions about the operational and political risks of the increased entanglement between peacekeeping and counterterrorism efforts, MINUSMA's impartiality and possible role as a party to the conflict,[3] and how this affects its ability and leeway to protect civilians. Implementing the POC mandate can be particularly delicate when counterterrorism forces, supported by MINUSMA, are themselves threats to civilians. Through their very presence, counterterrorism forces can put civilians at risk of collateral damage, reduce humanitarian space, and cause displacement. Measures taken by state authorities to fight extremism can also negatively affect

1 The UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, echoed by the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, strongly advised against the involvement of UN peace operations in counterterrorism: "The Special Committee recognizes that, owing to their composition and character, United Nations peacekeeping missions are neither suited for nor equipped to engage in counter-terrorism operations. The Special Committee notes that, in situations where a peacekeeping operation operates in parallel with counter-terrorism forces, the respective role of each presence should be clearly delineated." United Nations, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations: 2018 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/72/19, 2018.

2 MINUSMA is currently authorized to anticipate and counter asymmetric threats for the protection of civilians.

3 The International Committee of the Red Cross's approach to determining what legal framework is applicable to peacekeeping forces may lead to MINUSMA being considered a party to the armed conflict in Mali.

communities and, on occasion, counterterrorism forces and their proxies have directly preyed on civilians and perpetrated human rights abuses during their operations.

This paper analyzes the challenges facing UN peacekeepers mandated to protect civilians in Mali.[4] The first section analyzes protection threats related to violent extremism in Mali, including direct threats of violence from terrorist groups, risks associated with counterterrorism operations, and intercommunal violence fueled by terrorist and counterterrorism actors. The second section highlights the particularity of MINUSMA's POC mandate, which is uniquely ambitious but is not sufficiently prioritized by the mission, supported by robust structures, or approached in a coordinated way. This report then explores the operational challenges MINUSMA faces in delivering its mandate in a non-permissive environment and in balancing it with global efforts to counter violent extremism and stabilize Mali. Finally, as traditional protection tools seem either ill-adapted or irrelevant to the Malian context, it suggests possible ways to reinvent POC in contexts of violent extremism.

Threats to Civilians Related to Violent Extremism in Mali

Unlike the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), or South Sudan, Mali was not originally a hotspot for the protection of civilians. The conflict was concentrated in the north, an area with low population density,[5] and violence was limited to clashes between combatants from armed groups and the national army. Although the conflict displaced civilians, most internally displaced persons (IDPs) returned in the aftermath of the 2015 peace agreement,[6] and attacks on civilians were not large-scale or systematic. The prevalence of criminality in the absence of state authorities presented some threat of physical violence for local communities, but not at a level the international community saw as critical.

Over the last three years, however, concerns have expanded to include not only threats by armed groups and criminal elements but also terrorist acts and intercommunal violence, particularly in the floodplains of Mopti and Ségou in central Mali where population density is greatest.[7] As noted by the secretary-general in his September 2018 report on Mali, "The [three-month] reporting period recorded the highest number of civilian casualties since the deployment of MINUSMA, with 287 civilians killed."[8]

Threats to civilians related to violent extremism in Mali can be grouped in three main categories: (1) threats by terrorist and extremist groups; (2) threats by counterterrorism actors; and (3) other types of threats (particularly intercommunal violence) that are fueled or aggravated by either violent extremism or counterterrorism efforts.[9]

THREATS BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

There is a general assumption that terrorist and extremist groups operating in the north and center of the country pose a threat to the security of local populations. As described by Human Rights Watch in 2017, "The increasing presence of Islamist armed groups in central Mali generated fear and engulfed more civilians in the conflict."[10] However,

4 Around sixty interviews were conducted in New York, Bamako, and Mopti with UN officials, including from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and from the military, police, and civilian component of MINUSMA; representatives of Operation Barkhane; member-state representatives; representatives of NGOs and think tanks; Malian stakeholders; and independent experts.

5 The north accounts for less than 10 percent of the country's population but 66 percent of its territory, and eleven of its thirteen *cercles* (the administrative unit below the level of the region) have fewer than eleven inhabitants per square kilometer (Mali's average population density). See Asbjorn Wee, Julia Lendorfer, Jaimie Bleck, and Charlotte Yaiche, "State Legitimacy, Stability and Social Cohesion in Low Population Density Areas: The Case of Northern Mali," University of California, Berkeley, July 1, 2014, available at http://cega.berkeley.edu/assets/miscellaneous_files/130_-_Wee_-_Mali_-_Governance_and_service_delivery_in_low_density_-_ABCA_submission.pdf .

6 By January 31, 2016, 487,011 IDPs had returned to their homes. As of July 31, 2018, 526,505 had returned and 75,351 IDPs remained. UN Refugee Agency, "Mali: Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Populations," January 31, 2016, available at https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/55966 ; "Mali: Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Returnees," July 31, 2018, available at https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/65307 .

7 There are about 5 million inhabitants in the central region. According to Corinne Dufka of Human Rights Watch, "The human rights climate grew increasingly precarious over [2016], a result of execution-style killings and intimidation by Islamist armed groups, bloody intercommunal clashes, and surges in violent crime." "Mali: Islamist Armed Group Abuses, Banditry Surge," January 18, 2017, available at www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/18/mali-islamist-armed-group-abuses-banditry-surge .

8 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/866, September 25, 2018.

9 Threats to civilians not related to violent extremism, such as those related to compliant armed groups, organized crime, or banditry, are beyond the scope of this report.

10 Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2017: Mali," available at www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/mali .

Box 1. The Malian conflict and the Bamako Agreement[11]

The most recent conflict in Mali started in 2012 with the fourth northern rebellion in the history of the country. Tuareg and Arab combatants of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) returning from Muammar Qaddafi's Islamic Legion in Libya occupied a large part of northern Mali and declared the independence of Azawad in April 2012. The inability of Malian armed forces to properly fight the rebellion triggered a coup d'état in March 2012, leading to a constitutional crisis.

In the meantime, extremist groups, including al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), drove out the MNLA and took control of Timbuktu and Gao, while Ansar Dine, an Islamist Tuareg group, occupied Kidal, all in the north. The advance of extremist groups toward the center of the country, representing a potential threat to the capital Bamako, prompted the deployment of French forces under the banner of Operation Serval. Serval regained control of the main towns of the north with the support of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), authorized by the Security Council. France subsequently supported the idea of deploying a UN mission to Mali, and MINUSMA was authorized in April 2013 for deployment on July 1.

The peace process between the Malian government and Tuareg armed groups (the MNLA and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad, or HCUA, partly composed of former Ansar Dine fighters) started with the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement, which made presidential and parliamentary elections possible in the summer of 2013. The resumption of clashes in Kidal in May 2014, however, changed the balance of power by precipitating Malian forces and administration officials to depart from the north and armed groups to establish parallel administrations in the region. At the same time, extremist groups, which engaged in guerrilla-style fighting after being chased out of the towns, started to target MINUSMA.

The peace process that began in Algiers, Algeria, in July 2014 enabled negotiations between three parties:

- the Malian state;
- the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination), an alliance between the MNLA, HCUA, and Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), primarily composed of non-sedentary Arabs and Tuaregs calling for the establishment of "Azawad" as a political entity in northern Mali and a federal system; and
- the Platform, composed of groups defending the unity of the country, which claimed to represent sedentary populations and was generally perceived as being closer to Malian authorities (the Self-Defense Group of Imghad Tuaregs and Allies, or GATIA, which provided substantial military strength to the Platform when it joined in 2014, if often seen as a proxy for government forces).

While clashes continued during the negotiations, notably in Tabankort and Ménaka in 2015, all parties had signed the Bamako Agreement by June 2015.

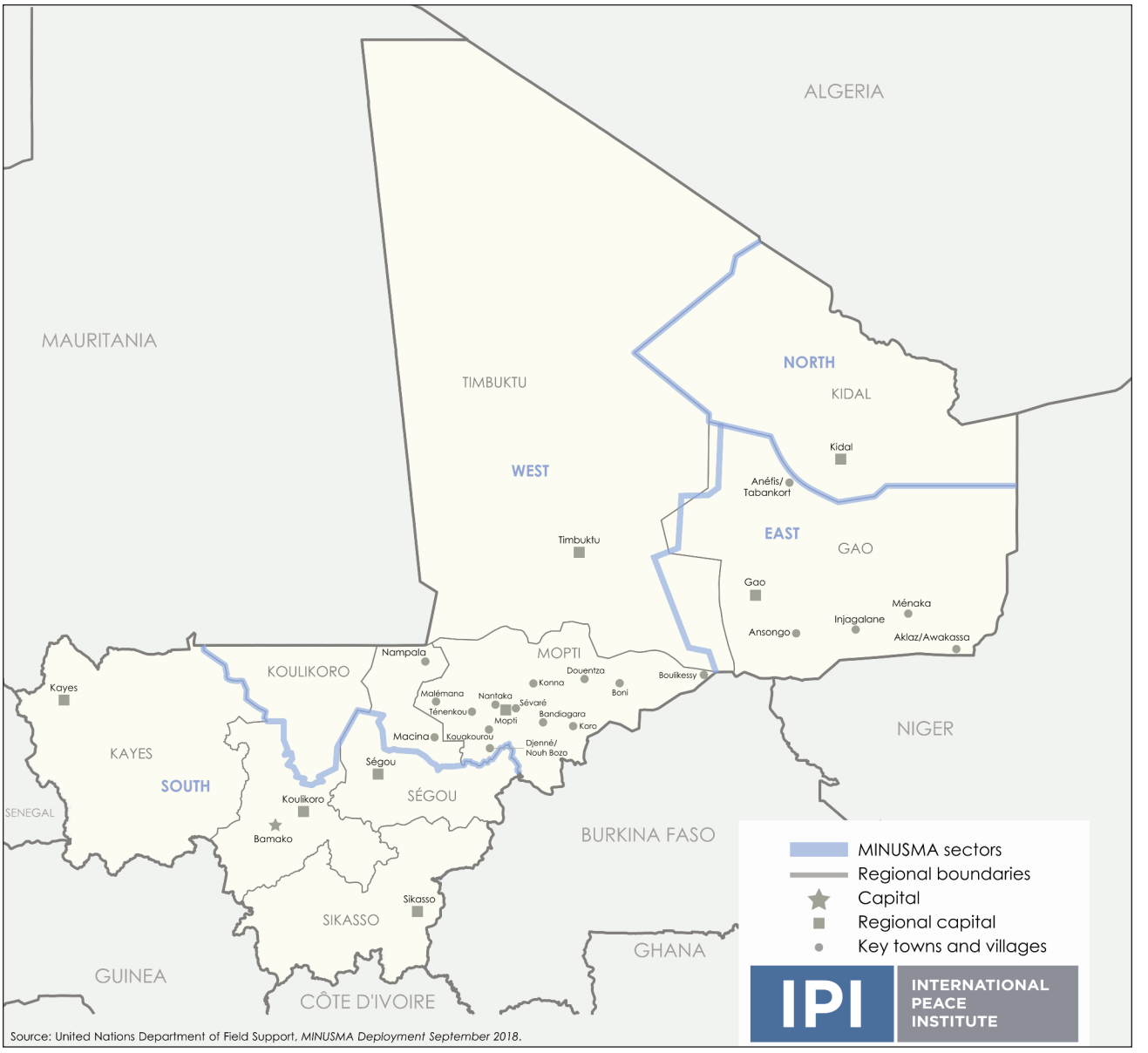
the modus operandi of these groups, which seek to gain the acceptance of local communities through a mix of targeted intimidation, general coercion, and integration into the social fabric, calls into question the extent of their predatory role.

Two contradictory narratives seem to coexist when it comes to assessing threats related to violent extremists in Mali: either they are reported to be the main and most concerning threat to the local population, or they are described as avoiding harming and alienating local communities and thus as not constituting a major threat to civilians.[12] There are three reasons for this dual narrative: confusion in labeling and lack of analysis; the fact that these groups seek to gain legitimacy as protectors of certain communities; and the nature of the threat they pose, which is indirect, discreet, targeted, and reactive.

11 For a full account of the Malian conflict and the peace process, see Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement," International Peace Institute, June 2017, available at www.ipinst.org/2017/06/lessons-from-inter-malian-peace-agreement .

12 Interviews, Bamako and Mopti, June 4–16, 2018. For an analysis of the inherent contradictions between the armed groups' quest for social legitimation and the violence they exert, see Klaus Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence: The Politics of Armed Groups* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009), p. 256.

Figure 1. Political map of Mali



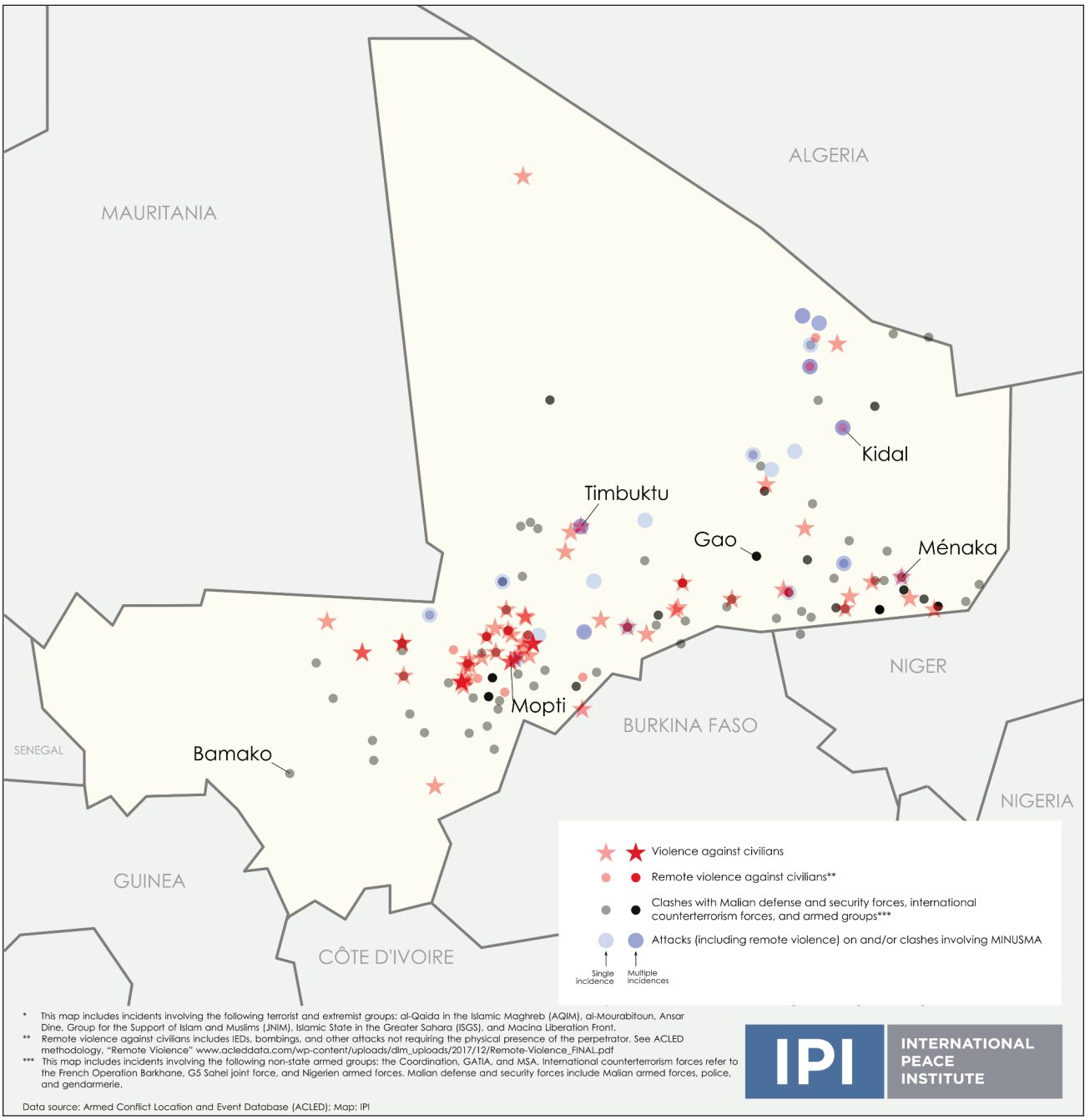
A Threat Analysis Misled by Labels

The paradoxical assessment of extremist groups results in part from a fluid and sometimes unclear use of labels related to violent extremism, leading to confusion. Groups are often interchangeably referred to as "terrorist," "extremist," "radical," or simply "armed" by international and national stakeholders. As a result, qualitative and quantitative assessments of the threats they pose to civilians remain limited—or even biased—and the object of easy manipulation. Over the course of this research, interviewees used all of the above-mentioned labels to designate terrorist groups, signatories to the Bamako Agreement, unidentified armed groups attacking civilians, or self-defense groups.

These actors in Mali often overlap and can have multiple agendas:[13] the same individual can be "party to the peace process in the morning, criminal in the afternoon, and terrorist in the

13 Boutellis and Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace."

Figure 2. Violence associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups in Mali (January 2017–September 2018)



evening;"[14] the same family can count members belonging to parties to the peace process, extremist groups, legitimate political parties, and the Malian armed forces.[15] Individuals often work for or provide their services to armed groups for primarily economic or opportunistic reasons rather than ideological ones.

This overlap makes it difficult for the UN mission in Mali to conduct granular analyses of violent extremist actors and their impact on civilians. A drive-by motorcycle shooting of civilians in a remote village in central Mali could be referred to either as a terrorist act or as a criminal act carried out by an individual settling a score, for example. Labeling actors as "terrorists" or "extremists" often results from loose usage of these terms, if not purposeful political manipulation to discredit a perpetrator or reinforce the image of jihadists as enemies of the people.[16] Because it is difficult to identify perpetrators and place them in rigid categories, it can be misleading to assume that the main threat to civilians in Mali is terrorism, banditry, organized crime, or intercommunal violence.

As acknowledged by a UN analyst asked how to distinguish violent extremists from other designations of armed actors, labeling can be perilous, and the UN often avoids it: "We don't [identify them]. We say 'assailants' or 'unidentified armed element.'"[17] Another analyst explained, "Perpetrators were radical groups, terrorist groups, or jihadist groups. We call them differently as they are always non-identifiable."[18] Another UN official stated that a good way to draw the line would be between those eligible to participate in the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) process and those refusing to disarm and continuing to perpetrate attacks.[19]

This paper uses "terrorist groups" to refer to those groups defined as such by the Security Council in resolutions on Mali or on global terrorism, and notably includes JNIM, ISGS and their affiliates.[20] "Violent extremist" groups or "violent extremists" refer to a broader category of groups or individuals advocating, supporting, or engaging in violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals.[21] Without dismissing the complexity of these groups' composition—often a minority of members is driven by ideology, while the majority has opportunistic or pragmatic motives—this paper addresses threats to civilians related to the phenomenon of violent extremism, including terrorism. In Mali, violent extremist groups have three characteristics. First, they systematically target the UN as a representation of the international community. They also have an ideological agenda they pursue through violent means. Finally, the host state, other UN member states, or regional and international actors label them as "extremist"—a label politically understood as delegitimizing their action and existence and triggering a specific set of responses.

14 Interview with UN official, Bamako, June 10, 2018.

15 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/518, August 9, 2018.

16 See Sergei Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016). "Framing a group as terrorists effectively delegitimizes them, while simultaneously justifying a policy of violence in response. As Philip Herbst argues, '[c]onveying criminality, illegitimacy, and even madness, the application of the term terrorist shuts the door to discussion about the stigmatized group or with them, while reinforcing the righteousness of the labellers, justifying their agenda's [sic] and mobilising their responses.'"

17 Interview with MINUSMA official, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

18 Written communication with MINUSMA analyst, October 12, 2018.

19 Interview with MINUSMA official, Bamako, June 15, 2018. The DDR program, while focusing on the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of signatory armed groups, also includes the possibility of accepting armed civilians in the process (and potentially members of self-defense groups or extremist groups). UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2017/811, September 28, 2017.

20 The last resolution "strongly condemn[s] the activities in Mali and in the Sahel region of terrorist organizations, including MUJAO, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Mourabitoune, Ansar Eddine, and associated individuals and groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims) and Islamic State in Greater Sahara and Ansaroul Islam, which continue to operate in Mali and constitute a threat to peace and security in the region and beyond, human rights abuses and violations, and violence against civilians, notably women and children, committed in Mali and in the region by terrorist groups." UN Security Council Resolution 2423 (June 28, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2423. See also Resolution 2374 (September 5, 2017), UN Doc. S/RES/2374.

21 See the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's summary of different governmental and intergovernmental definitional approaches to the concept of violent extremism, most of them referring to violent extremism as support or use of ideologically motivated violence. "Conditions Conducive to the Spread of Terrorism," in *E4J University Module Series: Counter-Terrorism*, no date, available at www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/radicalization-violent-extremism.html .

The Protective Agenda of Extremist Groups

Beyond the difficulties related to labeling, threat analyses have to take into account that some of the "terrorist" groups operating in Mali also present themselves as protectors of local communities.[22] Terrorist groups from abroad settled in northern Mali through a certain level of cooperation with local communities and have since entertained an "ambivalent but longstanding relationship" with locals.[23] Their modus operandi is founded both on coercion and on the pursuit of social solidarity with communities they did not control and had to win over.[24]

Terrorist groups have therefore claimed to offer their protection and services to appeal to local communities. In areas of central and northern Mali where the state is largely absent, or where the state has harassed local communities rather than protected them, some perceive extremist groups as an alternative source of protection.[25] Some groups have also presented themselves as liberators when pushing out other armed groups.

In 2012, for example, the terrorist group MUJAO reportedly justified expelling the MNLA from Gao because of the abuses it had perpetrated in the town. Malian civil society representatives interviewed for this report recalled that MUJAO had a societal project, provided security (including setting up an emergency phone number), and regulated the prices of basic products, halving the price of bread. According to a Malian police official, the population of Gao was so grateful that they helped the MUJAO police commissioner escape the city when it was being taken over by the French.[26]

When MUJAO moved to the center of Mali, it also became a source of protection for some Fulani in the town of Douentza, giving them an opportunity to go to the north to receive weapons and training.[27] The incentive for many Fulani was to come back in a better position to protect their villages and take revenge on the Malian armed forces who, during the re-conquest of northern Mali and French-led counterterrorism operations, had allegedly committed abuses against civilians perceived as having supported MUJAO.

Beyond security, many of these groups also provide public services such as a form of justice based on sharia, police to maintain law and order, or the organization of transportation and trade.[28] The Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM) has been navigating such a strategy by implementing projects and providing services to support the population.[29] As one UN official stated, "They are actually doing quick impact projects."[30] The Macina Liberation Front (FLM) has facilitated the seasonal cattle migration by organizing routes for transhumance and passage rights in central Mali.[31] In addition, some groups seem to strategically target specific individuals to win acceptance. For example, extremist groups reportedly executed criminals or punished corrupt officials to pose as bringers of justice.[32]

22 "Beyond the imposition of these norms and rules, radical armed groups have also engaged in other forms of governance, such as resource management, justice provision and conflict mediation." Anca-Elena Ursu, "Under the Gun: Resource Conflicts and Embattled Traditional Authorities in Central Mali," Clingendael, July 2018, available at www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/under-the-gun/ .

23 UN internal document.

24 Since it established itself in northern Mali in 2003, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, renamed AQIM in 2007) has pursued a strategy of integration and cooperation, creating social links with the population, through marriage, trade or traffic, and various forms of support. MUJAO, which does not have a particular ethnic identity, also managed to expand its membership among different communities. When the group expanded to central Mali following the counterterrorism operations launched by Operation Serval, "They did not come as conquerors, as they were being hunted." Interview, New York, September 2018.

25 See Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni and William Assanvo, "Mali's Young 'Jihadists': Fuelled by Faith or Circumstance?," Institute for Security Studies, August 26, 2016, available at https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/malis-young-jihadists-fuelled-by-faith-or-circumstance ; and International Crisis Group, "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?," July 6, 2016, available at www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making .

26 Interview with UN police official in Bamako, June 6, 2018.

27 Interview, Mopti, June 6, 2018.

28 For an analysis of the provision of public services by rebel organizations and their capacity to provide stability, dispute resolution, and public goods to civilians, see Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence*; and Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

29 JNIM is a coalition of jihadist movements composed of AQIM, Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoun. In the Kidal area, Iyad Ag Ghali (JNIM's current leader) has reportedly built or renovated wells.

30 Interview with UN official, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

31 Transhumance is the seasonal movement of livestock undertaken by nomadic communities.

32 According to Human Rights Watch, "Community leaders in central Mali said they believed a few local leaders had also been targeted as punishment for allegedly corrupt practices against local villagers." "Mali: Islamist Armed Group Abuses, Banditry Surge." As one interlocutor interviewed for this paper stated, "We say abductions, but for [these extremist groups], it is a regular 'arrest' in the areas they control and where they implement a certain rule of law, even if it is sharia."

This duality of extremist groups as both protectors and threats has led some communities, facing little choice, to accommodate their presence. As one analyst described, local communities sacrifice some liberties and compromise with radical groups to enjoy the security and services they provide: "It is the old dilemma between security and freedom."[33] Disenfranchised youth join the ranks of these groups for "protection, first and foremost."[34]

According to analysts and Malian officials interviewed for this report, some local communities perceive extremist groups as having improved security and justice in their area, and sometimes as being preferable to the Malian state. One of the outcomes of the 2017 Conference of National Understanding—a gathering of 300 representatives of the government, the political opposition, armed groups, and civil society to discuss a final settlement of the conflict—was civil society's recommendation to engage in dialogue with terrorist groups.[35]

However, even if such a protective posture remains an important aspect of the strategy of terrorist groups, there has been a notable change over the course of the last two years. After losses due to counterterrorism operations, their relationship with local communities has arguably become more predatory and distrustful. This explains the increasing violence perpetrated by extremist groups against civilians.

Indirect, Societal, and Targeted Threats

The main perpetrators of violence against civilians have been the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and its affiliates, operating in the northeastern Ménaka region on the border with Niger, and groups affiliated with JNIM, operating in the center of the country. These groups have rarely threatened civilians through large-scale massacres. Instead, the main threats are indirect collateral damage, societal harassment, and targeted abuse.

One of the most visible threats posed by terrorist groups in Mali is their use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Although they target Malian, French, or UN forces rather than civilians, IEDs are a major threat to local communities circulating on roads and in areas that have been mined. This threat has increased since 2017.[36] From January to June 2018, seventy-six civilians died from IEDs in the Mopti area (which accounts for 87 percent of verified civilian deaths from IEDs across Mali), compared to seven in the same period in 2017.[37] The majority of interlocutors mentioned in particular the deaths of dozens of civilians in Mopti when two buses hit explosive devices in January and February 2018.[38] Attacks against Malian or MINUSMA forces can also result in collateral damage, as when a car bomb killed four civilians and wounded thirty-one in Gao in July 2018.[39]

These civilian casualties are not necessarily intentional, as terrorist groups reportedly try to discriminate in their attacks by warning the population or by placing IEDs right before the passage of military targets. However, the high population density in central Mali has inevitably increased the risk of collateral damage in comparison to the north. A number of interlocutors also

33 Interview, Bamako, June 6, 2018.

34 See Théroux-Bénoni and Assanvo, "Mali's Young 'Jihadists.'"

35 Boutellis and Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace." See also Delphine Mechoulan, "Mali's National Conference: A Missed Opportunity for Reconciliation," *IPI Global Observatory*, April 14, 2017, available at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/04/mali-reconciliation-conference-national-understanding-azawad/ .

36 The first instance of the killing of civilians by an IED was on November 4, 2013, when a truck hit an explosive device on the road between Ansango and Ménaka, killing four civilians. The device was targeting a MINUSMA convoy passing by forty-five minutes later. In 2016, there were three incidents of collateral damage due to IEDs. These incidents became more frequent starting in 2017. Interview, June 15, 2018; UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali, Suliman Baldo*, UN Doc. A/HRC/25/72, January 10, 2014.

37 As the secretary-general wrote, "Since the beginning of 2018, the number of improvised explosive device incidents almost doubled, compared with the same period in 2017, with 93 incidents as at 18 May, compared with 55 incidents in 2017. As the increasing threat of improvised explosive device incidents expands towards more populated areas of central Mali, civilians are increasingly affected." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018, para. 29.

38 Interviews, Bamako and Mopti, June 4–16, 2018. On February 9, 2018, a civilian vehicle transporting twenty-two traders to the weekly market in Dera hit an IED near Konna, killing six people and wounding sixteen. Locals believed that the explosive device had been set up to target a detachment of the National Guard traveling on the same road as part of the government's Programme de sécurisation intégrée des régions du centre (PSIRC). On January 25, 2018, a vehicle carrying traders to the market in Boni hit an IED, killing all twenty-six passengers. The explosion reportedly took place shortly after the passage of the Senegalese quick reaction force moving south of Douentza *cercle*. See MINUSMA, "Allégations de violations et abus graves des droits de l'homme dans les régions du Centre: La MINUSMA poursuit ses enquêtes," March 30, 2018, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/all%C3%A9gations-de-violations-et-abus-graves-des-droits-de-l%E2%80%99homme-dans-les-r%C3%A9gions-du-centre-la-minusma .

39 "Mali Car Bomb Attack Kills Four Civilians, Wounds Four French Soldiers," Reuters, July 1, 2018.

mentioned that extremist groups were being less careful about avoiding civilian casualties. According to some, this is part of a strategy to convince communities that MINUSMA and Malian forces are increasing insecurity for local civilians and should leave the area.[40]

Extremist groups also directly threaten civilian populations on a societal level. As counterterrorism efforts have forced most terrorist groups to stay on the move, their mode of controlling local populations has changed from de facto occupation to less predictable guerrilla-style harassment.[41] This more sporadic and discreet way of intimidating local communities partly explains why some interlocutors do not see terrorist groups as posing a substantial threat to civilians. Indeed, rather than perpetrating large-scale massacres or attacks against the population, their predation is often incremental, subtle, "insidious, and sophisticated," aiming at pressuring communities to abide by certain codes of conduct.[42]

For example, terrorist groups circulate from village to village in remote areas of central Mali where the state is absent, "imposing restrictions on village life" based on a strict interpretation of Islam.[43] They prohibit the celebration of marriages and baptisms, music, radios, and alcohol.[44] They force communities to separate women and girls from men and boys in buses and schools. They also threaten teachers or burn down schools to oppose secular education; as of May 2018, 750 schools were closed in the Kidal, Gao, Ménaka, Timbuktu, Mopti, and Ségou regions.[45] Some extremist groups also impose taxes, or zakat, on the population. Jowros (or land masters), who traditionally manage passage rights for herders, have also been abducted and intimidated into implementing new rules for transhumance.[46] In the period leading up to the 2018 presidential election, extremist groups intimidated voters to prevent them from participating in the polls, especially in central Mali.[47]

Because such intimidation more often involves the threat than the use of physical violence, it has remained under the radar of the UN mission. In CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan, peacekeeping missions have faced major, high-profile threats of physical violence to civilians, including massacres and systematic rape. Accordingly, while the Department of Peacekeeping Operations' (DPKO) conception of POC includes protection from both physical violence and the threat of physical violence, missions tend to prioritize actual violence. They therefore tend to overlook the psychological and societal pressure exerted by extremist groups, which is more difficult to trace, substantiate, and quantify. Such abuses also relate to broader questions of "human rights" (including civil, political, and social rights), which encompass more than protection from physical violence and therefore transcend DPKO's conception of POC.[48]

Beyond this societal pressure, terrorist groups also target specific civilians who resist them or are presumed to collaborate with counterterrorism forces. They mostly do so by killing, abducting, or abusing community leaders, teachers, imams, government authorities, or persons they suspect of

40 One former UN official mentioned "a very serious communication strategy against the government and MINUSMA" conducted by extremist groups, including through disinformation and the dissemination of critical pamphlets.

41 In central Mali, the operations of the Malian armed forces have reduced the hold of terrorist groups since the beginning of 2018. Interview, Mopti, June 13, 2018.

42 The strategic review team found that the threats to civilians were "insidious and sophisticated, in particular in the centre of the country, where intercommunal tensions were being instrumentalized and extreme forms of Islamic law imposed, resulting in serious human rights violations." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018.

43 Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Islamist Armed Group Abuses, Banditry Surge."

44 According to the report of the independent expert on the situation of human rights in Mali, "Women have been whipped for having sung or for having celebrated their marriage in the traditional manner (with music and in mixed company)." UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali*, UN Doc. A/HRC/37/78, February 2, 2018.

45 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018. See also, Olivier Monnier, "Jihadists Close Mali Schools as Revolt against State Flares," *Bloomberg*, February 15, 2018. Out of 1,801 schools in Mopti, 693 had to close at least once between May 2017 and May 2018. Mali Education Cluster, *Aperçu général: Année scolaire 2017-2018*.

46 Interview with MINUSMA official, Mopti, June 12, 2018.

47 On June 29, 2018, several incidents of presumed terrorists intimidating voters by beating them or stealing their bikes were reported. Tim Cocks and Maimouna Moro, "Mali Presidential Race Seen Facing Run-Off; Attacks Could Be Issue," Reuters, July 30, 2018. See also UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/866, September 25, 2018.

48 In peacekeeping, "protection of civilians" refers to protection from physical violence. The DPKO/DFS policy on POC defines threats to civilians as encompassing "all hostile acts or situations that are likely to lead to death or serious bodily injury, including sexual violence, regardless of the source of the threat." *The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping*, July 2015, available at www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/project/dpkodfs-policy-the-protection-of-civilians-in-united-nations-peacekeeping-2015/ .

talking to or collaborating with Malian, French, or MINUSMA forces.[49] According to the secretary-general, from April to June 2018, terrorist groups were responsible for 138 human rights violations and abuses (90 percent taking place in the Ménaka, Mopti, and Ségou regions)—a sharp increase from 32 reported in 2016.[50]

Threats of retaliation and intimidation can be individual or collective. In addition to targeting community leaders or collaborators, extremist groups also retaliate against particular communities for not following their instructions or respecting their code of conduct. For example, when the villagers of Kouakourou refused to implement sharia and resisted extremist groups in September 2017, those groups responded by destroying irrigation pumps, cutting off river access, besieging the village, and imposing a blockade, all of which severely disrupted village livelihoods.[51] The village of Kanio was also besieged by extremist groups in September 2017 after a confrontation with the locals.[52]

Terrorist groups also target specific communities in retaliation for counterterrorism operations, particularly in the Ménaka area. On April 26 and May 1, 2018, attacks on Aklaz and Awakassa resulted in "the killing of at least 47 civilians and the displacement of around 300 others," while seventeen civilians were reportedly killed in Tindinbawen. The massacres were attributed to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) or its affiliates in revenge for counterterrorism operations led by a coalition of armed groups (GATIA and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad, or MSA).[53] However, raids on villages in Ménaka are often difficult to attribute to ISGS with certainty. On July 15, 2018, for example, a massacre of fifteen civilians in Injagalane was variously attributed to extremists, ethnic militias, or criminal gangs in contradicting reports.[54]

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS

Abuse of civilians in areas affected by violent extremism can be attributed not only to extremist groups but also to counterterrorism actors themselves. Although counterterrorism operations seek to neutralize the extremist groups threatening civilians and make a crucial contribution to the provision of security and POC, they can also be associated with substantial risks for the local populations. Through their very presence, counterterrorism forces can put civilians at risk of collateral damage, reduce humanitarian space, and cause displacement. Measures taken by state authorities to fight extremism can also negatively affect communities.[55] Beyond these indirect effects, physical violence by counterterrorism actors is also a threat to civilians. Human rights abuses committed against presumed terrorists and civilians suspected of supporting terrorists, including violations of international humanitarian law, have become increasingly concerning.

49 MINUSMA's national staff, including community liaison assistants, have also been threatened.

50 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018, para. 35. In 2016, OHCHR reported thirty-two cases of human rights abuses perpetrated by AQIM, Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, JNIM, al-Mourabitoun, and "similar groups." MINUSMA and OHCHR, *Droits de l'homme et processus de paix au Mali (janvier 2016–juin 2017)*, February 2018, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/malgr%C3%A9-la-mise-en-%C5%93uvre-de-l%E2%80%99accord-pour-la-paix-la-situation-des-droits-de-l%E2%80%99homme-demeure . According to Human Rights Watch, "In 2016, Islamist armed groups executed at least 27 men, including village chiefs and local government officials, Malian security force personnel, and fighters from parties to the peace accord." "Mali: Islamist Armed Group Abuses, Banditry Surge."

51 The Malian armed forces deployed the National Guard, and Kouakourou was the first village to implement the national Programme de sécurisation intégrée des régions du centre (PSIRC). See "Kouakourou, un village du centre du Mali bloqué par des terroristes," Radio France Internationale (RFI), September 30, 2017; "Présidentielle: Les attaques terroristes détournent l'attention des populations du centre du Mali," *Le Républicain*, July 13, 2018; MINUSMA, press release, February 9, 2018, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/point-de-presse-de-la-minusma-du-8-f%C3%A9vrier-2018 .

52 Interview, Mopti, June 5, 2018.

53 According to the secretary-general, "On 26 and 27 April, two violent incidents in the Aklaz and Awakassa settlements resulted in the killing of at least 47 civilians and the displacement of around 300 others. On 1 May, 17 civilians were reportedly killed in the locality of Tindinbawen. The victims of those incidents, mostly from the Dawsahak Tuareg community, were reportedly targeted in an act of reprisal following operations conducted in the area by a coalition of armed groups." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018. See also UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/581, August 9, 2018, para. 147.

54 "Gunmen Kill 14 Civilians in Northeast Mali Village," Reuters, July 16, 2018; "Douze personnes tuées dans l'attaque d'un village du nord-est du Mali," RFI, July 17, 2018. See also MSA/GATIA, "Note d'information coalition GATIA-MSA sur le massacre de civils à Injagalane le 15 juillet 2018," July 15, 2018, available at https://httpsahel-elite.com/2018/07/16/mali-niger-note-dinformation-coalition-gatia-msa-sur-le-massacre-de-civils-a-injagalane-le-15-juillet-2018/ .

55 The forced disarmament of individuals can further expose and aggravate the vulnerability of communities trying to defend themselves in insecure areas. The ban on the use of motorbikes in the Mopti region, meant to target the mode of transport used by terrorists, has impacted the population's freedom of movement and access to services and the justice system. Human Rights Watch also mentioned a ban on motorcycles in the Ségou region, which the Fulani complained about. "Mali: Spate of Killings by Armed Groups," April 5, 2017, available at www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/05/mali-spate-killings-armed-groups .

The Problematic Treatment of Terrorists

There is generally a growing concern in counterterrorism environments about the treatment of "terrorists." The demonization of "terrorists" as absolute enemies sometimes leads governments to justify extreme actions against presumed terrorists and to establish special counterterrorism regimes that tend to deviate from the standards of human rights and humanitarian law.[56]

Presumed terrorists, however, are entitled to minimum rights and protections, as defined by international human rights law and, where applicable, humanitarian law. For example, outside of the context of armed conflicts,[57] all citizens, including alleged criminals and terrorists are entitled to the right to a fair trial and due process.[58] Human Rights Watch has highlighted the prohibition of summary executions, and recalled that suspects arrested by Malian forces, whether members of terrorist groups or not, should be handed over to the national gendarmerie.[59]

In the context of armed conflicts, those who do not participate in hostilities, including civilians and fighters hors de combat, are also supposed to enjoy standard protections defined by IHL, such as the prohibition of torture and arbitrary executions.

There have been a substantial number of cases of denial of rights, arbitrary executions, and torture of detainees perpetrated by Malian armed forces during counterterrorism operations.[60] As the secretary-general noted in June 2018, "MINUSMA investigated serious allegations of violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law in the context of counter-terrorism operations undertaken by the Malian armed forces in the Mopti and Ségou regions, including allegations of 44 summary executions and three enforced disappearances."[61] The independent expert on human rights confirmed these abuses.[62]

The application of the least constraining (and therefore the least protective) legal regime to facilitate counterterrorism action can represent an important threat to civilians accused of terrorism. In Mali, some analysts have particularly pointed out the risks of a blanket application of IHL, which would justify targeting terrorists in all circumstances in a so-called "war against terrorism."[63] These experts argued that, in some cases, criminal law enforcement and policing standards—which prohibit extrajudicial killings—should apply in lieu of IHL.[64] In this framework, G5 Sahel and Malian forces have been pursuing efforts to expand judiciary processes in their fight against terrorism by focusing on actual criminal acts rather than presumed intentions. These efforts aim to steer more terrorism suspects through the courts, and to ensure compliance with human rights standards. These efforts are crucial to reducing the prevalence of abuse by Malian armed forces, who do not always trust a judicial system that has been reported to be unreliable and to frequently release suspects after they are sent to Bamako for their trial.[65]

Retribution against Communities

The risk of abuse by counterterrorism actors extends to communities at large, not only to presumed terrorists. Some elements among counterterrorism forces operating in Mali lack professionalism and have poor human rights records, putting populations in their area of deployment at risk. Additionally, terrorists often hide among civilian populations. The resulting

56 See Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb": "Labelling a group as ordinary criminals (notwithstanding that terrorism is also illegal), belittles the underlying grievances, ideologies, and motivations, attributing their actions to solely personal, often material gain. In all cases, the designated label channels a policy reaction that is anchored in the very different fields of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency (COIN), or law enforcement, each centred around its own principles, dogmas, and common practices."

57 See International Committee of the Red Cross, "Internal Conflicts or Other Situations of Violence: What Is the Difference for Victims?," October 12, 2012, available at www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/2012/12-10-niac-non-international-armed-conflict.htm .

58 UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, "Right to Fair Trial," no date, available at www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/right-fair-trial .

59 "Mali: Soupçons d'exécutions sommaires par des Fama près de Mopti," RFI, March 27, 2018.

60 Reports of individuals apprehended by the Malian armed forces and later found dead in Dogo in March 2018 raised questions over extrajudicial killings. See Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations," September 8, 2017, available at www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/08/mali-unchecked-abuses-military-operations ; "Mali: Deaths, Torture in Army Detention," April 9, 2018, available at www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/09/mali-deaths-torture-army-detention .

61 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018, para. 37.

62 UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali*, UN Doc. A/HRC/37/78, February 2, 2018.

63 Interviews, Bamako, June 3 and October 1, 2018.

64 Interviews, Bamako and New York, September 26, and October 1–9, 2018.

65 Interviews, Bamako, June 4 and 6, 2018.

difficulty of distinguishing them from the wider population presents operational challenges for the conduct of hostilities and results in numerous abuses of civilians accused of supporting or being terrorists.[66] In some cases, communities are targeted as much by Malian forces in retribution for perceived accommodation of terrorists as they are by extremist groups seeking to deter collaboration with the state.

During the military operations led by Operation Serval and the Malian army in January 2013 to curb the spread of terrorist groups, Malian forces reportedly committed a number of abuses against civilians.[67] According to interviewees, some of these retaliatory attacks resulted from frustration with the army's previous defeat and heavy losses in the north, and from suspicion that local communities had supported the terrorist groups.[68]

The Fulani community is particularly vulnerable, accounting for the majority of victims of abuse, particularly during operations to retake the north.[69] Due to these abuses and a history of harassment and injustice,[70] the Fulani have been particularly drawn to the protection MUJAO could offer them. As one Malian official described, they "actually asked for weapons from Malian authorities for their self-protection from the advance of terrorist groups to the center [of the country] and were dismissed in their requests. They therefore turned to the extremists for their protection."[71] As previously mentioned, some Fulani were sent to the north for military training by terrorist groups and came back to protect their communities. Some extremist groups are also mostly composed of Fulani, such as the Macina Liberation Front led by Hamadou Kouffa, himself a Fulani.[72] In the Ménaka area, ISGS has also emerged as a potential protector of the Tolebe Fulani.[73]

This history of close ties between terrorist groups and Fulani individuals strengthened perceptions that there was systematic cooperation between the Fulani community and terrorists, prompting abuses by Malian forces. This conflation of Fulani civilians and terrorists has also led to confusion in labeling (for example, instances of isolated criminal acts committed by Fulani individuals have promptly been categorized as "terrorist attacks").As such, increased human rights abuses committed against the Fulani community are one of the most serious threats to civilians in central Mali. These abuses have been committed both by national armed forces—whether deployed as part of the G5 Sahel force or not—particularly in the center of the country (Mopti), and by the MSA/GATIA coalition conducting operations against ISGS in the northeast (Ménaka).

While there are many small-scale incidents, such as the killing of two individuals by Malian forces in Ténenkou district in April 2018, massive human rights violations have also been perpetrated during counterterrorism operations, such as during the massacre of Boulikessy on May 19, 2018, which has signaled increased risks of systematic retribution against communities. A UN investigation concluded that Malian forces operating under the command of the G5 Sahel force killed twelve civilians, apparently in revenge for the killing of a Malian soldier by unidentified attackers.[74] According to a UN official, "Some [Malian army] units have vowed to avenge any killing of one of

66 Andreas Wenger and Simon J. A. Mason, "The Civilianization of Armed Conflict: Trends and Implications," *International Review of the Red Cross* 90, no. 872 (2008), available at www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc-872-wenger-mason.pdf .

67 The International Federation for Human Rights reported allegations of crimes related to the re-conquest of northern Mali and pointed out the lack of investigations into these allegations. "Mali: Choosing Justice in the Face of Crisis," December 2017, available at www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/20171208_rapportmali_justice_en.pdf .

68 Interviews, Bamako, June 6, 2018.

69 See UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali*, UN Doc. A/HRC/37/78, February 2, 2018; and Ursu, "Under the Gun."

70 For an analysis of Fulani perceptions of social injustice, see Ursu, "Under the Gun." See also Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Abuses Spread South," February 19, 2016, available at www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/19/mali-abuses-spread-south .

71 Interview with Malian police commissioner, Bamako, June 6, 2018.

72 Ursu, "Under the Gun." See also International Crisis Group, "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?"

73 Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Conflict within a Conflict in Mali's Northern Menaka Region," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 4, 2018, available at www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/analysis-conflict-within-a-conflict-in-malis-northern-menaka-region.php ; Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim and Mollie Zapata, "Regions at Risk: Preventing Mass Atrocities in Mali," US Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 2018, available at www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Mali_Report_English_FINAL_April_2018.pdf .

74 MINUSMA, "La MINUSMA conclut son enquête sur les incidents de Boulkessy du 19 Mai 2018," June 28, 2018, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/la-minusma-conclut-son-enqu%C3%AAte-sur-les-incidents-de-boulkessy-du-19-mai-2018 . See also Arthur Boutellis, "Shake-up of G5 Sahel Joint Force Starts at Home, in Mali," *IPI Global Observatory*, 2018, available at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/07/shakeup-g5-sahel-joint-force-starts-home-mali/ .

them by killing twelve people [in local communities]."[75] In another incident on June 13th, Malian forces arrested many civilians in Nantaka and later released the non-Fulani, keeping only the Fulani prisoners. The subsequent discovery of three mass graves with the bodies of twenty-five Fulani civilians prompted investigations by the UN and the government.[76]

Abuse by armed groups serving as government proxies in counterterrorism efforts adds to this threat.[77] The MSA/GATIA coalition, which is conducting military operations against ISGS in support of French and Malian forces, has been widely criticized for its attacks against civilians.[78] As of June 2018, GATIA and MSA have reportedly killed 143 civilians in the area of Ménaka and forcibly displaced hundreds.[79] Reports of massacres of civilians by ISGS in the Ménaka area also noted killings by MSA and GATIA.[80]

AGGRAVATION OF INTERCOMMUNAL VIOLENCE

The third category of threats to civilians in Mali encompasses preexisting violent dynamics that are fueled, aggravated, manipulated, or exploited by violent extremists or counterterrorism actors. Both violent extremists and counterterrorism operations can aggravate intercommunal violence. For example, extremist groups create more space and opportunities for banditry and organized crime by destabilizing areas, pushing state actors to flee, and participating in trafficking. More critically, violent extremists and counterterrorism operations also aggravate intercommunal violence.

Radicalization of Communities

In most of central and northeastern Mali, intercommunal violence has historically arisen between herders, farmers, and fishermen from different ethnic groups. This violence was usually contained by traditional mediation mechanisms used to manage land and agro-pastoral disputes. However, the growing availability of both small arms and light weaponry as well as the spread of violent extremism and expansion of counterterrorism activities in these areas have fueled, aggravated, and complicated intercommunal disputes.

The surge in intercommunal violence is particularly strong in the areas of Mopti and Ségou in central Mali.[81] According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as of July nearly 300 civilians had been killed as a result of "surging inter-communal violence" in 2018.[82] In Mopti, incidents of intercommunal violence rose from twenty in 2017 to more than seventy in the first five months of 2018 (more than half of these were in the Koro district).[83]

Resentment has further increased among communities suffering from abuse and harassment by extremist groups. Because these communities often conflate terrorists and the Fulani, some have started to resent the Fulani community for the violence perpetrated by terrorist groups. This has fed into existing mistrust between the Fulani, Bambara, and Dogon communities. Some communities targeted by extremist groups have therefore been retaliating against the Fulani, who

75 Interview with UN official, Bamako, October 1, 2018.

76 "Mali: possibles découvertes de charniers vers Nantaka et Kobaka, dans le centre," RFI, June 18, 2018; MINUSMA, "Statement Attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on Intercommunal Clashes and Human Rights Violations in Mopti Region, Mali," June 26, 2018, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/statement-attributable-spokesman-secretary-general-intercommunal-clashes-and-human-rights-violations .

77 Ibrahim and Zapata, "Regions at Risk."

78 The human rights division shared concerns about the legality of counterterrorism operations conducted by these two groups and allegations of human rights violations. MINUSMA, press release, April 12, 2018, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/point-de-presse-de-la-minusma-du-12-avril-2018 .

79 According to the secretary-general, "MINUSMA also investigated allegations of grave human rights abuses by the coalition of the Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad and Groupe d'autodéfense des Touaregs Imghad et leurs alliés in the Niger border area of Ménaka region. The Mission concluded that at least 143 civilians had been killed by the armed groups, houses had been burned and hundreds forcibly displaced, including 695 from Aklaz and Awakassa villages." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018, para. 39.

80 According to Yvan Guichaoua, in May 2018, three armed groups were involved in the fighting, and ascertaining who was responsible for the massacres was difficult. Laura Martel, "Mali: 'Trois groupes armés locaux se retrouvent à l'intersection de combats,'" RFI, May 4, 2018.

81 OHCHR, press briefing, July 17, 2018, available at www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23383&LangID=E ; UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018.

82 OHCHR, press briefing, July 17, 2018; "Almost 300 Malians Killed This Year in Militia Clashes: U.N.," Reuters, July 17, 2018.

83 About 11,400 people were displaced in 2018 as a result of these conflicts in Mopti, according to UN OCHA. "Mali: Bulletin humanitaire, mai–juin 2018," July 20, 2018, available at https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/mali-bulletin-humanitaire-mai-juin-2018 .

represent easy targets for revenge. In the areas of Koro and Bankass, for example, hunters burned down and attacked several villages. At least thirty villages were affected by the conflict, and hundreds of civilians were displaced.[84] In return, the Fulani, together with JNIM militias, attacked Dogon and Bambara communities, escalating the violence.[85]

In the quasi-absence of state authorities and institutions, this spiral of intercommunal reprisals has led to the creation of self-defense groups in the villages of central Mali.[86] Dan Nam Ambassagou and Dogon Ambassagou, Dozo hunter militias, vowed to protect their community from "terrorists" in the areas of Koro, Bankass, Douentza, and Bandiagara. In May 2018, a Fulani militia, the Alliance for the Salvation of the Sahel, committed to protect the population from "Dozo terrorists."[87]

While casualties from individual incidents of intercommunal violence remain limited, a handful of massacres have been committed against Fulani communities, usually by Dogon militias or Dozo hunters.[88] In June 2018, for example, Dozo militias killed twenty-four Fulani in Koumaga.[89] This escalation triggered displacement, such as the movement of 3,000 Fulani to Birga-Fulanih, where they were besieged by Dogon militias who prevented them from leaving the village to get food. It also affects the livelihoods of targeted communities by limiting movement and therefore access to food and basic goods or by stigmatizing certain activities, like herding, as "terrorist" activities.[90]

Terrorism and Counterterrorism Playing into Communal Tensions

The involvement of terrorist groups and counterterrorism forces is an important destabilizing factor and heightens the risk of mass atrocities resulting from these intercommunal tensions.[91] Some Fulani have sought the protection of terrorist groups, especially the Macina Liberation Front. The Dozo and Dogon, on the other hand, have tended to seek the support of the Malian armed forces and denounced the Fulani as terrorists to national authorities. Similar dynamics are visible in the area of Ménaka, where GATIA and MSA claim to protect the Tuareg Imghad and Daoussaks, while ISGS claims to protect the Fulani.[92]

Acts of terrorism, particularly targeted assassinations of community leaders, thus fuel intercommunal tensions, with revenge taken against civilians accused of collaborating with terrorists perpetrating violence. For example, tensions between the Diankabou and Djoungani communities started when extremists killed an influential Dogon in June 2017. In retaliation, the Dogon killed several Fulani, including women and children. In return, the Fulani reportedly killed around forty Dogon two days later. Similarly, the killing of the Bambara vice mayor of Dioura for collaboration with the Malian armed forces was followed by the killing of around forty people in Malémana. In Macina, terrorists attacked a merchant, and Dozo hunters killed several Fulani in retaliation.[93]

In some instances, extremist groups also appear to purposefully perpetrate targeted violence along ethnic and community lines. The UN noted that the most concerning feature of intercommunal violence was its instrumentalization by radical or terrorist groups. The secretary-general noted the "capacity of manipulation" of terrorist groups that "try to promote inter- and intra-communal

84 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018, para. 38.

85 Between July 7 and 10, 2018, Dogon and Bambara were attacked in Djenné and Koro by Fulani elements and JNIM militias. OHCHR, press briefing, July 17, 2018.

86 An analyst explained, "Nobody was arrested in Dioungani, and they were all released in Alamiana. Arrests could have prevented the escalation of community violence." Interview, Mopti, June 13, 2018. See also Interpeace, "Analyse locale des dynamiques de conflit et de résilience dans la zone de Koro-Bankass," June 2017, available at www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017-Interepeace-IMRAP-Portraits-Crois%C3%A9s-Koro-Bankass.pdf .

87 See the group's Twitter account: www.twitter.com/AllianceAss .

88 In the Koumaga and Bombou massacres, respectively, twenty-four and sixteen Fulani civilians were killed.

89 United Nations, "Mali: L'ONU préoccupée par la résurgence des violences communautaires dans la région de Mopti," July 17, 2018, available at https://news.un.org/fr/story/2018/07/1019132 .

90 According to Guillaume Ngefa, surging violence has a clear impact on food security as well, as some may be reluctant to go out in the field and expose themselves to attacks by unidentified elements, and some may be reluctant to engage in cattle herding activities as they may be seen as "terrorists." United Nations, "Mali: L'ONU préoccupée par la résurgence des violences communautaires dans la région de Mopti," July 17, 2018, available at https://news.un.org/fr/story/2018/07/1019132 .

91 Ibrahim and Zapata, "Regions at Risk."

92 ISGS counts among its combatants Tolebe Fulani who pledged to protect their community. However, the group's "protective" agenda is not purely driven by ethnic motives, and there are leaders of ISGS who are also Daoussak.

93 Interview with MINUSMA official, Mopti, June 13, 2018.

clashes."[94] Terrorist groups have especially sought to exploit the grievances of the Fulani to integrate into their communities and boost recruitment. MUJAO has offered the Fulani training and equipment, while the Macina Liberation Front has played on the victimization of the Fulani to rally them against social injustice. Through a populist discourse, Hamadou Kouffa has emerged as a credible opponent to the government speaking for disenfranchised communities that have experienced abuse by the Malian state.

While extremist groups manipulate intercommunal tensions to destabilize and gain a foothold in central Mali, communities tend to use terrorist groups or counterterrorism actors to settle scores or get rid of an inconvenient rival. Even among the Fulani community, elites have denounced individuals challenging their authority as terrorists supporting MUJAO and used the Malian armed forces to disarm them. From their side, non-elites have used terrorist groups to get rid of specific leaders or members of the elite. Targeted assassinations of village chiefs or their family in Dogo (Ténenkou), Bony (Douentza), and Mondoro (Boulikessy) have been carried out, and while there is no clear evidence as to the exact incentive of perpetrators, some interlocutors have indicated that these assassinations may fall into this category.[95]

From their side, Malian forces and their proxies tend to disproportionately target certain communities they associate with extremist groups like the JNIM and ISGS, including the Tolebe in the Ménaka area and the Fulani more generally, which exacerbates the existing intercommunal tensions. A 2017 study warned about the increased likelihood of ethnic violence and mass atrocities in Mali as counterterrorism forces back ethnically based militias, especially GATIA and MSA (which are mainly composed of Imghad and Daoussaks).[96] This scenario materialized when the abuses committed by MSA and GATIA against presumed terrorists who were Tolebe Fulani prompted retaliation by ISGS against Daoussaks and Tuareg communities.

The interplay between extremist groups and intercommunal violence makes analysis of threats to civilians particularly complex. Some incidents resembling intercommunal violence might be personal retaliation. Similarly, incidents labeled as acts of terrorism and violent extremism may instead relate to socioeconomic tensions between communities. The detrimental impact of poorly controlled or abusive counterterrorism operations on already explosive intercommunal relations adds to the complexity.

MINUSMA's POC Mandate and Structure

In this context, MINUSMA is mandated to protect civilians from any threat of physical violence. The mission has an unusually ambitious mandate that links POC to stabilization and efforts to counter asymmetric threats. Yet POC is not a strategic objective of the UN mission in Mali. As a result, the mission has not prioritized its implementation, put in place robust structures to support it, or ensured it is approached in a coordinated way.

A FRAGILE WORK STREAM

Lack of Prioritization

Unlike the peace operations in the DRC and CAR, the UN mission in Mali was not designed with POC as a central priority. Assisting the national peace process and protecting itself from terrorist attacks have been the top priorities for MINUSMA, while the POC mandate has received less attention. Several factors explain this lack of prioritization.

First, MINUSMA was originally designed to focus on the conflict in northern Mali. Consequently, its priority mandate has always been to support the peace process and the implementation of the peace agreement. Even in the June 2018 Security Council resolution renewing its mandate, "the strategic priority of MINUSMA remains to

94 António Guterres, press conference, May 30, 2018, available at http://webtv.un.org/en/ga/watch/ant%C3%B3nio-guterres-un-secretary-general-at-mali-press-conference-30-may-2018/5791606869001/?term=&sort=date .

95 Interview with independent researcher, Bamako, June 14, 2018.

96 See Ibrahim and Zapata, "Regions at Risk": "A plausible scenario in Ménaka in the next 12 to 18 months is that the governments of Niger and France could increase their collaboration with Tuareg (including Daousahaq and Imghad) militia as part of a counterterrorism coalition against majority Tolebe jihadist groups. In response, Tolebe militias would likely attack Daousahaq communities, prompting Daousahaq militia to attack Tolebe communities. Because of an imbalance in external support, in this scenario the Daousahaq would have the means and impetus to commit atrocities against civilians."

support the implementation… of the Agreement," and MINUSMA is requested "to reprioritize its resources and efforts to focus on political tasks."[97] POC is not defined as a "strategic priority," even if it still appears in the paragraph on "priority tasks" after support to the peace process, restoration of state authority, and good offices and reconciliation, and before promotion of human rights and facilitation of humanitarian assistance. This has left MINUSMA with a dilemma: civilians face the greatest threats in central Mali, but there is no political process in this region and it is therefore not a strategic priority for the mission.

Second, MINUSMA has increasingly had to worry about its own protection as its personnel come under direct attack from terrorist groups. At the end 2014, battalions were overwhelmed by terrorist attacks, and self-protection took over the mission's attention.[98] While acknowledging that POC was part of the mandate, several interviewees admitted that it became of lesser concern than their own security: "Protecting ourselves quickly became the priority… and we shifted to a passive presence," one noted.[99] This gave rise to a narrative that the mission, struggling to protect itself, lacked the projection and deterrent capacities to protect civilians.

Another reason POC was not initially a prominent task for MINUSMA was that, as described above, threats to local populations were limited in the early years of the mission's deployment. As explained by a MINUSMA official, the main threat to civilians in August 2013 was banditry due to the absence of state authority.[100] Stabilizing important urban centers and preventing major clashes between the Platform and the Coordination in the north seemed sufficient to manage the relatively low number of physical threats to civilians. As repeatedly claimed by MINUSMA officials, "civilians were fine," and "it was not a concern or a challenge at that time."[101] Even when terrorist groups became a greater concern in northern Mali, they mainly targeted MINUSMA, or Malian or French forces, rather than local populations.

However, as threats to civilians increased over the last two years, MINUSMA did try to put POC at the center of its work. MINUSMA teams were not caught off guard by the rise in intercommunal tensions in the center of the country and advocated for the mission to better consider the situation unfolding outside of its area of focus in the north. For any mission of this size and importance, however, redefining priorities in the course of deployment is inevitably challenging.

An Incomplete Structure

This historical construction explains a persistent lack of appropriation, integration, and prioritization of the POC agenda by MINUSMA's personnel. Because the mission was not formed around a sense of urgency regarding POC, its internal structures, the mindset and readiness of its staff, and its processes were not predisposed to manage major or chronic POC issues. MINUSMA's structures for implementing POC have been delayed and appear to still lack the necessary robustness. MINUSMA took two years to develop its mission-wide POC strategy[102]—only finalized in 2015—which frustrated many stakeholders, including member states.[103]

Within the existing structure, a POC team, led by a senior POC adviser, is in charge of coordinating

97 The resolution states, "The strategic priority of MINUSMA remains to support the implementation by the Government, the Plateforme and Coordination armed groups, as well as by other relevant Malian stakeholders, of the Agreement, in particular its political and security key provisions, notably the gradual restoration and extension of State authority and services, the definition of a new institutional architecture, the inclusive and consensual reform of the security sector and national reconciliation measures, and requests MINUSMA to reprioritize its resources and efforts to focus on political tasks." UN Security Council Resolution 2423 (June 28, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2423.

98 Interview with UN official, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

99 Interview, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

100 Ibid.

101 Interview with UN officials, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

102 In 2009, the Security Council requested the secretary-general "to ensure that all relevant peacekeeping missions with protection mandates incorporate comprehensive protection strategies into the overall mission implementation plans and contingency plans which include assessments of potential threats and options for crisis response and risk mitigation and establish priorities, actions and clear roles and responsibilities under the leadership and coordination of the SRSG, with the full involvement of all relevant actors and in consultation with United Nations Country teams." UN Security Council Resolution 1894 (November 11, 2009), UN Doc. S/RES/1894. As described in the DPKO/DFS policy on the protection of civilians, the POC strategy "will set the required principles, objectives and benchmarks; provide an overall threat, risk and capacity assessment; and define the required approach and activities and the relative roles and responsibilities as well as coordination and engagement mechanisms with other actors."

103 Interview with former MINUSMA official, New York, September 7, 2018

POC efforts across the mission. However, this team has been under-resourced. The position of senior POC adviser was vacant for several months, and the POC team only has seven staff, which is not enough to cover all the duty stations and military bases in Mali.[104]

Since its establishment in 2015, MINUSMA's POC structure has had two layers: mission headquarters and regional offices. At the mission headquarters, a POC Core Group (since renamed the POC Working Group) is co-chaired by the senior POC adviser and the military deputy chief of staff operations.[105] It provides guidance on POC strategy development and implementation, establishes the "responsibility of the sections," reviews reports from the field, and provides guidance on operational responses to POC threats. It also develops the POC early-warning and response matrix and ensures response to threats.[106]

At the regional level, heads of offices are in charge of implementing MINUSMA's mandate, including POC, in their region. Regional POC task forces in each of the four regional offices, chaired by the head of office and the sector commander, are in charge of producing monthly threat assessments for their region and designing action plans. As a MINUSMA representative recalled, "We bet everything on the regions. The idea was to have a POC and stabilization operational plan for each region."[107]

The 2017 POC strategy established a more developed POC framework and further clarified the roles and responsibilities of mission personnel. However, the strategy's revision did not necessarily strengthen POC mechanisms. The POC Core Group was renamed the POC Working Group and continued to meet on a bimonthly basis, and the regional task forces were requested to produce bimonthly—rather than the originally required monthly—assessments.[108] A 2018 revision of the POC strategy was being drafted at the time of this report's publication.

The terms of reference for POC staff in both headquarters and regional structures are extremely "output-focused."[109] When breaking down roles and responsibilities, they stress bureaucratic outputs and internal requirements such as "draft[ing] and updat[ing] the regional POC action plan," "plan[ning] and deploy[ing] POC joint field missions," "stimulat[ing] coordination on POC activities," and "report[ing] to the core group." One senior MINUSMA official stated, "Besides excellent reports from the POC unit, there is no action." As a result, despite its bureaucratic work and the analysis and early warnings issued by civilian personnel, the mission has yet to ensure timely action and effective protection of civilians.

In addition, MINUSMA suffers from structural issues inherent to the UN recruitment system, which makes it difficult to attract the most experienced and competent POC staff to a hardship duty station.[110] A senior UN official called for more experienced and skillful staff to avoid retaliation against civilians interacting with the mission: "There is a need for more professionalism in community liaison activities to avoid reprisals.… It is very technical, but there are appropriate methods [to ensure the protection of people]." Ensuring relevant, context-specific training across the mission as well as the expertise required in non-permissive context of violent extremism, remains an important challenge.

Integration Challenges

While the mechanisms set up to coordinate POC in MINUSMA appear to be inspired by POC structures in other missions, such as those in the DRC and CAR, they are less complex and refined in practice. Remarkably, the senior leadership at

104 The team is composed of one staff member at the P5 level, one at P4, two at P3, one government-provided staff member, and two UN volunteers.

105 The POC Core Group is composed of representatives of the political affairs, child protection, women protection, DDR, and stabilization units, the joint operations center, the joint mission analysis center, the UN Mine Action Service, the military force, the Public Information Office, UN police, the protection cluster, the UN Refugee Agency, and UN OCHA. Interestingly, the POC strategy does not mention MINUSMA's human rights representatives as part of the Core Group, with the exception of the child protection and women protection units.

106 MINUSMA, *Protection of Civilians Strategy*, March 2015 (internal document).

107 Interview with senior UN official, Bamako, June 3, 2017.

108 MINUSMA, *Protection of Civilians Strategy*, March 2017 (internal document).

109 Namie Di Razza, "Reframing the Protection of Civilians Paradigm for UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, November 2017, available at www.ipinst.org/2017/11/poc-paradigm-un-peace-ops .

110 Namie Di Razza, "People before Process: Humanizing the HR System for UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, October 2017, available at www.ipinst.org/2017/10/humanizing-hr-system-for-un-peace-operations .

mission headquarters does not participate in any coordination mechanism dedicated to the protection of civilians.[111] While the organizational chart places the senior POC adviser under the direct authority of the special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG), regular access can be challenging when the SRSG is consumed by implementation of the political process and provision of good offices. The 2018 revision of the POC strategy is expected to require senior-level staff to participate in coordination mechanisms and to create a coordination forum at the level of senior mission leadership that will meet every six months.

At the regional level, disagreements over threat analyses, debates on reporting lines and hierarchy, and personal issues have been reported to undermine the smooth implementation of the POC mandate. As one interlocutor explained, "Personalities actually harmed POC in this mission. People created more hostility and tensions [around POC]."[112]

Several interviewees raised the lack of integrated analysis and operational planning as a crucial challenge. Despite the POC team's efforts to mainstream POC and coordinate protection activities, the mission tends to work in silos. "Silos are heavier here than in any other mission," according to one senior staff member.[113] The lack of integration between the civilian, military, and police components undermines the efficiency of POC, which is by definition a whole-of-mission, multidimensional task. The mission has recently improved coordination, however. For example, a justice and reconciliation project launched in central Mali in July 2018 that involves different sections of the mission.[114] Likewise, the mediation and civil affairs teams have engaged in discussions to define their respective roles and responsibilities in addressing intercommunal violence.[115]

The establishment of a team dedicated to coordinating POC efforts throughout the mission also had the unintended effect of diminishing other section's sense of responsibility for POC.[116] Interviewees in the mission felt that some sections did not sufficiently or proactively support work on POC or engage in efforts to settle operational questions related to POC such as the definition of "terrorist" and "violent extremist." As one UN official noted, POC can exasperate some mission personnel: "When the POC team arrives in a meeting, we roll our eyes and wonder, 'What did we do wrong this time?'" Several current and former UN staff attested to the poor perception of POC among personnel; one interlocutor describing the state of the mission in 2017 even said it seemed that "everybody hate[d] POC."[117]

Coordination of POC with humanitarian and development actors outside the mission—a key element of the protection work of integrated multidimensional peacekeeping operations—is also difficult for the UN mission in Mali. Mechanisms such as the protection cluster, which brings together the mission, UN agencies, funds, and programs, and NGOs working on POC, are designed to ensure joint planning and assessment of protection needs and leveraging of their different comparative advantages.

However, the perception that MINUSMA is a party to the conflict has hindered an integrated approach to POC and coordination with humanitarian actors. To preserve the humanitarian space and protect themselves from retaliation due to a presumed association with MINUSMA, many NGOs have distanced themselves from the UN.[118] The UN Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord), which brings together humanitarian and military actors, suffers from an over-representation of military personnel from MINUSMA, Operation Barkhane, and the EU Capacity Building Mission and an under-representation of NGOs.[119] In some instances, this distance

111 The mission in the DRC has a coordination structure at the senior mission leadership level with a senior management group on protection both at the headquarters and regional levels, in addition to protection working groups.

112 Interview with senior UN official, June 8, 2018.

113 Interview with senior UN official, June 3, 2018.

114 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/866, September 25, 2018.

115 Interview with UN official, Bamako, June 8, 2018.

116 Interview with former MINUSMA official, October 5, 2018.

117 Interview with UN official, Bamako, June 3, 2018.

118 Interviews, Bamako and Mopti, June 4–16, 2018.

119 Interview with UN official, Bamako, October 1, 2018.

between humanitarian and military actors has reduced the space for humanitarian actors to protect civilians, as they are unable to access certain areas without military escorts.[120]

There have been particular integration challenges between the military and civilian components of MINUSMA. The military component, which drives the mission's allocation of resources and deployment of operations, generally designs these operations based on its priorities—stabilization and countering asymmetric threats. In coordination with French and Malian forces, its robust and complex military operations aim to stabilize, clear IEDs, enable freedom of movement, and deter violence in specific regions of the country (e.g., Operation Foronto in Mopti, Operation Furaji in Douentza, Operation Fitiri in Telatai and Ménaka).[121]

One of the objectives of these operations is to create space for the mission's civilian sections to work.[122] The MINUSMA force notifies civilian staff of its intended movements and offers them opportunities to visit villages in the area. Such operations are rare due to MINUSMA's limited projection capacities,[123] so when they are conducted, they often end up being catchall initiatives, pushing everybody to piggyback on military movements to accomplish their work without a clear and sequenced strategy.

Indeed, these operations are not always in line with the priorities identified by civilian staff. In other multidimensional peace operations, civilians usually drive military efforts based on their analysis of hotspots and protection needs. MINUSMA's civilian component, however, appears to have a more limited role in the planning of military operations. Some civilians involved have reported being too rarely consulted in the design of such operations or only being included in an ad hoc manner.

Nonetheless, the military component sometimes blames civilians for not planning for these operations. As stated by a senior military officer, "Civilians tell us 'I don't need to go to that village,' but they should take advantage of our operations and do preventive work because the force cannot be reactive enough."[124] A senior UN official noted, "Instead of treating the force like a taxi service or a service provider… civilians should also make efforts to better communicate their needs," such as the desired effects of their missions or their projects.[125] From their side, civilian staff are frustrated with the mission's lack of reactivity and flexibility to provide military support to movements they perceive as essential.

However, the mission has recently sought to improve integrated civil-military planning and coordination. The establishment of a "joint effects working group" in 2018 was meant to reinforce joint civil-military planning of integrated missions to the field and facilitate discussion of priority hotspots. In this spirit, the mission launched the "Road Map 4" (or "box approach") in the summer of 2018 to better allocate resources and improve planning in the Timbuktu military sector (covering Mopti). Under this approach, military personnel ask civilian staff in the regional office to identify areas they need secured in order to engage with communities in the long term and sustainably implement projects. In addition to this, the head of office and the sector commander have set up an integrated justice and reconciliation project in Koro, where the military force will support civilian missions for a period of three months. Such integrated planning also opens humanitarian access for NGOs, whether in the areas secured by the UN or, for those that want to keep their distance from the mission, in the areas where the UN is not present.

120 Communication with former UN official, October 4, 2018.

121 On Foronto, see UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018, para. 32; on Furaji, see UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/273, March 29, 2018, para. 44; and on Fitiri, see MINUSMA, press release, November 30, 2017, available at https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/point-de-presse-de-la-minusma-du-30-novembre-2017 .

122 As the secretary-general noted, "From 25 to 28 March, MINUSMA conducted Operation Faden, which enabled a joint civilian team's missions to five localities in Koro district for the purpose of improving their situational awareness, including on the rollout of the Government's plan to secure the centre. From 18 to 24 April, Operation Foronto facilitated similar joint civilian missions to four localities in the Mopti district." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018, para. 32.

123 Operation Furaji, for example, involved human rights monitoring, reconnaissance, patrolling, medical and veterinary outreach, and engagement with community leaders. UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/273, March 29, 2018, para. 18.

124 Interview with MINUSMA military officer, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

125 Interview with UN official, Bamako, October 1, 2018.

A PARTIAL UNDERSTANDING OF THREATS

POC has recently received more attention from MINUSMA, largely due to the increase in intercommunal tensions, the growing impact of IEDs on local populations, and recent retaliatory attacks against civilians by terrorist groups or abuse by elements from counterterrorism forces. MINUSMA's analysis of threats to civilians, however, is based on a partial assessment of the situation in the country.

A Delayed and Partial Analysis

As noted above, MINUSMA did not have a POC strategy during the first two years of its deployment. The strategy was eventually developed in 2015 and revised in 2017, and it included an analysis of threats to civilians. In 2015, the strategy defined six categories of threats; the revised 2017 version contained slight changes to the phrasing and prioritization of those categories.[126]

The categories of threats identified have evolved with the situation on the ground. The threat "control of areas by armed groups," described as "high" in 2015, was removed in 2017 as state authorities started redeploying to the north. In 2017, the new category "conventional attacks and other abuse by non-state armed groups" replaced it. Inter- and intra-communal tensions received more attention in the 2017 strategy, as did armed banditry, which most likely increased as a perverse effect of the peace accord and the subsequent idleness among fighters and because of the absence

Table 1. Comparison of the threat analysis in MINUSMA's POC strategy[127]

2015	2017
Unconventional attacks from non-state armed groups	Inter- or intra-communal clashes
Armed conflicts between non-state armed groups	Armed banditry
Inter- and intra-community tensions and conflict	Conventional attacks and other abuse by non-state armed groups
Control of areas by armed groups	Unconventional (asymmetric) and/or terrorist attacks from non-state armed actors using terrorist tactics, techniques, and procedures
Armed banditry and organized crime	Armed conflicts between or within non-state armed groups
State actor violations	State actor violations and abuse

126 In 2017, each category of threat was broken down into sub-categories assessed for their probability and impact. For example, for unconventional attacks, the sub-categories "massive and deliberate targeting of civilians," "violent retaliation against presumed informants," "IEDs," "mines," "explosive remnants of war," and "collateral damage" were assessed as having "high" or "very high" impact on civilians. Deliberate targeting was assessed as having a "low probability."

127 The table replicates the order in which categories are listed in MINUSMA's POC strategy. However, the UN document does not explicitly indicate whether the list is in order of priority.

of state authority in the Mopti area.

The strategies' treatment of terrorist threats also evolved. The 2015 strategy referred to "unconventional attacks from non-state armed groups," which could be a euphemism for terrorist threats but encompassed all non-state armed groups. The 2017 strategy changed this to the wordy and seemingly cautious label "unconventional (asymmetric) and/or terrorist attacks from non-state armed actors using terrorist tactics, techniques and procedures." This new wording de facto limited the threat category to terrorist groups and separated it from "abuse by non-state armed groups." This new attention to these unconventional attacks reflected the emergence of new terrorist groups and several high-profile terrorist attacks against the UN and civilians in 2015.[128]

The probability that this threat would materialize, however, was downgraded from "high" to "medium" or "low" (except for the sub-category "retaliation against informants"). By the time the POC strategy was finalized in March 2017, the mission did not see terrorism as a priority threat to local populations due to the low visibility of these threats and limited reports on and analysis of terrorist groups' predatory posture. Such an interpretation, as described above, can be debated. Similarly, violations by state actors were relatively downplayed in both versions of the strategy, despite concerning reports of abuse.[129]

The 2018 version of the POC strategy, in the drafting process at the time of writing, will be a shortened document defining POC structures and coordination mechanisms and will not include a threat analysis—a task left to each regional office. However, reducing the POC "strategy" to a mapping of internal structural arrangements and coordination mechanisms risks focusing too much on tools, activities, and outputs rather than the desired impact and a roadmap for achieving it. Without a mission-wide, strategic analysis and prioritization of threats to civilians, separate regional plans might lack political buy-in, strategic sequencing, and allocation of resources at the national level.

Blind Spots in the Analysis

Beyond this official taxonomy, many questions remain open for MINUSMA personnel, who often pointed out a general "lack of analysis."[130] Civilian components of peace operations usually have a comparative advantage in contributing to POC through multidimensional, expertise-based analyses to inform decision making and military action. Political affairs, civil affairs, human rights, child protection, and DDR officers, as well as the joint mission analysis center, have a central role to play in assessing threats, protection needs, and entry points for leveraging influential figures or perpetrators. They are expected to do this through their understanding of political, economic, and social dynamics, their monitoring and investigations, and their supposedly unique access to civilian populations, local authorities, or non-state armed groups.

In Mali however, the design of effective and innovative protection strategies has been hampered by restricted access to communities, the resulting lack of granularity in analysis of threats to civilians, blurred lines between protectors and threats as well as between extremists and victims, and the intricate web of perpetrators and motives. In addition, lack of coordination within the mission impairs information sharing. While the joint mission analysis center produces analytical reports and has knowledgeable local staff who understand the political, social, and economic dynamics in their area, the rest of the mission and its leadership do not always consider or integrate its analyses.

As a result, the mission has no common assessment or baseline understanding of threats and protection needs. During the interviews conducted for this research, different sections of the mission relayed varied understandings of protection needs in Mali. Staff have contradictory opinions on questions such as the actual impact of terrorist groups on civilians or the reality of "intercommunal violence" in central Mali, and some criticize the assessment and prioritization of threats to

128 The Macina Liberation Front emerged in 2015, and in October 2015, Ansar Dine's leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, denounced the peace process. The terrorist attack on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako by al-Mourabitoun on November 20, 2015, and the various attacks against MINUSMA in the north revealed the extent and particularity of the terrorist threat for the UN and for local populations.

129 They were labeled "low probability" and "high impact" in 2015, and "medium probability" and "low impact" in 2017.

130 Interviews with MINUSMA personnel, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

civilians.

On the threat of terrorism, the mission's analysis closely aligns with that of the Malian government and of some other member states interested in the region. Under the general framework of cooperation with Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel, MINUSMA's approach seems to reduce terrorist groups to "enemies" to proscribe and neutralize. The fact that these groups target MINUSMA perpetuates this view. Within MINUSMA's mandate to support the peace process and stabilization, such an approach certainly makes sense, as terrorist groups have vowed to fight the peace process, state authorities, and foreign forces in Mali. From the perspective of the POC mandate, however, the mission could consider a different analysis. Because some of these extremists seek to spare civilians, MINUSMA could engage them to reduce threats of violence against civilians, as in Afghanistan, where the UN political mission (UNAMA) interacts with and sensitizes the Taliban on human rights and protection issues.[131]

In the context of MINUSMA's close partnership with national and international stakeholders, the 2015 and 2017 POC strategies have also tended to overlook abuse by state authorities and security forces, including the questions of corruption, impunity, and harassment. The absence of any mention of risks to civilians related to counterterrorism operations is particularly striking. Even though the G5 Sahel joint force was not yet in place when the POC strategy was revised in 2017, the consequences of counterterrorism operations for POC, such as possible collateral damage or abuse, were already tangible. To a certain extent, MINUSMA's proximity to counterterrorism forces may have led the mission to adopt a partial analysis of threats. At the same time, while "terrorists" are a threat to the UN mission, French forces, and Malian authorities, they are not a threat to civilians in the same way or to the same extent.

On intercommunal tensions, different sections of the mission have competing understandings of the situation in central Mali. Some UN civilian analysts question the extent of intercommunal violence due to the lack of data and are wary to talk about "interethnic conflict." Some argue that there is no interethnic violence between the Fulani and other communities because tensions are mainly based on livelihoods (cattle herding, farming, fishing, and other issues related to land and transhumance) rather than ethnic identity—a potentially valid argument. A handful of interlocutors from the UN and civil society also warn that terrorist groups could be destabilizing central Mali to deflect attention from the north—though this would not justify the mission remaining passive in the face of violence and abuse against civilians.

A Late and Controversial Consideration of Central Mali

As one UN interlocutor stated, "The focus is on the north, so there is no vision for the protection of civilians in the center."[132] Indeed, MINUSMA only had a small office in Mopti in 2015, mainly for liaising with agencies and NGOs and for working on the issue of IDPs from northern Mali. Initially, the Malian government also demonstrated little interest in having the mission focus on the center, a situation it thought it could address on its own. Despite early warnings, the mission did not substantially reinforce the small team in Mopti, which, without any projection capacities, is unable to properly respond to the rise of intercommunal violence. The region is in the area of responsibility of the Timbuktu sector, and a quick reaction force was only sent to Sévaré in March 2017.[133]

There has also been a persistent presumption among the mission's personnel that "the center is not the mandate." UN funds and agencies and civil society representatives also tend to regret that "MINUSMA does not have a mandate for the center," even though the mission's POC mandate does not set geographic limits for this task.[134]

With the deployment of the G5 Sahel force in

131 See Ralph Mamiya, "Engaging with Non-state Armed Groups to Protect Civilians: A Pragmatic Approach for UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, October 2018. During the first years of the conflict in Afghanistan, the Taliban were also considered a proscribed group and described as the main enemy in the war against terrorism. However, the UN political mission in Afghanistan's human rights teams have sought to abide by certain standards for the protection of civilians in the conflict.

132 Interview with UN official, Mopti, June 12, 2018.

133 One part of the quick reaction force—the advanced force—came in March 2017, and the rest followed gradually.

134 The mandate has explicitly referred to central Mali since 2016, mandating MINUSMA to stabilize areas where civilians are at risk, "especially in the Centre and North of Mali."

Sévaré and increased killings from intercommunal violence in the region, the UN has recently refocused some of its attention to the center, and the team there seems willing to tackle threats to civilians.[135] However, the Security Council has remained wary of shifting MINUSMA's mandate and stressed that the strategic priority remains the implementation of the peace process in the north. In 2018, the council authorized the mission to "stabilize the key population centres and other areas where civilians are at risk, notably in the Center and North of Mali" under its POC mandate.[136] But following intense deliberations on this sensitive question, the council ensured that this would not impact the pursuit of the strategic priority in the north. It "encourages the reconfiguration of MINUSMA posture to optimize and rebalance the uniformed and civilian presences in the Central region, at the discretion of the SRSG, in close consultation with the Force Commander and without impeding its ability to pursue its strategic priority in the North."[137] As a result, the mission's response to the crisis in the center has been mostly reactive. There was no strategy for the center before a MINUSMA senior adviser was requested to draft one in 2018 to better sequence and increase the coherence of the mission's response in the region.

AN AMBITIOUS MANDATE TO SUPPORT STABILIZATION AND COUNTERTERRORISM

Although the main focus of the mission is support to the implementation of the peace process and, in practice, MINUSMA paid limited attention to POC in comparison to other peacekeeping operations, Security Council resolutions have included POC as a priority task for MINUSMA since 2014, authorizing the mission to use all necessary means under an ambitious and robust mandate to protect civilians.[138] Importantly, the link between POC, stabilization, and countering asymmetric threats—both conceptually and in practice—has given MINUSMA extensive leeway to protect civilians in a proactive and forceful manner and galvanized the potential actions that can be undertaken for POC.[139] However, this link has also led to confusion between POC, stabilization, and counterterrorism operations, any of which can justify the use of force.

The Conflation of POC, Stabilization, and "Countering Asymmetric Threats" in Mission Mandates

As it seeks to deliver on protection mandates more effectively, the UN seems to be overemphasizing military action. Because peacekeepers are now expected to oppose actors threatening civilians, they are increasingly pushed beyond their traditional limitations to embrace a more robust and proactive stance against those who prey on local populations.[140] The POC discourse has been accompanied by a new rhetoric discrediting "spoilers," "negative forces," "perpetrators of violence," and, more broadly, groups threatening civilians. In places like the DRC and CAR, the POC approach increasingly resembles warfare strategies aiming to "defeat" an enemy. The recent Dos Santos Cruz report, which states that armed groups only understand "overwhelming force," represents a landmark in this trend. At the policy level, the victim-based approach (protect civilians) has also seemed to shift to a perpetrator-based approach (tackle the threats), with transformational consequences for the UN system and peacekeeping missions.[141]

In Mali, the mission has a mandate authorizing

135 The headquarters was relocated to Bamako after it was attacked by terrorist groups in June 2018.

136 UN Security Council Resolution 2423 (June 28, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2423.

137 Ibid.

138 Security Council Resolution 2164 (June 25, 2014), UN Doc. S/RES/2164.

139 Interestingly, POC and stabilization—"including countering asymmetric threats"—were merged in both the Security Council resolutions and in the secretary-general's reports. In the secretary-general's 2015 report, a section combines "Security, Stabilization, and POC." *UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2015/219, March 27, 2015, section III.

140 Especially where they are mandated to use all necessary means to protect civilians. This culture of protection has even led UN missions to flexibly interpret the principles of peacekeeping regarding the use of force, impartiality, and consent of the main parties. In the DRC, blue helmets have been explicitly mandated to use force to neutralize perpetrators of violence through targeted and offensive operations, which impacted local perceptions of the mission's impartiality in the conflict. The mission in CAR has also intervened militarily to stop the advance of certain armed groups on several occasions, guided by a reasonable assumption that they would directly put civilians in harm's way. In South Sudan, UN peacekeepers often operate without the tactical consent of the parties to the conflict, and sometimes have to protect civilians from the host state itself.

141 There have recently been efforts to improve threat-based analysis to better design POC strategies in peace operations. Such analysis can help make responses more tailored and effective and improve the prioritization and allocation of mission resources and approaches in response to different types and levels of threats to civilians.

robust operations against armed groups to protect civilians, stabilize the country (including to prevent the return of armed groups), and counter asymmetric threats.[142] In 2013, protection of civilians was the third priority task, coupled with the protection of UN personnel, while stabilization of key population centers was the first. In 2014, stabilization and POC were coupled in the same paragraph,[143] conflating POC and robust operations as two sides of the same coin: the mission is requested both to stabilize urban centers "where civilians are at risk" and to "deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements," with "armed elements" understood to include both conventional armed groups and terrorist groups.[144]

POC, stabilization, and "countering asymmetric threats" have been conflated since 2016, when they were combined in the same paragraph (see Table 2).[145] The 2016 mandate also established "countering asymmetric attacks in active defence of MINUSMA's mandate" (including "asymmetric attacks against civilians") as a separate priority task. In 2018, the resolution's language continues to link "POC and stabilization, including against asymmetric threats."[146] The separate paragraph on "asymmetric attacks in active defence of MINUSMA's mandate" was moved as an operative paragraph under "general principles" instead of "priority tasks."

Cooperation with Counterterrorism Forces in Practice

In parallel to this conflation of tasks within the mission's mandates, cooperation between MINUSMA, with its mandate to protect civilians, and parallel forces, with their mandate to neutralize terrorist threats, have raised questions about the mission's positioning. Indeed, due to the support provided by the mission to counterterrorism forces, it could potentially be perceived as a party to the conflict.

Although MINUSMA is not a counterterrorism force, it has been drawn in to complement and support counterterrorism efforts in the region. France supported the idea of deploying a UN peacekeeping mission in Mali to pursue the stabilization of the country, while its own counterterrorism operation, Serval, was in a drawdown process.[147] As French and Malian forces would continue fighting against terrorist groups, the needed support to Mali's stabilization and the protection of civilians under the threat of extremist groups were decisive considerations for such a UN deployment.[148] This complementarity between POC, stabilization, and counterterrorism was therefore historically engrained in the rationale behind MINUSMA's deployment alongside counterterrorism forces.

Cooperation between MINUSMA and counterterrorism forces enable the coordination of all security forces' efforts on the ground, as well as the pooling of capacities in order to fill gaps. Operation Barkhane has provided operational support to MINUSMA that has greatly increased its capacity, reinforced its security, and expanded its outreach. In many areas, the deployment of MINUSMA units has been enabled by French forces' air or land support, including military escorts. Intelligence sharing and pooling of detection and alert capabilities to protect military bases have also contributed to greater force protection. Barkhane's engineering assistance to maintain and secure camps, detect and counter IEDs, and evacuate vehicles or personnel, as well as its provision of medical assistance, have also been crucial for MINUSMA.

Through "coordinated operations" between

142 See UN Security Council Resolution 2085 (December 20, 2012), which mandated the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) "to support the Malian authorities in recovering the areas in the north of its territory under the control of terrorist, extremist and armed groups and in reducing the threat posed by terrorist organizations, including AQIM, MUJWA and associated extremist groups." Resolution 2100 (April 25, 2013) mandated MINUSMA to "help restore the authority of the State of Mali over its entire national territory, to uphold the unity and territorial integrity of Mali and to reduce the threat posed by terrorist organizations and associated groups."

143 "Security, Stabilization and POC" in 2014, and "POC and Stabilization" in 2015.

144 Security Council Resolution 2295 (June 29, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2295.

145 In parallel to the evolution of the Security Council resolutions, the mission's POC strategy evolved toward a more explicit mention of terrorism threats in 2017. In 2015, there was no mention of "violent extremist," "extremist," "jihadist," "Islamist," or "radical" perpetrators, and only occasional references to "terrorist" groups in reference to civilians embroiled in the conflict Operation Barkhane and Malian forces were engaged in with terrorist groups. In 2017, reference to terrorist attacks and threats by terrorist groups or groups utilizing terror tactics is much more explicit.

146 UN Security Council Resolution 2423 (June 28, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2423.

147 Gérard Araud, comments at Security Council media stakeout, April 25, 2013, available at http://webtv.un.org/media/watch/g%C3%A9rard-araud-france-on-mali-security-council-media-stakeout-25-april-2013/2327411645001/?term=&page=1 .

148 Interview, New York, May 14, 2018.

Table 2. Evolution of the language on POC, stabilization, and countering asymmetric threats in Security Council resolutions on MINUSMA

Security Council resolutions	Relevant language on POC	Relevant language on stabilization or countering asymmetric threats
Resolution 2100 (2013) Mandated priority tasks: a. Stabilization of key population centres and support for the reestablishment of State authority throughout the country b. Support for the implementation of the transitional road map, including the national political dialogue and the electoral process c. Protection of civilians and UN personnel d. Promotion and protection of human rights e. Support for humanitarian assistance f. Support for cultural preservation g. Support for national and international justice	**Mandated priority tasks**	
	To protect, without prejudice to the responsibility of the transitional authorities of Mali, civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, within its capacities and areas of deployment	In support of the transitional authorities of Mali, to stabilize the key population centres, especially in the north of Mali and, in this context, to deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas
Resolution 2164 (2014) Mandated priority tasks: a. Security, Stabilization and protection of civilians b. Support to national political dialogue and reconciliation c. Support to the re-establishment of State authority throughout the country, the rebuilding of the Malian security sector, the promotion and protection of human rights, and the support for humanitarian assistance	**Mandated priority tasks**	
	To protect, without prejudice to the responsibility of the Malian authorities, civilians under imminent threat of physical violence To expand its presence, including through long-range patrols and within its capacities, in the North of Mali beyond key population centres, notably in areas where civilians are at risk	In support of the Malian authorities, to stabilize the key population centres, notably in the North of Mali, and, in this context, to deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas

Security Council resolutions	Relevant language on POC	Relevant language on stabilization or countering asymmetric threats
Resolution 2227 (2015) Mandated priority tasks: a. Ceasefire b. Support to the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali c. Good offices and reconciliation d. Protection of civilians and stabilization e. Promotion and protection of human rights f. Humanitarian assistance and projects for stabilization g. Protection, safety and security of UN personnel h. Support for cultural preservation	**Mandated priority tasks**	
	To protect, without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the Malian authorities, civilians under imminent threat of physical violence	In support of the Malian authorities, to stabilize the key population centres and other areas where civilians are at risk, notably in the North of Mali, including through long-range patrols, and, in this context, to deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas
Resolution 2295 (2016) Mandated priority tasks: a. Support to the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali b. Good offices and reconciliation c. Protection of civilians and stabilization, including against asymmetric threats d. Countering asymmetric attacks in active defence of MINUSMA's mandate e. Protection, safety and security of UN personnel f. Promotion and protection of human rights g. Humanitarian assistance	**Mandated priority tasks**	
	To protect, without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the Malian authorities, civilians under threat of physical violence	In support of the Malian authorities, to stabilize the key population centres and other areas where civilians are at risk, notably in the North and Centre of Mali, and, in this regard, to enhance early warning, to anticipate, deter and counter threats, including asymmetric threats, and to take robust and active steps to protect civilians, including through active and effective patrolling in areas where civilians are at risk, and to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas, engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats In pursuit of its priorities and active defence of its mandate, to anticipate and deter threats and to take robust and active steps to counter asymmetric attacks against civilians or United Nations personnel, to ensure prompt and effective responses to threats of violence against civilians and to prevent a return of armed elements to those areas, engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats

Security Council resolutions	Relevant language on POC	Relevant language on stabilization or countering asymmetric threats
	Other operative paragraphs	
	Requests MINUSMA to update its protection of civilians strategy… and, in this regard, to identify threats to civilians, implement prevention plans and accelerate the coordinated implementation of relevant monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements	
Resolution 2364 (2017) Mandated priority tasks: a. Support to the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali b. Good offices and reconciliation c. Protection of civilians and stabilization, including against asymmetric threats d. Countering asymmetric attacks in active defence of MINUSMA's mandate e. Protection, safety and security of UN personnel f. Promotion and protection of human rights g. Humanitarian assistance	**Mandated priority tasks**	
	To protect, without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the Malian authorities, civilians under threat of physical violence	In support of the Malian authorities, to stabilize the key population centres and other areas where civilians are at risk, notably in the North and Centre of Mali, and, in this regard, to enhance early warning, to anticipate, deter and counter threats, including asymmetric threats, and to take robust and active steps to protect civilians, including through active and effective patrolling in areas where civilians are at risk, and to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas, engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats In pursuit of its priorities and active defence of its mandate, to anticipate and deter threats and to take robust and active steps to counter asymmetric attacks against civilians or United Nations personnel, to ensure prompt and effective responses to threats of violence against civilians and to prevent a return of armed elements to those areas, engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats

Security Council resolutions	Relevant language on POC	Relevant language on stabilization or countering asymmetric threats
Resolution 2423 (2018) Mandated priority tasks: a. Support to the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali b. Support to the restoration of State authority in the Centre c. Good offices and reconciliation d. Protection of civilians and stabilization, including against asymmetric threats e. Promotion and protection of human rights f. Humanitarian assistance	**Mandated priority tasks**	
	To protect, without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the Malian authorities, civilians under threat of physical violence, including through public information, community outreach, dialogue and direct engagement	In support of the Malian authorities, to stabilize the key population centres and other areas where civilians are at risk, notably in the Centre and North of Mali, and, in this regard, to enhance early warning and documentation of the impact of conflict and violence on civilians, to anticipate, deter and counter threats, including asymmetric threats; to strengthen community engagement and protection mechanisms, including through reconciliation, mediation and support to the resolution of local conflicts; to take robust and active steps to protect civilians, including through active and effective patrolling in areas where civilians are at risk, mitigating the risk to civilians before, during and after any military operation; to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas, engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats
	Other operative paragraphs	
	Underlines the importance for MINUSMA to consider potential measures, as appropriate, as applicable, in line with its protection of civilians mandate as set out in paragraph 38 (d) below, and within existing resources, with a view to reducing or avoiding potential collateral damages among civilians which could result from attacks against the mission's camps	In pursuit of its relevant priority tasks and active defence of its mandate, to continue anticipate and deter threats and to take robust and active steps to counter asymmetric attacks against civilians or United Nations personnel, to ensure prompt and effective responses to threats of violence against civilians and to prevent a return of armed elements to those areas, engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats

MINUSMA and Barkhane, in which both forces share details on their respective operations, timing, objectives, and modalities of action, the UN mission has contributed to holding and stabilizing areas cleared by Operations Serval and Barkhane.[149] Logistical support to French forces (even if granted on an exceptional basis), has also become more frequent.[150] The collocation of UN and French forces in the same camp (or, as often highlighted by interviewees, in two separate but adjacent camps) is another sign of this proximity. Since February 2018, a technical agreement has established MINUSMA's formal support to the G5 Sahel counterterrorism force. The cost of this support, including the provision of fuel, food, and medical, engineering, and logistical support, was estimated at 44 million euros over two years.[151]

However, coordinated operations have also raised questions about the actual role of the UN in counterterrorism efforts. In the well-known sequence used in counter-insurgency and stabilization operations (clear/hold/build), some could interpret that French forces would "clear" areas, MINUSMA and Malian forces would "hold" the areas liberated, and MINUSMA's civilian components would "build."[152] The distinction between counterterrorism and peacekeeping, made for political, legal, and organizational reasons, has thus proven more difficult to draw on an operational level.[153]

Some senior officials in MINUSMA and in the UN Secretariat admit that the peacekeeping mission has become over-involved in counterterrorism efforts and has focused too little on POC. As one UN official stated, "The objective is to support the [G5 Sahel] and Barkhane, to occupy the territory, detect threats—and, perhaps, do POC…. But in reality we are doing very few operations whose objective is POC." Indeed, MINUSMA has tended to conduct military operations to detect, search for, and neutralize asymmetric threats with POC as merely an add-on task. MINUSMA staff have attempted to take advantage of these robust operations to advance and create more space for POC activities. For example, MINUSMA was the first mission to have a solid intelligence system aimed at identifying and monitoring threats, even if it was poorly integrated across the mission.[154] Mission staff used this interest in intelligence across the mission to advance the POC agenda and increase buy-in to POC activities by demonstrating the value of preventive analysis for both POC and countering asymmetric threats.[155]

While most interlocutors did not think MINUSMA purposely instrumentalized POC to justify engaging in counterterrorism, they did admit that lines have been blurred, and the Secretariat has recently sought to set clearer boundaries. Officials interviewed for this report also acknowledged the need to clarify the distinct roles of actors operating in Mali, even if, as the secretary-general declared, they all work toward the same objectives.[156] Similarly, the independent strategic review of MINUSMA conducted in early 2018 criticized MINUSMA's proximity to counterterrorism forces.[157]

149 Interviews, New York and Bamako, May, June, and October 2018.

150 For example, Operation Barkhane has recently asked to use UN aircraft to support the rotation of its military personnel.

151 This includes 10 million euros from the EU. The total amount pledged by donors for the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel is €414 million. Security Council Report, "May 2018 Monthly Forecast," available at www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-05/g5_sahel_joint_force.php?print=true .

152 Interview, Bamako, June 8, 2018. See also Arthur Boutellis, "Can the UN Stabilize Mali? Towards a UN Stabilization Doctrine?," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015).

153 Bruno Charbonneau, "Counterterrorism and Challenges to Peacekeeping Impartiality," *IPI Global Observatory*, June 28, 2018, available at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/06/counterterrorism-peacekeeping-impartiality/ .

154 The All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU). For more background information on this unit, see Olga Abilova and Alexandra Novosseloff, "Demystifying intelligence in UN Peace Operations" Toward an Organizational Doctrine," International Peace Institute, July 2016, available at www.ipinst.org/2016/07/demystifying-intelligence-in-un-peace-ops .

155 Interview with UN official, New York, August 2018.

156 The secretary-general repeated in May 2018 that peacekeeping mandates do not include counterterrorism but that there must be complementarity between MINUSMA, the G5 Sahel, Operation Barkhane, and the Malians, and that strengthening the support framework for the G5 Sahel was important to enable the Joint Force to fight against terrorist movements and organized crime for the protection of civilians. António Guterres, press conference, May 30, 2018.

157 See UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018: "The review team was of the view that the proximity of MINUSMA, and its support role and cooperation with security actors, including counter-terrorism actors, had contributed to the perception that the Mission was engaging in counter-terrorism actions."

The Manipulation of POC in a Highly Politicized Environment

MINUSMA implements its protection mandate in a highly politicized environment. As a result, parties to the conflict, including the Platform and the Coordination, have tended to use and manipulate POC to request the intervention of MINUSMA to stop the advance of their opponents for the sake of "protecting civilians."

There have been examples of MINUSMA interventions that have been officially pursued to protect civilians but ultimately favor one group against the other.[158] In January 2015, the mission justified firing at the Coordination in Tabankort to protect itself and civilians in the area from heavy firing.[159] However, there was a debate over the "civilians" MINUSMA was claiming to protect, who were reported to be Platform supporters firing at the Coordination.[160] Later that year in Ménaka, MINUSMA was criticized for seemingly seeking to oust the Platform from the town. In a press release, the mission reiterated its impartiality and denied allegations of its involvement between belligerents. It "categorically" denied giving an ultimatum to the Platform to leave but acknowledged it was pursuing mediation efforts to prevent armed hostilities that could threaten civilians.[161] In August 2015, MINUSMA established a security zone around Kidal and condemned fighting between the Coordination and the Platform as well as the seizing of Anéfis by Platform forces. In a press release, it expressed that it was determined to protect civilians and that "any movement by elements of the Platform inside this zone will be forbidden & considered an 'imminent danger to populations.'"[162] As a UN official put it, "We were actually sanctioning a cease-fire violation."[163] The Platform and the Coordination's manipulation of MINUSMA has thus complicated the implementation of POC.

Practical Challenges: MINUSMA's Shrinking Space for Protection

UN peacekeeping operations have a full spectrum of armed and unarmed activities to protect civilians at their disposal. The military component can navigate a whole continuum of tools ranging from a deterrent presence to robust operations, quick reaction, and domination. The police component, through its capacity-building activities, ability to maintain law and order, and experience in community engagement, also has tools it can use to protect local populations. The civilian component, through analysis, presence, dialogue and engagement, mediation, human rights monitoring and investigation, and extension of state authority, contributes to establishing a protective environment and to directly supporting civilians at risk. Some of these tools have been replicated from mission to mission. For example, the mission in Mali has used tools developed in the DRC, such as multidisciplinary teams assessing protection needs, community liaison assistants ensuring proper interaction with communities to better protect them, and community alert networks improving early warning and quick reaction.[164]

However, both the non-permissive environment and internal confusion about the mission's role in counterterrorism efforts have constrained the use of traditional protection tools in Mali. These tools have proven to be ill-adapted to the Malian context, impaired by the partial position of MINUSMA and

158 On the events in Tabankort, see the MINUSMA statement on January 20, 2015, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/minusma-constrained-use-force-today-tabankort . See also UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2015/219, March 27, 2015, para. 18. On the events in Kidal, see the MINUSMA statement on August 27, 2015, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/la-minusma-met-en-place-une-zone-de-s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9-autour-de-la-ville-de-kidal .

159 As noted in the secretary-general's report, "On 20 January, the Coordination fired heavy machine guns and rockets into Tabankort close to the MINUSMA position as well as civilian locations. MINUSMA sent two attack helicopters to deter further firing and fired warning shots that failed to halt the shooting. MINUSMA helicopters fired at and destroyed the rocket launcher." MNLA complained about having men killed by MINUSMA, and the Platform called on MINUSMA to allow armed groups to continue fighting in Tabankort, prompting demonstrations in support of and against MINUSMA in different towns. UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2015/219, March 27, 2015, para. 18.

160 Interview with senior UN official, New York, July 18, 2018; interview with former UN official, October 5, 2018.

161 MINUSMA, press release, May 21, 2015, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/mise-au-point-de-la-minusma-0 .

162 MINUSMA, "La MINUSMA met en place une zone de sécurité autour de la ville de Kidal," August 17, 2015, https://minusma.unmissions.org/la-minusma-met-en-place-une-zone-de-s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9-autour-de-la-ville-de-kidal .

163 Interview with senior UN official, New York, July 18, 2018.

164 MINUSMA, "Face aux tensions dans le Nord, la MINUSMA déterminée à protéger les civils," May 7, 2015, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/face-aux-tensions-dans-le-nord-la-minusma-d%C3%A9termin%C3%A9e-%C3%A0-prot%C3%A9ger-les-civils .

its partnership with counterterrorism forces, or restricted (and sometimes even avoided) because the UN is attempting to dissociate itself from counterterrorism.

TOOLS ILL-ADAPTED TO NON-PERMISSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

In non-permissive environments, several methods that missions traditionally rely on to protect civilians are hindered by attacks on UN personnel and reprisals against communities with which they engage. In such contexts, the UN's presence and community engagement have a limited effect on protection and can even put civilians at greater risk.

Deterrent Presence

One of the most basic tools peacekeepers can use to protect civilians is their very presence as a deterrent against hostile actors. The presence of a UN base, patrols by UN peacekeepers, and visits by UN civilian staff can help discourage spoilers, stabilize an area, and reassure the population.

To a certain extent, MINUSMA has made use of the UN flag's advantage as a deterrent. The military force has carried out patrols and operations to reassure people and dissuade would-be criminals.[165] Military and police patrols in and around key urban areas were some of the most visible activities of the mission during the first years of its deployment in the north and continue to reassure the local population and build trust.[166] During the 2018 elections, foot and motorized patrols by UN police aimed to secure the population.[167] Operation Furaji II, a large-scale operation in Douentza in June 2018, was intended to reassure civilians, especially women, through a brigade including Togolese female troops seeking to improve "female outreach."[168] The operation was reported to reduce the number of attacks against civilians.[169]

Through their presence, peacekeepers also provide space for civilians and humanitarian actors to conduct their activities. In 2018, Operations Faden and Foronto in the Mopti region enabled joint civilian teams to conduct several missions to meet with the population and improve the mission's situational awareness.[170] Military bases can also shelter civilians and shield them from violence, and civilians have sought refuge in MINUSMA compounds.[171] In one instance, twenty-two civilians were protected at the mission's camp in Tabankort in 2015 during clashes between the Coordination and the Platform.

However, the deterioration of peacekeepers' security has adversely affected the mission's capacity to be present and mobile. Regular ambushes of MINUSMA by extremist groups have led it to "bunkerize," reducing its domination of the terrain. The rules for personnel movement have been tightened since 2015, and MINUSMA's civilian staff now require military escorts in most of the country. This has significantly diminished the capacity of civilian components to operate unless they break the rules and take personal risks.[172] As a result, the military component is largely driving the strategy for deployment and the activities undertaken by the civilian component outside of the main urban areas. As a UN military officer explained, "If human rights [officers] want to go to Telataï to investigate killings, it requires two companies and four helicopters and an entire military operation to bring one civilian [staff]." Such security requirements also make it extremely difficult for civilian staff to differentiate themselves from their military counterparts.

The security situation has also overstretched MINUSMA's military capacity. The mission

165 The mission has carried out coordinated patrols with signatory and splinter armed groups in Ménaka in eastern Mali to build confidence and deter "armed banditry." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/273, March 29, 2018, para. 46.

166 See UN Peacekeeping, Twitter, August 27, 2018, 11:26am, available at https://twitter.com/UNPeacekeeping/status/1034145182168612865 .

167 See UN Police, Twitter, July 30, 2018, 11:48am, available at https://twitter.com/UNPOL/status/1024003890063269889 .

168 MINUSMA, "FURAJI II: Une opération des Casques bleus au féminin," June 27, 2018, available at https://minusma.unmissions.org/furaji-ii-une-op%C3%A9ration-des-casques-bleus-au-f%C3%A9minin .

169 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/866, September 25, 2018.

170 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018, para. 32. Troops were involved to assess the security situation and meet the local population. MINUSMA, Twitter, April 17, 2018, 2:11am, available at https://twitter.com/UN_MINUSMA/status/986170267889172480 .

171 The secretary-general noted in his report that, a few days before the robust action taken by the mission against the Coordination in Tabankort, "On January 16, the Coordination attacked Platform positions in the town. Twenty-two civilians sought refuge at the Mission's temporary camp and MINUSMA reinforced its troops there." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2015/219, March 27, 2015.

172 Interviews, Bamako and Mopti, June 4–16, 2018.

cannot have a protective presence everywhere in the country. Its light footprint, lack of equipment, and force protection concerns restrict its ability to deploy. The forward command post in Sévaré, which is under the responsibility of the Sector West headquarters in Timbuktu, has extremely limited capacity and is unable to deploy to the floodplain of Mopti most of the year. A senior UN official stated that "we have waited for months for the force to go to Koro," which was identified as a hotspot in June 2017.

Force projection does not appear to be a solution in the current context of budget constraints and limited troop contributions. The strategic review of MINUSMA in 2018 made the same conclusion, noting that "on average, 80 per cent of the resources of the MINUSMA force were being employed to provide pockets of security covering a radius of 5 to 20 kilometres, protecting major population centres in the north." The review team estimated that chronic mobility shortfalls and the operational environment would likely continue to challenge the mission's ability to project its presence and implement its mandate. The military component of the mission, however, has sought to demonstrate its capacity to dominate territory, conducting large-scale operations engaging up to ten companies 100 to 150 kilometers away from MINUSMA bases, such as Operations Firiti, Foronto, and Faden. MINUSMA's sectors have also conducted large-scale operations.

Beyond restraining movement, terrorist groups' aggression toward MINUSMA puts into question the relevance of a deterrent presence as a protection tool in Mali. The UN flag seems to have little, if any, success in deterring violent extremist groups from targeting UN personnel. Some have ironically pointed out that in a civilian convoy escorted by UN peacekeepers "it is actually civilians who are protecting peacekeepers, not the reverse."[173]

If anything, it seems the UN flag is attracting threats and violence and thus has the opposite effect of a deterrent. A road is more likely to be mined when blue helmets circulate on it: "If there is no MINUSMA, there are no IEDs," stated an interlocutor.[174] Unlike in the DRC, where MONUSCO would often recommend increasing patrols in an area where civilians are at risk, a greater presence in Mali can decrease security and further harm communities. Violent clashes in the Mopti region in June 2017 prompted the deployment of a civilian mission to the town of Koro in June and another to the villages affected in July. These visits were reportedly followed by an aggravation of the situation as extremist groups placed more mines and IEDs, preventing any follow-up mission to these villages.[175] Attacks against UN compounds or subsequent clashes between terrorist groups and MINUSMA can also cause collateral damage to civilians. Even the Security Council has specified the importance of designing mitigation measures against the risks of violence triggered by the mission's presence.[176]

Assessing whether MINUSMA's presence is more protective than harmful is an important step to follow in developing a protection strategy. Some make the case that MINUSMA's prompt departure would be its best way of contributing to POC. However, MINUSMA is the only security actor in northern Mali, where it has enabled positive signs of stabilization, such as the slow return of state institutions and the establishment of confidence-building measures with compliant armed groups. MINUSMA's presence has a better chance deterring such groups and "legitimate" parties to the peace process willing to show their good will and to cooperate with the international community. Obviously, extremist groups do not react in the same way to the presence of an actor representing and supporting institutions, a rule of law system, and an order they are fighting.

Nevertheless, as explained by a representative of a UN agency, the UN's absence would "not mean that civilians would be more protected." IEDs would probably be less prevalent, but local populations would still be threatened by banditry, intercommunal violence, and harassment by extremist groups. A senior military officer shared

173 Interview with representative of a UN agency, Bamako, June 7, 2018.

174 Interview with representative of a UN agency, Bamako, June 7, 2018.

175 Interview with UN official in Mopti, 12 June 2018.

176 UN Security Council Resolution 2423 (June 28, 2018) "*underlines the importance* for MINUSMA to consider potential measures, as appropriate, as applicable, in line with its protection of civilians mandate as set out in paragraph 38 (d) below, and within existing resources, with a view to reducing or avoiding potential collateral damages among civilians which could result from attacks against the mission's camps."

that perspective: "If you are there, you create trouble. If you are not, the trouble continues."[177]

The mission has also had some successes in using a deterrent presence, especially when accompanied by a credible threat of force. In the Djenné area, it deployed two helicopters to deter armed elements besieging the village of Nouh Bozo in May 2018 after alerted by local authorities.[178] This demonstration of force successfully pushed assailants to leave the area.

To deter violent extremist threats in Mali, the UN presence ought to be continuous, extensive, or particularly impressive. Brief visits and sporadic patrols are counterproductive, as they put people at risk of retaliation once UN forces leave. Similarly, projecting force through numerous, small military bases, like in the DRC, would not work in Mali, as these bases would be too vulnerable to asymmetric attacks by violent extremists. A robust military deployment for several weeks, followed by the deployment of Malian or UN police forces to prevent a security vacuum, would be an interesting formula to explore. Along these lines, the force is restructuring into small company-based camps, which are being consolidated into battalion-level camps. Longer-term three-month operations are also being planned to respond to the rampant insecurity in central Mali.

Community Engagement and Mediation

Community liaison and engagement have become essentials protection tools for the UN. In the DRC, the mission has "joint protection teams," "community liaison assistants," and "community alert networks" and develops local protection plans in consultation with local communities. These measures enable the mission to more accurately assess and respond to the needs of civilians, build trust between uniformed components and the population, address intercommunal tensions, and strengthen early-warning and response mechanisms.

Some of these tools have been replicated in Mali, with mixed success. For example, joint civilian teams comprised of staff from different sections of MINUSMA have been visiting hotspots to liaise with stakeholders on the ground, evaluate protection needs in cooperation with communities, and try to defuse disputes and reassure communities. Likewise, "integrated missions" have assessed the impact of violence, engaged community leaders on potential reconciliation initiatives, sensitized the population, and created community discussion fora.[179] Community liaison assistants have been hired since mid-2015 to analyze local social, security, and political trends in their area of responsibility. In Douentza, two community liaison assistants constitute the mission's only civilian presence.

Liaising with communities is invaluable for early warning and prevention and creates networks of contacts informing MINUSMA about protection threats and needs. For example, when the village of Nouh Bozo was surrounded by armed groups in May 2018, village chiefs called MINUSMA civil affairs officers, triggering the rapid deployment of MINUSMA helicopters. Reconciliation and mediation activities can also defuse conflicts and counter radicalization, offer disenfranchised members of communities a voice in public debates, and build confidence between different groups and between state authorities and constituents in a polarized environment.[180]

Mali's harsh security conditions, however, have confined civilian personnel to military bases and thus prevented them from doing community outreach. National staff are regularly threatened, prompting the mission to move them to regional offices rather than the areas where they are most needed, and prompting some of them to stop wearing the UN badge. The ability of community liaison assistants and civil affairs officers to move depends on huge logistics efforts to coordinate

177 Interview with MINUSMA officer in Bamako, June 11, 2018.

178 Interviews with MINUSMA officials, Mopti, June 12–13, 2018.

179 According to the secretary-general, in Tabankort in 2015 MINUSMA "undertook two integrated missions to assess the impact of the fighting on civilians and to engage community leaders on potential reconciliation initiatives." UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali, UN Doc. S/2015/219, March 27, 2015, para. 17. Joint civilian missions were also deployed in the north: "Following inter- and intracommunity tensions linked to longstanding land disputes in Alafia and Lafia communes, MINUSMA worked closely with national authorities and humanitarian partners, including through joint civilian missions to a disputed island (Iloa) and to Houndou Bongo Koyna, where displaced people from the island had moved." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/273, March 29, 2018, para. 44.

180 In June, MINUSMA provided logistical support to a government initiative aimed at addressing local conflicts in Mopti, and in July, the mission launched an integrated "justice and reconciliation project" in three villages in Koro district to prevent conflicts between the Dogon and Fulani. UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/866, September 25, 2018.

military escorts, which makes them less nimble and reactive. When they go out, they are often restricted to urban areas or to brief visits to remote villages as part of large-scale military operations.[181] As reported by a UN representative in Mopti, "We can't move. We can only reach communities remotely, over the phone."

Community liaison initiatives can also put local civilians at risk and expose them to retaliation from extremist groups who target presumed informants. The thin line between community engagement and intelligence gathering for the UN force (or French and Malian forces) puts locals in a delicate position when interacting with MINUSMA. Despite being perpetually on the move and in hiding, terrorist groups have strong networks of informants and often harass populations once the UN leaves. As attested by several MINUSMA officials, civilians have been killed, abducted, tortured, or threatened by extremist groups after talking to the UN mission. In April 2015 in the village of Dogo, a local figure who met with the civil affairs division was reportedly assassinated afterwards. In December 2016, the chief of the village of Isey was kidnapped minutes after talking with UN representatives and was held in captivity and tortured. He was later killed by Malian forces. "We create more problems than we solve," stated one MINUSMA civilian staff member.[182]

As a result, members of local communities, including victims and witnesses who used to talk to UN staff and provide them information on the threats they face, increasingly mistrust MINUSMA's ability to protect them. In many places where the mission is visiting but does not have a long-term presence, locals have stopped collaborating. Local authorities have canceled meetings with MINUSMA because they do not feel secure, and some civilians even refuse to talk to MINUSMA over the phone. The lack of appropriate action to provide individual protection and ensure that threats will be tackled by the UN or Malian authorities can further reduce trust and community engagement opportunities. For example, people who denounced extremists, prompting their arrest, have reportedly been killed after those individuals were eventually released by the Malian justice system.[183]

The difficulty and danger of accessing communities also makes it challenging for the mission to engage in mediation, conflict resolution, and reconciliation in a context of increasing intercommunal tensions. The mission's lack of community engagement and local presence particularly impairs its capacity to maintain a good understanding of local dynamics. Many interlocutors also pointed out that without expertise in anthropology, sociology, and political economy, MINUSMA does not seem the best-placed organization to undertake these activities.[184]

Nonetheless, while the UN has not been formally involved in mediating local agreements, it can facilitate engagement with local authorities and provide financial, logistical, or technical support to reconciliation initiatives. The use of consultants and subcontracted NGOs has also filled some of the gaps and enabled the mission to maintain mediation, conflict resolution, and reconciliation initiatives within local communities like Ténenkou. However, the mission has limited means to follow up on these activities and their impact, which makes their effectiveness difficult to assess.

TOOLS CONSTRAINED DUE TO THE MISSION'S SUPPORT TO COUNTERTERRORISM

Beyond the complications posed by non-permissive environments, some protection tools have faced challenges due to the mission's delicate positioning, working in support of counterterrorism forces. While the Secretariat consistently denies that MINUSMA plays a role in counterterrorism efforts, it still presents the mission as a natural partner for Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel—an untenable position both politically and operationally. The resulting political and institutional pressure has prevented the mission from using certain tools to their maximum efficiency. As an NGO representative remarked, "This is the congenital weakness of MINUSMA." A senior

181 Interview with UN official, Bamako, June 8, 2018.

182 Interview with MINUSMA official, Mopti, June 12, 2018.

183 Interview with MINUSMA official, Mopti, June 12, 2018.

184 Interviews with UN officials, NGO representatives, and experts, Bamako, June 10, 2018, and New York, May 10 and October 5, 2018.

military representative to the UN also acknowledged that "it is really difficult to do both CT and POC at the same time for the military." Even if the mission is not directly engaged in counterterrorism operations, its proximity to counterterrorism forces appears to be a critical factor affecting the delivery of its POC mandate.

Human Rights Monitoring

Human rights activities are a central piece of the UN's protection strategies. Through monitoring and investigations of human rights violations and public reporting, human rights officers contribute to fighting impunity and deterring future abuses. Through advocacy and engagement, they also influence actors likely to perpetrate violations against civilians, including state authorities and national defense and security forces.

MINUSMA's human rights division has issued public reports and communications on abuse of civilians by armed groups on all sides and by government representatives. Through declarations, radio interviews, and press conferences, it exposed the massacres of Boulikessy and Ménaka perpetrated by Malian forces and non-state armed groups allied to counterterrorism forces. The mission's human rights chief declared, "We try to address the frequency and surge in violence not only by… deploying… field missions to shed light into these events, but mostly [by publishing] the findings of these reports… [which] are then shared with the authorities. The mission has been pushing the government to open criminal investigations to ensure that those militias which are community-based are held responsible."[185]

However, the mission has received acute political pushback against such work, especially its public reporting. Because the Secretariat is supporting counterterrorism efforts and calling for financial support to the G5 Sahel, the need to avoid bad press for the newly established G5 Sahel force and any damage to Operation Barkhane's image is an important parameter to take into consideration for the mission and the Secretariat. For example, the sensitive political negotiations among member states in New York on support to the G5 Sahel led DPKO to take a wary approach to the massacre in Boulikessy. Similarly, at the mission level, some viewed Barkhane's cautious position regarding alleged massacres in Ménaka as having weighed on, and possibly delayed, MINUSMA's decision to publicly denounce the attacks.[186]

More generally, MINUSMA's support to the Malian state can make it difficult for the mission to maintain its own political (and protection) strategy rather than aligning it with the Malian government's positions. Moreover, the poor human rights record of some Malian armed forces has put the mission's mandate to support these forces in tension with its mandate to protect civilians. The team has limited capacity to implement the Human Rights Due Diligence policy, aimed at making sure the UN does not support non-UN forces responsible for grave human rights violations.

The focus of the human rights team has recently shifted to supervising the G5 Sahel joint force's international human rights and humanitarian law compliance framework at the regional level. While the modalities of human rights reporting remain highly politicized, the human rights division therefore prioritizes mitigation and accountability measures, including support to national investigations, rather than public denunciation. These measures depend on the good will of the G5 Sahel forces themselves to undertake internal monitoring and investigations and implement mitigation measures.

The position of MINUSMA's human rights division, which operates under a dual reporting line to both DPKO in New York and OHCHR in Geneva, helps counter some of these political sensitivities. Even if OHCHR has also been subject to increasing pressure from member states in recent years, as illustrated by numerous speeches by the former high commissioner Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, its independent role in speaking out for human rights offers a robust platform for the compliance framework established for the G5 Sahel joint force.[187] Some interlocutors have described it as one of the strongest mechanisms for monitoring human rights and international humanitarian law

185 United Nations, "Mali: L'ONU préoccupée par la résurgence des violences communautaires dans la région de Mopti," July 17, 2018.

186 Interviews, Bamako, June 7 and 14, 2018.

187 "We have to speak, and we have to engage," Zeid said, even if it poses difficulties for other UN colleagues, including secretary-general António Guterres. "Outgoing UN Rights Chief: No Regrets for Speaking Out," Associated Press, August 3, 2018, available at www.voanews.com/a/un-rights-chief-no-regrets/4512062.html .

established in the context of counterterrorism operations.[188] The role of this mechanism, and more broadly the human rights division, is key to prioritizing the protection of human rights in a highly politicized context, both within the mission and with the mission's partners.[189]

Engagement with Extremist Groups

UN missions have long engaged with non-state actors to advance peace processes, sensitize them to international human rights and humanitarian law, push for DDR, and enhance the protection of civilians in areas they control. However, this is one of the protection tools that has been most affected by MINUSMA's support to counterterrorism efforts. While MINUSMA is engaged with compliant armed groups that signed the Bamako Agreement, it has an unspoken and unofficial policy establishing a "red line" for terrorist groups. Moreover, because of its support to counterterrorism actors, MINUSMA lacks access and leeway to start a constructive dialogue with extremist groups.

The utility of dialogue and negotiation with armed groups labeled "terrorist" is the subject of frequent debate. Some interlocutors think that terrorists target MINUSMA not because of its proximity to French and Malian forces, but rather because the UN represents the international order they fight, and therefore any attempt to engage in dialogue would be in vain. However, the UN has engaged with groups labeled "terrorist" in other contexts. In Afghanistan, for example, the UN political mission has been maintaining a dialogue with the Taliban since 2003, which has significantly contributed to the protection of civilians.[190]

MINUSMA still manages to engage in indirect dialogue with extremist groups. The mediation unit, civil affairs division, and human rights division have identified and profiled the main influential actors in the peace process. Their network of contacts has allowed them to convey messages to extremist groups despite MINUSMA's official position against engaging them directly.[191] However, finding entry points into extremist groups has generally proven difficult, as most lack clear chains of command. One MINUSMA official acknowledged that they "cannot really pick up the phone and talk to terrorist groups."[192] MINUSMA mainly engages these terrorist groups through indirect channels, and little information on such initiatives is shared within the mission and used for the implementation of POC mandates.

Extension of State Authority

The restoration and extension of state authority is a large part of peacekeeping missions' efforts to establish a protective environment. Installing state representatives and institutions in the regions, including defense and security forces, justice officials, and providers of other services to the population, is key to addressing the population's social and economic grievances and ensuring security and law and order.

Accordingly, MINUSMA is supporting the Malian state in extending its authority in the north and center of the country, including by training and mentoring Malian security forces and other state institutions and accompanying Malian troops on the ground. MINUSMA has offered its support for the construction of a military base for Malian forces in the Mopti area in August 2018, the ongoing reinforcement of Malian camps in Boni and Tessit, and joint patrols. In the context of the mission's limited projection capacity, these capacity-building activities are essential to long-term protection strategies aimed at bolstering the deterrent presence of state forces. In Kouakourou and Koro towns, the deployment of Malian forces has decreased the number of violent incidents

188 Meeting, New York, October 18, 2018.

189 Interview, Bamako, June 16, 2018.

190 See Mamiya, "Engaging with Non-state Armed Groups to Protect Civilians." The UN special political mission in Afghanistan is a strictly civilian mission operating in parallel with Afghan and NATO counterterrorism forces, while MINUSMA remains a multidimensional mission including a military component. However, the transparent and impartial reporting mechanisms developed by the Afghan mission's human rights component are a good practice that could be replicated by MINUSMA, as long as the mission clarifies its position towards counterterrorism forces and strengthens its impartiality.

191 Some figures, like Cheikh Ag Aoussa, a leader of the HCUA until his death in 2016, have been reported to be instrumental points of contact between compliant armed groups and extremist groups. See Andrew Lebovich, "Taking Mali Hostage," European Council on Foreign Relations, May 12, 2016, available at www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_taking_mali_hostage_7025 . The Panel of Experts on Mali also named several elements from compliant armed groups as having links with terrorist groups. UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/518, August 9, 2018.

192 Interview, Bamako, June 8, 2018.

against civilians.[193]

However, the return of state institutions can also represent a threat to communities that had historically been harmed more than assisted by the state, and that consequently mistrust state authorities. "They do not want state authority, they want state services," explained one interviewee.[194] Past abuses by armed forces and a corrupt justice system in particular seem to be root causes and drivers of conflict, and some communities reportedly favor the authority of extremist groups over that of the state. According to a Malian interviewed for this report, "The radicalization of communities and individuals happened because of the injustice" exerted by state officials. Political scientist Bruno Charbonneau also notes that "group terrorist membership is varied, ephemeral, and largely comprised of people disgruntled with the state and with an imposed development model that does not match their priorities."[195]

However, this is a difficult conversation for the UN mission to have with state authorities it is "supporting." Because of its alignment with the political vision of the Malian government, MINUSMA does not seem to sufficiently address the quality of governance being restored and of the services the state will provide to communities. Moreover, the narrow focus on military solutions in the context of counterterrorism efforts has obscured the debate and led to the prioritization of the deployment of the army, without sufficient attention to the other services. Considerations of the utility of the state to its people should be at the center of efforts to deploy state institutions to the regions.[196] To be efficient, a mission's POC strategy requires substantive efforts to improve governance, regain the trust of communities, and fight against corruption and abuse by state authorities.

TOOLS AVOIDED TO DISTINGUISH PEACEKEEPING FROM COUNTERTERRORISM

Paradoxically, there are also protection tools the mission is cautious to use or completely avoids in order to counter its perceived proximity to counterterrorism forces. Both the Secretariat in New York and the mission in Mali have sought to make a clear distinction between peacekeeping and counterterrorism. As a result, some activities used by other peacekeeping missions mandated to protect civilians appear too sensitive for the Malian context. MINUSMA has especially refrained from conducting robust military operations and activities to prevent violent extremism, which are prone to being confused with counterterrorism.

Robust Action

Several peacekeeping missions have used robust, or even offensive, operations to protect civilians, including in the DRC against the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda and M23 and in CAR to thwart the movement of ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka rebels. MINUSMA is authorized to conduct similar operations to "anticipate, deter, and counter asymmetric threats," including cordon and search operations and arrests "in case of serious and credible threats." Its protection strategy even includes "deterrent presence of patrols by Force and UNPOL… committing to neutralize serious and credible threats" as a possible response to unconventional threats.[197]

Several interviewees noted that European troops in MINUSMA, many with NATO backgrounds, were more inclined to apply a counterterrorism framework and to advocate for "doing more," including counterinsurgency. As vigorously stated by a UN military officer, "Attackers should know we can strike back. It is the heart of operating in an asymmetric environment."[198] The effective demonstrations of force in Nouh Bozo and the deployment of quick reaction forces in Kouakourou and Koro have been good examples of the efficacy of military force to protect civilians.

However, as described above, some worry about the growing conflation between proactive peacekeepers engaged in operations against armed groups and counterterrorism operations. As a result, the Secretariat has tried to clearly distin-

193 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/866, September 25, 2018.

194 Interview with UN analyst, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

195 Charbonneau, "Counterterrorism and Challenges to Peacekeeping Impartiality."

196 Interview with researcher, Bamako, June 4, 2018.

197 MINUSMA, *Protection of Civilians Strategy*, March 2017.

198 Interview with UN military officer, Bamako, June 11, 2018.

guish between peacekeeping and counterterrorism. These efforts have had the side effect of reducing MINUSMA's propensity to use force and to conduct offensive operations against extremist groups. The mission has ruled out conducting operations to neutralize extremist groups threatening civilians to prove it does not do counterterrorism. "The red line would be to target specific terrorists…. We cannot go and hunt them," a military representative admitted. A senior adviser in Bamako confirmed that peacekeeping missions "can't do offensive operations like we did against the M23 [in DRC]."[199] While the Malian state and many Malian citizens seem to be calling on MINUSMA to conduct more robust operations and to hunt terrorists,[200] the UN repeatedly insists on this red line.[201]

The blending of terrorists into civilian communities also renders such operations extremely risky for local communities. Since March 2016, when Operation Barkhane conducted strikes against jihadist positions, "terrorist elements understood they had to avoid staying in the middle of nowhere" and have been closer to the populations.[202] As a result, such operations "would be like the Battle of Algiers," according to one analyst.[203] This restraint about operations against armed groups has removed an important protection tool. A senior UN official in Mopti claimed to be "horrified" when the strategic review team recommended reducing tier 2 of POC (i.e., the provision of physical security): "We need patrols, quick reaction forces, boots on the ground… and a sector in Mopti."[204]

Community Violence Reduction and Preventing Violent Extremism

Besides robust operations, the mission's cautious approach to anything resembling counterterrorism has also limited civilian protection activities. In light of the military component's constrained capacity to project force and react to threats, the mission's POC strategy is more dependent on civilian efforts to address the root causes and drivers of violent extremism. The prevention of violent extremism (PVE) could therefore be a valuable entry point for the civilian component of the mission to protect civilians and reduce threats of violence. Peacekeeping operations already regularly conduct activities and projects seeking to address the grievances of communities through mediation and reconciliation initiatives, quick impact projects, community violence reduction, DDR, and stabilization.

Community violence reduction (CVR) programs in CAR, the DRC, Darfur, and Mali encompass "a range of initiatives from labor-intensive projects, business incubation and community dialogue fora, to direct engagement with members of armed groups, as well as youth-at-risk, to prevent further recruitment."[205] CVR can reduce tensions at the grassroots level, improve social cohesion, and resolve conflicts. The DDR section of MINUSMA, which is in charge of CVR, has supported local initiatives and stabilization projects targeting "youth at risk." For example, the section facilitated a discussion between 200 young people and 100 Islamic teachers in Mopti in partnership with the High Islamic Council of Mali, aiming to prevent recruitment by extremist groups and facilitate the integration of youth into the economy.

The DDR section also facilitated discussions between local authorities and communities in Mopti to defuse tensions and reduce perceptions that state forces are predatory. Similarly, the DDR program can potentially include individuals from violent extremist and self-defense groups, "provided they renounce the use of violence."[206] In cooperation with the DDR and CVR work streams, the mission's stabilization section also mobilizes programmatic funding to create temporary jobs for those vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups and contributes to appeasing societal

199 Interview, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

200 Focus group, Peacekeeping School of Bamako, June 6, 2018; interviews, Bamako, June 6 and 8, 2018.

201 António Guterres, press conference, May 30, 2018.

202 Interview with senior UN official, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

203 Interview, Bamako, June 15, 2018.

204 Interview with senior UN official, Mopti, June 12, 2018.

205 UN Peacekeeping, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration," no date, available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/disarmament-demobilization-and-reintegration .

206 Ibrahim Maïga, "Mali's Myriad Armed Groups Prevent Stability," Institute for Security Studies, February 6, 2018, available at https://issafrica.org/iss-today/malis-myriad-armed-groups-prevent-stability?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Today&utm_medium=email .

tensions.

Because stabilization, DDR, and CVR can greatly contribute to the prevention of violent extremism, the mission could better integrate a PVE angle when designing its activities.[207] This could take advantage of synergies between the PVE and POC agendas, which both encompass a wide range of overlapping activities. For example, CVR activities specifically aimed at PVE could target youth at risk of radicalization as a protection priority.

However, as with counterinsurgency operations by the military component, UN policymakers appear wary of the civilian component engaging in preventive or protection work under a PVE agenda. CVR projects are cautiously labeled "targeting youth at risk," never "preventing violent extremism" or "de-radicalization." "People are careful about vocabulary.… [PVE] is quite taboo," explained a UN official working in central Mali.[208] As a result, mission leadership has not paid close attention to such initiatives and their potential contribution to protection from terrorist threats and reduced risk of intercommunal violence. Some have stopped abruptly because of lack of funding, prioritization by the mission, or national-level buy-in.

Reinventing POC in Environments Affected by Violent Extremism

MINUSMA's ability to protect civilians from the effects of violent extremism and the potential repercussions of counterterrorism operations is limited by internal and external factors. Internally, structures, mechanisms, and mindsets do not lend themselves to prioritizing and integrating protection and have yet to be adjusted to be more effective in implementing POC. Externally, asymmetric attacks against the mission, as well as its delicate position both supporting and distancing itself from counterterrorism efforts, have limited the POC toolbox at its disposal. Traditional UN protection tools developed by other missions are either irrelevant or perceived to be in tension with MINUSMA's broader political strategy.

Nevertheless, MINUSMA remains responsible for supporting the Malian state in preventing and responding to violence against civilians in its areas of operation. This report invites policymakers to consider the following recommendations for better linking the mission's protection and political strategies and leveraging its comparative advantages to protect the Malian population.

EXPLORE THE FULL SPECTRUM OF MILITARY, POLICE, AND CIVILIAN TOOLS

MINUSMA needs to use the full spectrum of military, police, and civilian protection tools and to sequence and prioritize these. Through a clear vision for the protection of civilians, the mission leadership should also improve coordination among the mission components using these tools to avoid duplicative, ill-sequenced, or disconnected initiatives.

Use Proactive Military Operations to Support Civilian Personnel

MINUSMA's military force is overstretched and can neither dominate the terrain nor guarantee it will be able to respond quickly to attacks. Use of force has saved lives in the past, however, and the mission should not shy away from it when needed. In fact, it is essential to the credibility of the mission, whose duty remains to protect the population from abuse and attacks whenever and wherever it can.

Civilian staff should drive military deployments, however, and military force should be based on joint analysis with the police and civilian components. This can ensure the work of different components is properly sequenced, for example so troops can secure areas until UN police or Malian forces can take over.[209] It can also help prioritize deployment to fragile areas at risk of escalation so civilian staff can target their protection work to focus on communities facing growing polarization or youth vulnerable to violent extremism. The

207 According to a DPKO internal report, MINUSMA has recently developed a PVE strategy. However, several MINUSMA senior officials asked about the document did not know about it.

208 Interview with UN official, Mopti, June 12, 2018.

209 The Programme de sécurisation intégré des régions du centre offers an opportune framework for a phased and coordinated approach with national forces in central Mali.

recent initiative to jointly identify areas for MINUSMA forces to support civilian projects for three-month periods is a step in the right direction.

Increase the Use of UN Police

UN police have the necessary experience and expertise to engage communities and manage nonmilitary threats. The mission has employed formed police units to secure UN personnel and compounds, conduct deterrent patrols, and undertake small, isolated projects such as providing material assistance or medical consultations to communities.[210] They could be more widely used, however. For example, formed police units could secure communities at risk of intercommunal tensions and address threats related to criminality in central Mali. Recent initiatives to undertake community policing in areas where civilians are at risk could be expanded. Integrating and combining the comparative advantages of the police and military components, especially in cases of intercommunal violence, should also be further considered.

The expertise of UN police in investigations, including the collection of evidence, and arrests could also strengthen the rule of law and fight against impunity, which are essential to prevent further radicalization. While arrests have mainly targeted individuals threatening the UN, UN police could also consider supporting the Malian government in arresting those threatening the civilian population.[211] Offering more training and support to strengthen investigations by local police in the regions and sensitizing national forces about policing standards and procedures would both reinforce the criminal justice chain and Malian security forces' respect for human rights. Furthermore, community policing, coupled with mentorship of the national police, could help rebuild trust between communities and state security forces.

Bolster Civilian Expertise

The independent strategic review of MINUSMA stressed the importance of shifting POC efforts to civilian activities. Investing in the civilian component and having it drive the mission's strategy and the deployment of military force is necessary. This requires meaningfully integrating POC across the mission and holding senior leaders accountable for this integration.[212]

However, the mission needs the utmost level of professionalism, specialization, and experience among civilian staff. The Secretariat should help provide the necessary expertise, as the mission cannot afford inept or amateur workers in such a sensitive and challenging context. Having seasoned personnel has proven to make a difference in community engagement, confidence building, mediation, and strategic communication. These personnel can ensure reliable analysis of threats and protection needs, develop the appropriate networks of contacts, identify points of leverage, efficiently engage in fruitful negotiations with local actors, and innovate techniques and modi operandi.

ENSURE THE INDEPENDENCE OF MINUSMA'S POC ACTIVITIES FROM COUNTERTERRORISM AGENDAS

While the 2018 strategic review of MINUSMA recommended that the mission dissociate itself from counterterrorism forces, doing so will not necessarily change the hostile operating environment. MINUSMA inherently represents the international community, and its principles and objectives, including support to state authority, will remain at odds with terrorist groups. Nevertheless, establishing a healthy distance from counterterrorism actors could unfetter its decision making and expand possible courses of action for POC.

Distinguish Peacekeeping from Counterterrorism without Dismissing Protection

As many analysts have already recommended, and in line with UN doctrine, there is a need to clearly distinguish between kinetic military operations aiming at counterterrorism and multidimensional peacekeeping operations aiming at supporting the peace process and protecting the population. Security Council Resolution 2391 mandating

210 There are two former police units in central Mali (one in Douentza and the other in Mopti), mostly employed for the security of the UN.

211 In the Mopti area, UN police have conducted arrests in Kouakourou, Djankabo, and Bony, each time of persons suspected of fomenting an attack or targeting convoys with IEDs. Interview, Mopti, June 2018.

212 As established by the recent addendum to the POC policy in 2018, which defines roles and responsibilities for senior mission leaders and accountability mechanisms for performance in POC.

MINUSMA to provide operational and logistical support to the G5 Sahel force, and the subsequent technical agreement establishing this support, has arguably conflated peacekeepers' political and protection role with efforts to fight terrorism, and has the potential to strengthen perceptions of the UN mission as a service provider for counterterrorism forces. This conflation weighs heavily on the mission's decision making and constrains its protection activities.

Coordination of efforts in the complex Malian environment, where stabilization requires multifaceted action to tackle the threats, protect civilians, and lay the ground for conflict resolution and better governance, is necessary to maximize comparative advantages and multiply impact. However, to be in a position to deliver on its protection of civilians mandate, MINUSMA cannot afford to be reduced to a service provider for counterterrorism forces and needs the political and operational autonomy to distinguish itself from counterterrorism agendas.

At the same time, a clearer distinction should not be a pretext for the mission to escape its responsibility to protect civilians using all necessary means—including the full spectrum of military, police, and civilian tools to provide physical protection and establish a protective environment. In the interest of impartiality and transparency, the mission should make the protection of civilians from all perpetrators its cardinal principle and the local population the actor to which it is most accountable.[213] In this vein, the mission's leadership should not shy away from a robust operation against extremist elements if it can decisively advance POC.

Prioritize Mitigation of Risks from Counterterrorism Actors

In a context of asymmetric threats that limit its mobility and capacity, MINUSMA should build on its comparative advantages and tackle threats to civilians over which it has leverage. In view of its current strategic positioning, the mission should thus focus on threats by counterterrorism actors, especially Malian and G5 Sahel forces and their proxies. The mission can have a quick and substantial impact protecting civilians from these forces through its impartial human rights work, including investigations, public reporting, due diligence, mitigation and accountability measures, and support to the fight against impunity.

The human rights compliance framework for the G5 Sahel is a promising and robust tool in this regard. It reframes support to counterterrorism forces by conditioning and centering it on the protection of civilians. The mission should take this POC-centric angle while continuing to coordinate with counterterrorism forces: the protection of civilians can justify support as long as it is defined as this support's main rationale.

Acknowledge MINUSMA's Contribution to PVE and De-radicalization

Integrating considerations related to PVE into protection strategies would allow MINUSMA to position itself more clearly in efforts to prevent violent extremism. If there is to be a "division of labor" between MINUSMA, Operation Barkhane, the G5 Sahel, and Malian actors, this division needs to be made clearer to the government, armed groups, counterterrorism forces, and communities. Analyzing and designing strategies from a PVE angle could, in some cases, maximize the relevance of protection activities undertaken by the mission. This would be consistent with MINUSMA's current role in protecting civilians and stabilizing the country through a multidimensional, preventive approach.

The protection activities MINUSMA is already undertaking are relevant, if not directly related, to the PVE agenda.[214] The UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism is based on seven priority areas: dialogue and conflict prevention; strengthening good governance, human rights, and the rule of law; engaging communities; empowering youth; gender equality; education, skill development, and employment

213 Namie Di Razza, "Making Peace Operations about People: A Needed Shift for the Protection of Civilians," *IPI Global Observatory*, June 26, 2018, available at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/06/making-peace-operations-about-people-needed-shift-protection-civilians/ .

214 For more analysis on the PVE-relevant and PVE-specific activities of UN peace operations, see Arthur Boutellis and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "Waging Peace: UN Peace Operations Confronting Terrorism and Violent Extremism," International Peace Institute, October 2016, available at www.ipinst.org/2016/10/un-peaceops-contronting-terrorism-extremism .

facilitation; and strategic communication.[215] To a certain extent, MINUSMA is already undertaking activities in these areas, even if it does not formally associate them with PVE for fear of conflating them with counterterrorism efforts.

Protecting civilians is a crucial way to prevent violent extremism in Mali. By reducing threats to civilians from Malian or counterterrorism forces and working with the government to address root causes of the conflict and social grievances, MINUSMA could help de-escalate violence and de-radicalize communities. Applying a PVE lens to community violence reduction and stabilization projects, activities related to public information and confidence building, and other activities contributing to a protective environment could help reduce threats related to violent extremism in a more strategic, efficient, and dedicated manner.

Engage with Terrorist Groups

Focusing on threats and perpetrators has made it difficult for MINUSMA to "think beyond the confines of dominant political narratives" about what these perpetrators represent and how they should be dealt with.[216] Using "extremist groups" as the units of analysis also overlooks individuals who could be interesting to engage regardless of the political treatment of the armed group they belong to.

Peacekeeping missions, therefore, should not rule out engaging proscribed terrorists. Dialogue and engagement are crucial multipliers for the protection of civilians and can have positive effects on the behavior of potential perpetrators. Engaging proscribed terrorists can also complement engagement with local communities, which sometimes call for such engagement as part of an inclusive approach. While the fact that extremists often live among these communities is often described as a complication, it can also be an entry point for peacekeepers to reach out to radical groups. When the leaders of these groups are difficult to engage, the mission should also target individuals in their rank-and-file or explore indirect engagement through intermediaries.

DESIGN A POLITICAL STRATEGY PRIORITIZING POC

Putting POC at the center of planning and operations and reconciling the mission's protection and political strategies is a crucial step to enhance the delivery of its POC mandate. This requires the mission leadership to design a political strategy anchored in POC considerations and to pursue this strategy even if it departs from partners' approaches. Such a strategy should build on MINUSMA's comparative advantages, including its preventive and political tools—backed by credible force. It should also ensure a people-centered approach by connecting the "high politics" to the "low politics."

Define and Own a Protection-Centered Political Strategy

While continuing to coordinate efforts on the ground and to seek complementarity with its partners, MINUSMA's POC and political strategies do not have to be perfectly aligned with those of the Malians, French, or G5 Sahel. MINUSMA's leadership needs to define, own, and stand by its own political strategy. It also needs to strengthen protective activities in this strategy, even if they are not welcomed by the Malian government or parallel forces. This is the only way to prevent the politicization of MINUSMA's protection work while linking it to a wider political strategy for Mali.

Having such a strategy could galvanize the mission's ability to resist political pressure and go beyond "red lines" defined by the political landscape. Notably, it could allow the mission to step away from militarized and securitized approaches to countering violent extremism. It could also enable MINUSMA's teams to gain autonomy and credibility in their advocacy, negotiation, and mediation work, not only with compliant groups but also with extremists (if this would contribute to the protection of civilians).[217]

215 United Nations, *Agenda for Action: Recommendations on Preventing Violent Extremism*, no date, www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/plan_action.pdf .

216 Mamiya, "Engaging with Non-state Armed Groups to Protect Civilians."

217 Ibid.

Exploit Political Tools and Preventive Approaches at All Levels

Because the mission's capacity to react to threats is limited, it should put prevention and political engagement at the forefront of its POC strategy. This could include political analysis, strategic communication, community engagement, dialogue with parties who have direct or indirect influence on armed groups, human rights monitoring and advocacy, and capacity building for both communities and state institutions. As the strategic review recommended, a focus on tier 1 (dialogue and engagement) and tier 3 (establishment of a protective environment) of POC could enable MINUSMA to better exploit its comparative advantages.

MINUSMA should focus on prevention and political engagement through both top-down and bottom-up approaches, depending on its leverage and the opportunities identified by an integrated analysis. MINUSMA does not have to lead all local mediation and reconciliation activities; it can support the actors best positioned to facilitate them, such as religious leaders, civil society, local authorities, or international NGOs like the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.[218] However, MINUSMA is in a unique position to weigh in on political decision making at the highest diplomatic levels. Mission leadership can have the most added value by advocating for international, regional, and national counterterrorism strategies and policies that prioritize and mainstream POC and address the root causes and triggers of violence against civilians.

Connect High and Low Politics

MINUSMA's leadership should also better link "high politics" and "low politics" in its political strategy. The mission has mostly focused on issues related to the state's survival and national security—high politics—including the implementation of the peace agreement and regional counterterrorism efforts. It has not dedicated enough attention to economic and social affairs—low politics—including public services and community welfare.[219]

Protecting civilians and managing extremist threats requires addressing social grievances and frustrations, perceptions of injustice, and certain communities' fundamental mistrust of the state, which are major factors driving radicalization and violence. Beyond restoring the presence of the state by implementing the peace process and redeploying state representatives and forces to northern and central Mali, there is a need to restore the utility of the state. MINUSMA can contribute to POC by engaging the Malian government in tough and frank discussions on how to restore and extend not only state authority but also public services.

Adopt a People-Centered and Victim-Based Approach

A victim-based approach could help the mission detach its POC strategy from political narratives demonizing terrorists, improve analysis of threats, and better adapt responses. As explained by a UN analyst, defining responses by category of perpetrator has not worked in a context where individuals move among categories. Instead of a "straightforward alignment against terrorists or spoilers,"[220] the mission should consider potential victims among radicalized youth and communities, including those accommodating extremists for their security. A victim-based approach could also enable the mission to better consider more subtle threats that traditional UN analyses may overlook, such as psychological pressure and harassment from extremist groups, and to integrate the perceptions of beneficiaries on possible solutions.

218 The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue recently mediated an agreement between Fulani and Dogon communities in central Mali. See www.hdcentre.org/updates/fulani-and-dogon-communities-from-koro-sign-a-peace-agreement-in-the-mopti-region-of-mali/ .

219 Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Keohane, "Transnational Relations and World Politics: A Conclusion," *International Organization* 25, no. 3 (1971).

220 Charbonneau, "Counterterrorism and Challenges to Peacekeeping Impartiality."

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