



The Military Intervention in Mali and Beyond: An Interview with Bruno Charbonneau

28 March 2019

Distinguished scholar and Sahel specialist Bruno Charbonneau critically examines the 2013 French military intervention in Mali and the peacekeeping initiative which followed.

Q. Why did the French launch a military intervention in Mali in 2013?

Officially, French President François Hollande launched operation Serval in January 2013 to prevent jihadist armed groups from reaching Bamako and to restore Mali's territorial integrity. During the summer of 2012, the jihadist armed groups had taken over the rebellion from the separatists and had begun imposing their rule over the northern territories of Mali. In December, the UN Security Council authorised the deployment of an African force (AFISMA), which is likely what prompted the jihadists to move south a few weeks later, towards the strategic airport at Sévaré, in Central Mali. These troop movements were interpreted in Paris as a threat to Bamako, and thus as a cause for triggering operation Serval.

There is no doubt that, for the French government, this was (and still is) a military intervention launched under the necessities of the global war on terror; a war or an intervention which was often compared to Afghanistan. And since the Malian army had been unable to face it, and African regional organisations were slow in responding, the French military was the assumed 'normal' alternative in the context of [Francophone Africa](#).

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The **imperial legacies** of French military interventions in Africa always loom large. Yet, on the heels of the 2011 Ivorian election crisis, the French government never claimed that it could or wanted to impose a solution to the Malian armed conflict. Hollande and his generals were clear: the French army was to fight terrorists and stabilise the situation. The conflict resolution and peacebuilding work was to be done by Malians with UN help. Serval was supposed to be a ‘bridging force’ for a UN peacekeeping mission and for establishing the conditions deemed necessary for a political solution.

Q. Following Operation Serval, the UN authorised the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Originally, what was MINUSMA's mandate?

In 2013, acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, MINUSMA’s mandate included three core missions: stabilisation, support for the reestablishment of the Malian state authority over its territory, and support of a transitional road map. UN Security Council resolution 2100 also authorised French troops to ‘use all necessary means’ in order ‘to intervene in support of elements of MINUSMA’.

Q. How have MINUSMA's mandates changed since 2013?

The three core missions never really changed, but the mandate nevertheless evolved in two significant ways. First, with resolution 2227 (2015), support for the implementation of the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali became a priority task, then MINUSMA’s strategic priority with resolution

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2295 (2016). From then on, the roadmap for implementing the Agreement was intimately intertwined with the restoration of Malian state authority. Political and institutional reforms, support for SSR and DDR programs, for reconciliation and justice measures, and for the organisation of elections, and more, are conceived as building the necessary state capacity for asserting state authority. The extent to which the UN or MINUSMA distinguishes capacity from authority is unclear, but, as my colleague Jonathan Sears argued, this technical-capacity focus often undermines contextualised understandings ‘of the bureaucratic, political, and perceptual challenges that the State faces.’

The second way is in how MINUSMA’s mandate has adapted to and authorised parallel counterterrorist operations: namely French and G5 Sahel forces. In the case of the former, despite the early tactical successes of Serval, as early as 2014 France assessed that it could not leave Mali. The situation was not stable and the fear was to see the jihadists make a comeback. But the French needed a success story, so they claimed ‘mission accomplished’ for Serval and transformed it into operation Barkhane. While it is usually minimised, I think that this was a radical move.

Barkhane is a permanent military intervention that operates not within a country, but over the G5 Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Barkhane moves rather freely across these countries (except Mauritania, and some restrictions in Burkina Faso), operates autonomously in Mali, and autonomously in Niger if under ‘emergency conditions’, while it needs the approval of the respective governments of the other countries for offensive missions. While the reach of Barkhane goes well beyond Serval’s, UN Security Council resolutions have continued authorising French troops to ‘use all necessary means’ to support elements of MINUSMA. I

do not know of any other such post-1945 arrangement or military intervention that officially authorises such freedom of military movement and intervention across multiple borders.

On the other hand, since 2017 MINUSMA must provide operation and logistical support to the defence and security forces of the states of the G5 Sahel when they intervene on Malian territory as part of the G5 Joint Force. This includes medical evacuation and access to 'essentials' like fuel, water, and rations.

As the security situation has unabatedly worsened since 2014 (since 2015, all reports by the UN Special Representative on the situation in Mali have stated that the security and humanitarian situation keeps worsening), MINUSMA's posture and mandate were not really transformed to reinvigorate the peace process, but rather to support the counter-terrorist posture, notably the G5 Sahel Joint Force. MINUSMA's political mission of supporting the peace process has been subordinated to military logic.

Q. Is "counter-terrorism" an accurate description of MINUSMA's activities? Is there a realistic idea of who the "terrorists" they are meant to be fighting in Mali are?

It really depends on how you define counter-terrorism. Strictly speaking, MINUSMA is not engaging in counter-terrorist kinetic actions like the French and their allies. At the least, it engages in counter-terrorism in the very limited meaning of the term as tactical measures to protect UN peacekeeping personnel (as of 1 March 2019, the mission has lost 122 personnel and 358 suffered serious injuries from 'malicious acts').

Having said that, MINUSMA enables counter-terrorist activities in several ways. One is through its mandate which authorises and supports French and African counter-terrorist forces, as discussed previously. Two, it is an open secret that MINUSMA shares intelligence and analyses with the parallel forces deployed in Mali, even though such exchanges are rarely reciprocal. Third, with the exception of the Mopti base, all MINUSMA camps are contiguous or even common (in the cases of Kidal and Tessalit) to those of the Barkhane force. MINUSMA provides logistical support (air travel mostly) to French forces when needed. For instance, the Canadian contingent based in Gao recently [evacuated injured French soldiers](#) who were ambushed near the Niger border. All of this is justified and defined in terms of a “division of labour” between MINUSMA who engages with the legitimate political actors part of the peace process, and counterterrorist troops who deal with terrorists.

This [division of labour](#) is thus premised on the ability and on the authority to distinguish between terrorist and non-terrorist actors, and between legitimate and illegitimate spheres of activities and politics. This totally works on paper, as a broader strategy of violence legitimization, because it addresses the legal aspects of having two international military forces operating in the same theater, of separating UN peacekeepers from combat troops.

Of course, in practice, reality is not written in binary code. Researchers have shown, time and again, that so-called terrorist groups in Mali and the Sahel are embedded in local dynamics, and have [some degree](#) of political authority and legitimacy as they [find support](#) in criticisms of and protests over bad governance and lack of justice. The ‘terrorist’ label disarticulates these groups, movements, and dynamics from the contexts of their historical and contemporary relations, but articulates the legal and doctrinal need for clearly

defined roles and responsibilities. Moreover, the same label is not applied to non-jihadist armed militias when they kill and burn civilians, at least 160 in the [Ogossagou](#) massacre of 23 March 2019, suggesting both the hypocrisy and the inadequacies of the 'terrorism' conflict narrative.

Q. The Mali intervention and some other cases have yielded much discussion about the desirability of peacekeepers undertaking counterterrorism roles. Can UN peacekeeping ever work effectively within a counterterrorism paradigm?

Not if you believe that UN peacekeeping is a distinct and worthy instrument for conflict management and resolution. Doing so defeats the purpose of UN peacekeeping because counterterrorism undermines the impartiality principle of the former. The logic, ethics and purpose of counterterrorism are grounded in enmity: it needs to identify an enemy to destroy. By definition, UN peacekeepers are not supposed to have or identify enemies. Otherwise, they become just like all the other soldiers, lose what makes them unique, and might as well just go to war. Impartiality is, here, the key principle because it plays a fundamental function in drawing the limits to the use of force and its purpose. Impartiality does not prohibit peacekeepers from using military force, but severs the link between violent coercion and enmity; between the use of military force and the identification of an enemy. Instead, it links and limits the use of force to a political process and the search for a political solution.

Q. In 2019, how stable is the situation in Mali?

The situation seems to be going nowhere but downhill. The North has been relatively stable since 2017, but there are sporadic attacks against Malian and UN forces, or fighting between rival armed groups, notably around the traffic (in licit and illicit goods) hubs that are Gao and Meneka.

The situation in the Centre of Mali (Mopti and Segou regions) is nearly catastrophic. The patterns of violence are different from the 2012 origins of the conflict, and not really addressed by the 2015 Agreement or MINUSMA's mandate and posture. The Centre is a mixed bag of community fragmentation, historical herders-pastoral conflicts, ethnicization of violence, militias and various armed groups (including jihadists) protection economy, and a retreating state whose army is known for committing human rights abuses. The severity of the Ogossagou tragedy might be a turning point in the escalation of violence.

Several armed groups have spread south towards the capital Bamako, but Bamako remains an 'island of peace' for now. The regional situation must also be considered, as the instability has been steadily spreading to Burkina Faso since 2015, and somewhat less so to Niger, along the tri-border area between the three countries. Overall, the prognostic is bad: the Malian state is losing ground and the government shows little interest in working towards serious implementation of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement; jihadist elements and various armed groups are governing parts of the country, assuming the role of the state, especially in the Centre, and some are spreading south and to neighbouring countries. The French might claim all sorts of tactical victories, but the military counter-terrorist approach is clearly not working, and has arguably made things worse.

Q. Is Mali reflective of a broader trend in modern security? Are seemingly perpetual conflicts and interventions the new normal?

Military intervention in Mali is articulated in the joining of French-led counter-terrorism and UN peacekeeping, presented as a ‘division of labour’ between parallel forces. Criticising this posture is difficult, even **censored** at times, as it is assumed to be necessary given the so-called limits of UN peacekeeping in facing terrorist groups and the fragmentation of conflict actors. In this context, UN peacekeeping compares to counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism or imperial pacification, but such comparisons have been limited to tactical and operational concerns, thus largely missing the ‘big picture’. In Mali, the difficulties in implementing this division of labour have revealed the intense international politics involved in defining, and laying claims to, the tolerable limits of military intervention. Mali exposed and revealed what I call ‘counter-insurgency politics’.

Counter-insurgency politics is military intervention that does not seek conflict resolution, or even ‘victory’, but sustained military engagement in the management and suppression of instability and its effects. It is a mode of global governance, with military intervention at its centre. But there are at least ‘two sides’ to this. On the one hand, it is indeed about claims to the necessities of perpetual military intervention. To me, in the Sahel, it is rather clear that European involvement (4,500 French Barkhane troops; 580 European troops under EUTM; 900 German and 470 Italian troops in Niger; plus European contributions to MINUSMA’s intelligence-gathering units) is not about supporting a peace process, but a permanent intervention to prevent the ‘flows’, as EU officials call it, of migration and illicit trafficking to Europe. Flows that are assumed to be caused, in part, by Malian instability.

But it is also, on the other hand, about transforming or integrating the post-colonial state within this logic. How do you make permanent military intervention integral to the existence of the post-colonial state? In part, the failure of the post-colonial state to monopolize violence is part of the space in which such military intervention and the associated politics can exist and take shape. What is happening in Mali is not some French neo-colonial endeavour in the West African Sahel. This is *not* the counter-insurgency doctrine of ‘winning hearts and minds’ to build liberal subjects. Intervention in Mali is an extensive international engagement of transforming regional and national security management and governance, involving a multitude of global governance structures and transnational elite networks that normalise the use of force on the basis of claims about countering or preventing terrorism and violent extremism. Military intervention incorporates ‘development’ and ‘holistic approaches’ into its logic only to the extent that it normalises and legitimises the use of force. And the distinctive feature of this counter-insurgency politics, or counter-insurgency governance, is perpetual war.

Image credit: [Fred Marie/Flickr](#).

About the interviewee

Bruno Charbonneau (PhD, Queen's University, Canada) is Associate Professor of International Studies, and Director of the *International Centre for the Study of the Profession of Arms*, at the Royal Military College Saint-Jean, Canada. He is also the Director of the *Centre FrancoPaix in Conflict Resolution and Peace Missions of the Raoul-Dandurand Chair at the Université du Québec à Montréal*. His work examines the power politics of and interactions between

international interventions and armed conflicts. In particular, he analyses the regional and international dynamics of conflict management and resolution in the Francophone West African Sahel. He is currently working on the consequences of the "division of labor" between the international counter-terrorist forces and the UN peacekeeping forces deployed in the Sahel. He is also developing a research project on the links between armed conflict, counter-insurgency and climate change.

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