

# Mexico and the Fragile Situation in Mali and the Sahel

*México ante la frágil situación  
en Malí y el Sahel*

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## Abstract

The evolution of the conflict in Mali and the Sahel has brought about significant changes in the dynamics within the Security Council. The prolonged security crisis in this African region and the growing divergence of interests among Council members make it increasingly difficult to reach agreements and show the limited results that the Council's actions have had in stabilizing the Sahel. In this context, Mexico advocated for a review of the strategy to pacify the region and promoted an open and transparent dialogue that allowed for the unanimous support of the Sanctions Committee on Mali to be maintained.



## Resumen

La evolución del conflicto en Malí y el Sahel ha traído consigo cambios importantes en la dinámica dentro del Consejo de Seguridad. La prolongada crisis de seguridad en esta región de África y la creciente divergencia de intereses entre los miembros del Consejo dificultan alcanzar acuerdos y muestran los resultados limitados que ha tenido la acción de ese órgano en la estabilización del Sahel. Frente a ello, México abogó por una revisión de la estrategia para pacificar la región y promovió un diálogo abierto y transparente que permitió mantener el apoyo unánime al Comité de Sanciones sobre Malí.



## Keywords

Security Council, Sahel, Mali, MINUSMA, United Nations, peace



## Palabras clave

Consejo de Seguridad, Sahel, Malí, MINUSMA, Naciones Unidas, paz

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As an elected member of the Security Council for the 2021-2022 period, Mexico saw a new dynamic coalesce around the Sahel conflict,<sup>1</sup> determined by the growing divergence between the interests of the permanent members regarding Africa, particularly between France and Russia. In parallel, the Malian governments that emerged from the two successive coups d'états that the country experienced in 2020 and 2021 have been increasingly critical of the Council's action and have sought to influence its decisions through alliances with African members (A3) and also with Russia and China.

Mexico's presidency of the Security Council Committee established by resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali (2374 Sanctions Committee), which among other things analyzes the reports of the Group of Experts that helps it to monitor the situation in that country, meant that it had a privileged perspective on efforts to stabilize the region as a whole. Mali, which between the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s experienced an exemplary democratization process,<sup>2</sup> has since 2012 been the epicenter of the regional crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this article, the Sahel is considered the area of Africa that encompasses Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Mauritania.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Pringle, "Mali's Unlikely Democracy," in *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2, Spring 2006, pp. 31-39.

To understand how this situation has arisen, it is necessary to review two aspects: the evolution of the conflict in Mali and the responses of the Security Council to the situation in that country and the Sahel.

## Mali: epicenter of the crisis in the Sahel

Although institutional fragility in the Sahel has been a constant since the States of the region became independent from France in the 1960s, the current situation began to take shape in 2012. Two interrelated factors were determining factors for this crisis centered in Mali: the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, in 2011, and the rebellion of the Tuareg minority that broke out in 2012 in the north of Malian territory.

Faced with NATO's intervention in Libya and the subsequent overthrow of Gaddafi, Tuareg fighters from Mali who were fighting in the Libyan civil conflict returned to northern Mali.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, the dispersion of the Libyan army's arsenal increased the availability of weapons and ammunition throughout the Sahel.

This context favored the reactivation of the separatist demands of a number of Tuareg groups in northern Mali, whose relations with Bamako have been a source of conflict since the country gained its independence. Various Tuareg armed groups, later organized around the Platform of Movements of June 14, 2014 (the Platform) and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), began a rebellion against the Malian army in January 2012.<sup>4</sup> In the initial part of the revolt, these groups allied themselves with extremist organizations such as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Al-Qaeda and Ansar Dine. However, this did not last and the Islamists ended up breaking off the alliance with the MNLA.

The initial victories of the rebel alliance caused a political crisis that led to a coup against President Amadou Toumani Touré in March 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Rabah Aynaou, *L'OTAN et les enjeux sécuritaires dans la région saharo-sahélienne à l'ère de la nouvelle donne géopolitique*, Rome, NATO Defense College (Research Paper, 110, March 2015, at <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep10454> (date of access: June 15, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Mali faced Tuareg rebellions in 1962, 1990 and 2006.

The capture of Gao by MUJAO and the fall of Timbuktu to Ansar Dine, just a few months after the uprising began, fueled fears that a caliphate would be created in the central Sahel. As one of its areas of influence on the African continent, France deployed the Serval military operation in 2013, which managed to preserve the integrity of the Malian State against the advance of terrorist groups in Mali. This force was replaced a year later by the Barkhane operation, with a regional focus.

In 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta won the presidential election with a promise to pacify the country, and was re-elected in 2018. During his first administration, the peace process facilitated by Algeria led to the signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali between the Government of Mali, the Platform, and the MNLA in 2015. Although this agreement laid the foundations for the pacification of the north of the country and the neutralization of these two powerful formations, the Islamist groups were not party to the negotiations and their activity intensified in the center of the country. The limited presence of the Malian State in its vast territory allowed Islamists to engage in various lucrative illicit activities and exploit rivalries between communities to reinforce their power.

The growing virulence of extremist organizations, the intensification of violence in the context of the fight against terrorism, the rivalries between communities of farmers and transhumant herders, the limited progress in the reforms provided for in the Peace Agreement and the institutional weakness of the Malian State gave rise to growing popular discontent.

In this complex panorama, disagreements over the 2020 legislative elections brought about a wave of demonstrations led by the M5-RFP movement. This movement managed to unite various voices of the political opposition and social leaders, such as that of Imam Mahmoud Dicko, to demand the resignation of President Keïta, accused of having failed to end the violence or improve the economic situation, and of collaborating with foreign interests, particularly with France, whose military presence was increasingly unpopular, in part because of the complex colonial past.

In the midst of this social uprising, a group of soldiers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta deposed and arrested Keïta. The military formed the National Committee for the Salvation of the People and appointed a government to lead the country during a transition period, whose 18-month roadmap was validated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Disagreements between the Army and Government over the cabinet reshuffle led to a second coup d'état on May 24, 2021. The appointment of Assimi Goita as president and the interruption of the transition process led to the imposition of sanctions against the country (border closure, freezing of financial assets in the region, etc.) and its leaders by ECOWAS.

At the same time, the growing cooperation between the government of Mali and Russia, through the presence of the Russian private security company known as the Wagner Group (active in other conflicts such as the Central African Republic and Libya) in the fight against terrorist organizations, strained Mali's relations with France, the European Union and the United States. Various reports from Western countries linked Wagner Group personnel to attacks on civilians and human rights violations. Mali defended its freedom to decide on its partners in fighting terrorism, leading to the withdrawal of the Barkhane (France) and Takuba (European force) military operations, the suspension of military cooperation with France and the expulsion of its ambassador in Bamako.

The security rapprochement with Russia allowed the Malian army to adopt a more offensive posture against terrorist groups without being subject to significant human rights demands. At the same time, an official communication campaign was deployed that plays up the military victories of the armed forces to show the effectiveness of the new alliance. However, more than a year into this partnership and almost two years after the army assumed command of the country, the data shows a worrying trend, with violence intensifying in the central Sahel and expanding towards the coastal states of West Africa.

According to the Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, in 2022, attacks by armed Islamist groups (notably by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, ISGS) have again become frequent in the north of the country, where the situation had been relatively stable since the 2015 Peace Agreement. In addition, numerous civilian casualties have been reported in some of the anti-terrorist operations by the Malian allied forces and their Russian allies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)," in Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, May 31, 2023, at <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/mali/> (date of access: June 15, 2023).

The Group of Experts on Mali<sup>6</sup> indicated in its February 2023 report that, for the first time in seven years, the Malian armed forces had engaged in an armed confrontation with the signatory groups of the Peace Agreement. In the tri-border region, between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, clashes between the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the ISGS have worsened insecurity, especially after the Malian decision to withdraw, in 2022, from the G5-Sahel Joint Force.<sup>7</sup>

The resulting insecurity has a high humanitarian cost: there are more than 400 000 internally displaced people in Mali, more than half a million children have no access to education due to school closures, and more than two million are in a situation of food insecurity.<sup>8</sup> Since 2012, an estimated 1 500 000 people have lost their homes and there are 198 000 Malian refugees in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger.

But what has the international community, particularly the Security Council, done to transform the difficult situation that, expanding from Mali, threatens to drag the entire Sahel into a spiral of violence and weakening of institutions? The Security Council's response, its evolution and the challenges that this body currently faces in the region will be briefly analyzed below.

## The Security Council and the situation in the Sahel

The responses of the Security Council to the multiple crises in this region reflect the experience built up by this body in dealing with conflicts in Africa. At the same time, the lack of tangible results has raised questions about the usefulness of the tools available to the Council to fulfill its mandate of preserving international peace and security.

<sup>6</sup> Security Council, "Mid-term Report of the Group of Experts on Mali," S/2023/138, February 22, 2023, at <https://undocs.org/S/2023/138> (date of access: Friday, June 16, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Created in 2017 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, with the support of France, to combat extremist groups in an area 50 kilometers on each side of the borders between the member countries. The role of the Security Council regarding this military force will be explained later.

<sup>8</sup> Security Council, "Situation in Mali. Report of the Secretary-General," S/2023/21, January 6, 2023, pp. 10-11 at <https://undocs.org/S/2023/21> (date of access: June 16, 2023).

In its initial reactions to the 2012 crisis, the Security Council limited itself to expressing concern about the rapid deterioration of the situation in Mali and supporting the efforts of the African Union and ECOWAS.

The first resolution adopted on the situation in Mali was 2056 (2012), which condemns the coup d'état of March 2012, validates the agreements reached with ECOWAS for the reestablishment of the constitutional order, calls for a ceasefire between the warring parties, and reaffirms its support for Mali's territorial integrity. Likewise, it asks the Secretary-General to put forward a comprehensive strategy for the Sahel region that takes into account issues of security, governance, development, human rights and the humanitarian situation. Since the beginning of the conflict, there has been a clear awareness that the underlying problems must be addressed and a regional approach must be adopted.

Faced with the rapid advance of the Tuareg rebel groups, as described above, the Security Council adopted resolution 2085 (2012) to authorize, under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). With almost 8000 troops from African countries and financed by voluntary contributions, the institutional architecture of this operation that arrived in Mali in January 2013 was not well-suited to face the complexity of the combat (a wide range of armed groups operating across a vast territory, and an ineffective State). Its contributions were, however, important for the reestablishment of constitutional order through the elections that allowed Keïta to come to power in 2013.

MISMA and the United Nations Office in Mali (UNOM), established in December 2012 by the Security Council, paved the way for the creation in 2013, through resolution 2010, of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The vast mandate of this peacekeeping mission includes the protection of civilians, support for the stabilization of the country, monitoring the human rights situation, support for the political process, and the stabilization of the center of the country. The breadth of the mandate is accompanied by considerable resources, at least when compared to other peacekeeping operations (PKOs). In June 2022, according to U.N. data, MINUSMA had 17 557 troops and an annual budget of more than USD 1262 million, the highest of any PKO.

This force is, however, insufficient to stabilize a country with an area twice that of France, with poor road and communications infrastructure, very limited coverage of basic services, and in which various armed groups operate, some of them inspired by extremist ideologies. The protection of civilians in this context is a titanic task, far beyond the means available to MINUSMA, which generates both high levels of expectation among the population and strong criticism when the ambitious mandate of the mission is contrasted with the harsh reality of the civilian victims of the conflict. The frequent attacks by terrorist groups against MINUSMA make this one of the most dangerous PKOs.<sup>9</sup>

On the ground, MINUSMA cooperated closely with the French military operation Barkhane until the latter's withdrawal in 2022, as a result of diplomatic tensions between France and Mali. With 4500 soldiers and significant air power, Barkhane aimed to combat terrorist organizations, an aspect that is outside the mandate of MINUSMA, but is part of the efforts to counter violence. The French operation also provided intelligence information, aerial equipment and medical assistance to the blue helmets.

Some sectors of the Malian population identified MINUSMA with France, a former colonial power, due to its cooperation with French forces. The complex history of relations between Paris and Bamako since Mali gained its independence explains why there is a marked anti-French sentiment among some groups in society. These groups often disregard MINUSMA as an instrument of France to continue to dominate the region. This speech rejecting MINUSMA represents a threat to the safety of its personnel and hinders the fulfillment of its mandate. Unfortunately, the mission has lacked the capacity to respond effectively to the proliferation of messages and real campaigns against it, orchestrated by various interest groups.

During the discussions about the work of MINUSMA, Mexico was one of the first countries to draw attention to the expansion of violence into southern Mali. In addition, Mexico put forward an evaluation of the work of this mission, taking into account the lessons learned in the decade

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<sup>9</sup> From its creation until February 2023, 168 peacekeepers lost their lives in hostile acts. U.N., "Mali: Three UN Peacekeepers Killed in Explosive Attack," in U.N. News, February 21, 2023, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133742> (date of access: June 16, 2023).



it has been in operation, particularly given the deterioration of governance in the country, as a consequence of the coups d'état of 2020 and 2021, and the changes in the field of operations resulting from the departure of European forces. As part of this discussion, the Security Council asked the Secretary-General for options on the future of MINUSMA, which were published on January 16, 2023.

It is worth mentioning that, among the initial proposals to define the configuration of MINUSMA, it had been contemplated that the PKO itself would be accompanied by a parallel component aimed at fighting terrorist organizations. Although this component was never established, due to the doctrinal problems it raised for the peacekeeping framework, the Security Council supported other ways of neutralizing the terrorist threat.

This is how the Security Council supported the deployment of the G5-Sahel Joint Force since its creation in 2017, as a regional mechanism to fight terrorism in the border areas between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Due to the problems that its members have in financing it (it depends fundamentally on voluntary contributions) and in advancing its autonomy, the region has constantly sought for the Security Council to grant a mandate to the Joint Force under Article VII of the United Nations Charter, which would allow it access to financing via the regular budget of the United Nations. This initiative has some support within the Security Council, especially from France and African countries, but has faced resistance from the United Kingdom and the United States. Arguments against direct financing of the Joint Force include that it is a poorly consolidated anti-terrorist operation (each participating army operates almost autonomously) and with a history of human rights abuses. As an alternative, since 2017 MINUSMA's mandate has included provisions on logistical support to the Joint Force in terms of troop supplies, mainly with European financing.

Given the difficulties in neutralizing terrorist organizations in the region, the request for greater support from the United Nations to the G5-Sahel was gaining support within the Security Council, and in 2021 it was agreed to ask the Secretary-General for a report on the options for supporting the initiative. The report, presented in October that year, reactivated the debate and, at the November meeting on the issue, it was clear that political pressure from African countries to strengthen the Joint Force

was gaining ground. However, in May 2022, Mali announced its decision to leave the G5-Sahel due to the refusal of the other members to hand over the presidency of the group to the Malian military authorities.

The discussion on possible reinforced support from the United Nations via a Security Council mandate for the Joint Force lost validity, at least while the remaining members of this mechanism decide on its future. In any case, this crisis confirmed an issue that Mexico insisted on during its interventions: for the Security Council to give its support to the Joint Force, it was essential that its members make the political and operational decisions necessary to strengthen and harmonize the commitment of each of them within the alliance. An illustration of where the real problems with this alliance lie is the fact that the current crisis is not the result of the financial situation of the Joint Force, but rather the inability to resolve a political disagreement.

Given the rapid realignment of the forces operating in the region, the Secretary-General launched the High-Level Independent Panel on Security and Development in the Sahel in 2022. This mechanism brings together the African Union, ECOWAS and the G5-Sahel to reflect on the adjustments required by the strategy with the aim of presenting recommendations in 2023.

Finally, it is necessary to point to another important piece of the architecture that has been developed by the Security Council for the stabilization of Mali: the Sanctions Committee 2374. This subsidiary body was created in 2017 at the request of the Malian authorities to sanction individuals or entities that obstruct the implementation of the Peace Agreement, and was chaired by Mexico during the 2021-2022 period.

The reports of the Committee's Group of Experts make it possible to monitor the evolution of the conflict and identify those who engage in behavior that meets any of the criteria provided for in resolution 2374 (2017). Currently, there are eight individuals on the sanctions list.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this regime. The two sanctions imposed (ban on international travel and freezing of financial assets) have limited effectiveness in a context like Mali, which is part of a regional bloc with freedom of movement of people (ECOWAS), and where the majority of the population are unbanked. On the other hand, by framing its activity in the implementation of the Peace Agreement, the 2374 Sanctions

Committee does not have direct jurisdiction over the activity of the terrorist groups that today are mainly responsible for the violence in Mali.

Without ignoring these limitations, Mexico used its presidency of the Committee to promote a direct dialogue with the States of the region, including Mali, which represent the first line of application of the sanctions. To ensure the continued relevance of the sanctions list, the first update of the list was carried out since the creation of the Committee. Mexico also used its good offices to facilitate dialogue between the Panel of Experts and the Malian authorities, with the aim that the Committee should continue to receive reports on the situation in the country.

## The internal dynamics of the Security Council

To conceive and implement the initiatives briefly described so far, the Security Council had to meet, grant and renew mandates, request reports from the Secretary-General and analyze them, request that investigations be carried out, and evaluate their results. Each of these actions is the result of a negotiation in which the 15 members reached an agreement.

Traditionally, issues linked to Africa had been spaces where internal dynamics made it possible to offer solutions to the challenges to international peace and security. However, some of these issues on the Security Council agenda have given rise to increasingly marked polarization, driven primarily by permanent members jostling for position in Africa.

An example of this trend is the fact that in June 2022 the mandate of MINUSMA was renewed with 13 votes in favor and the abstention of China and Russia, when since 2013 it had been approved unanimously. This occurred months after the presence of the Wagner Group in Mali was reported, revealing greater Russian involvement in the Sahel and generating friction with Western countries, which accused this group of exploiting the country's mineral resources. Years ago, a similar situation was experienced in the Central African Republic, which also had consequences for the relationship between the permanent members of the Security Council.

The data on the resolutions adopted in the years 2021 and 2022 show, on the one hand, the considerable attention that the Security Council pays to African issues and, on the other, a decrease in the number of decisions

that indicates greater difficulties in achieving agreements between members. Thus, in 2021, there were 37 decisions<sup>10</sup> related to Africa (26 resolutions and 11 presidential statements), that is, 66.07% of the total decisions taken that year. In 2022, the Council adopted 29 decisions (27 resolutions and two presidential statements) on African issues, or 60.42% of the total. The evident reduction in the number of presidential statements, which must be adopted unanimously, clearly illustrates the difficulties faced in reaching agreements.

Despite the above, there is still room to move things forward if expectations are adjusted based on feasibility, and all parties to a negotiation are consulted in a transparent and ongoing manner.

Two months after the record of unanimous renewal of the MINUSMA mandate was broken, in August 2022, Mexico co-penholder with France a draft resolution to renew the sanctions regime relating to Mali and the mandate of the Group of Experts. As president of the 2374 Sanctions Committee, the Mexican delegation together with its French counterparts facilitated a negotiation that led to the adoption of the resolution with the favorable vote of all 15 members.

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<sup>10</sup> Here “decision” is understood to refer to a resolution or presidential statement.