



## **Is Mali Set to Become Germany's Second Afghanistan?**

**Jürgen Koch**

**March 2022**

### **Summary**

---

Is Germany's involvement in Mali set to end in a similar rush to withdraw its military personnel and development workers, which marked its disastrous exit from Afghanistan last August? This question is currently being asked with increasing frequency in Germany. Yet despite parallels in certain performance indicators, hasty judgments should be avoided. The case of Mali is distinctly different from that of Afghanistan, and thus Germany's record of military and civilian engagement in Mali demands a far more detailed analysis. In view of the above, any coherent strategy for the Federal Republic's further engagement in Mali should be formulated by way of the comprehensive approach.<sup>1</sup>

### **About ISPSW**

---

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

In the increasingly complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, which presents both major opportunities and risks, decision-makers in the economic and political arena depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, the economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have held executive positions – in some cases for decades – and have dispensed advice in a wide range of fields.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the technical definition of the concept "Comprehensive Approach", see Civil Military Center of Excellence (CCOE): CIMIC Handbook, The Hague 2022



## Analysis

---

Would a fast-paced withdrawal of Germany's military and civilian personnel from Mali be ill timed? What is the likelihood of this scenario being played out prematurely? In Germany, such questions are currently being posed and with increasing frequency both by pundits and politicians, as well as the general public.

In August 2021, Germany's military and civilian engagement in Afghanistan came to an abrupt end. The immediate causes of Germany's hurried military disengagement, and the departure of civilian employees from international development organizations, are well known: the precipitous departure of U.S. forces and the Taliban's seizure of power within a matter of days, without significant resistance from the Afghan forces left no viable alternative. All but a handful of the Bundeswehr's Afghan staff and civilian organizations accompanied by their close family members were able to flee the country. By mid-February, about 1200 people were airlifted to Germany. The number of additional Afghan staff and their families who can be flown to Germany will depend on negotiations with Taliban representatives.

On the whole, the West's policies in Afghanistan have failed. The shock prompted by the unforeseen termination of German involvement in Afghanistan and its chaotic withdrawal from Kabul has been felt most keenly by the soldiers formerly stationed in the region. The same applies to the international and Afghan employees of GIZ<sup>2</sup> and non-governmental organizations involved in development cooperation, who operated under extraordinarily difficult conditions and with great dedication.

In the wake of this withdrawal from Afghanistan it is thus hardly surprising that questions regarding the failure of the West's commitment are becoming steadily more insistent. A German Parliamentary commission of inquiry in conjunction with the responsible ministries set up to address such questions, is currently grappling with the reasons for this failed mission. How is such a spectacular misjudgment of the situation in Afghanistan possible, and only days prior to the withdrawal of the remaining contingent of German forces?

Germany's Foreign Office has commissioned a strategic evaluation of civilian engagement, the results of which are expected this autumn. Assimilating the bitter lessons gleaned from Afghanistan, and implementing the concomitant strategic amendments for German engagement in other sensitive hot spots, cannot be done overnight. Meanwhile, the current shift of focus by key policymakers and ministry staff is on Mali, which, with about 1,300 soldiers, by far now constitutes Germany's largest foreign operation.<sup>3</sup>

Parallels between the respective situations in Mali and Afghanistan prior to the reemergence of the Taliban regime, seems obvious. However, facile comparisons of complex societies are apt to be misleading. Not only are Mali and Afghanistan thousands of kilometers apart, but they are also separated by culture, history and geography.

Islam, as practiced in Mali, is substantially different to its Afghan counterpart. While 90% of Malians are Muslim, the constitution protects religious freedom. Moreover, the vast majority of Malians is tolerant of religious minorities, whereby the country has traditionally adopted a more liberal stance towards Islam. Unlike Afghanistan, there has never been a radical Islamic theocracy in Mali. Mali's population is also ethnically very diverse, with thirteen officially recognized languages in addition to French. In recent years, however, Islam has

---

<sup>2</sup> German International Cooperation

<sup>3</sup> Bartholomäus Grill: "Auch die Mali Mission wird scheitern" Spiegel-Online, 15 September 2021



adopted a more conservative interpretation, thus fostering radicalization, in part owing to the advance of conservative Salafists bolstered by Saudi Arabia.

The situation with respect to armed groups in Mali is somewhat nebulous and volatile. Rebel groups affiliated to different umbrella organizations compete and form alliances. The JNIM<sup>4</sup> organization, for instance, which is associated with Al Qaeda, is waging a bitter struggle against ISGS<sup>5</sup> fighters. This fast-emerging fragmentation among Mali's jihadist organizations stands in marked contrast to the situation in Afghanistan, where the Taliban occupy the center of the country's power structure. Despite the military presence of the UN and the EU, violent conflicts have been steadily escalating since 2016.<sup>6</sup> The central government is cooperating with some among these rebel groups who, while having refused to sign the Algiers peace agreement in 2015, are now amenable to the agreement.<sup>7</sup>

With a population of over 40 million and an area covering 653,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Afghanistan has successfully repelled several foreign interventions. From a Western perspective, Islam as practiced by the Taliban, has proven no less intolerant, misogynistic and backward-looking as the manifestations of radical Islamic terrorist organizations in Mali. While the Taliban provide sanctuary to radical terror groups, they have not sought to disseminate their interpretation of Islam internationally. The focus of the Taliban's struggle has invariably centered on the expulsion of Western "infidel" occupiers and the establishment of an Islamic theocracy based on their interpretation. Thus, following the West's de facto capitulation, the chaotic withdrawal of foreign troops and the resumption Taliban ascendancy, they have achieved their key objectives. However, economic collapse, famine and ISIS assassinations pose enormous challenges for the new Taliban regime.

Mali, by contrast, with its population of 20 million within a 1.25 million km<sup>2</sup> area, is twice the size of Afghanistan and has half the population. However, a mere one third of Mali's land is arable. Climate change is also causing a massive expansion of the Malian desert, posing serious challenges for a country the population of which has doubled in size over the foregoing 20 years. Given these developments, violent conflicts among sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists – the frequent targets of Jihadist terrorist groups exploiting the latter for recruitment and destabilization – have meanwhile become bloodier and more frequent. The boundaries between religious, ethnic and social conflicts are extraordinarily fluid.

Despite their differences, Mali and Afghanistan exhibit frightening parallels with regard to responses by the international community's. In Mali, the German Army is guided by United Nations mandates as stipulated for the multinational peacekeeping force MINUSMA<sup>8</sup> and the European training mission EUTM.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2001, German military engagement in Afghanistan has been based on three mandates from the Bundestag for participation in the ISAF<sup>10</sup> mission and the OEF.<sup>11</sup> However, as early as 2011 the Bundeswehr's presence in Afghanistan was described by a military historian as "lacking a strategy", observing that it lacked clear goals, a

<sup>4</sup> Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal-Muslimi

<sup>5</sup> Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

<sup>6</sup> ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Collection): Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires and Shifting Frontlines, 17 June 2021

<sup>7</sup> "Non-signatory compliant armed groups"

<sup>8</sup> Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

<sup>9</sup> European Training Mission

<sup>10</sup> International Security Assistance Force

<sup>11</sup> Operation Enduring Freedom



credible plan and the means to achieve them.<sup>12</sup> Since the Bundeswehr's military objectives in Afghanistan derive from the guiding principles of NATO's 28 members, it is hardly surprising that the guidelines for action were correspondingly vague. Numbering among the notable omissions were a clear exit strategy, and contingency planning for the orderly evacuation of national staff and their families.

MINUSMA's most important task as stipulated in its mandates, is the establishment of state authority, the protection of the civilian population and consolidation of the peace process. Combating terrorism is not a mandated task, however, and roughly 80% of military resources are deployed to protect MINUSMA infrastructure, convoys, and troops stationed in Mali. Protecting the soldiers in Germany's "parliamentary army" is entirely understandable, all the more so during times in which public approval for foreign missions is on the wane. In short, from the standpoint of security, the German Army does not generally speaking fully exploit its already defensive mandate. Yet, many Malians criticize this defensive posture, emphasizing as it does Blue-Helmet safety to the relative detriment of protection of the civilian population.<sup>13</sup>

The security situation is meanwhile deteriorating sharply in Mali's northern, central, western and southern sectors, cinching ever tighter the noose around the capital, Bamako, within which confines foreign aid workers operate in relative safety. While terrorist groups have long-since been capable of carrying out attacks in the capital and other cities, they have refrained from doing so in Bamako since 2017.

Thus, the central government has lost control of most rural areas and has been increasingly confined to a few cities. Frequently, neither its Governors nor the police force it deploys beyond Bamako speak the local language, hence causing locals to regard them as outsiders or even as occupiers. Foreign partners identified these shortcomings several years ago, and hence called for concrete reforms to the security sector. To date, no serious response has been forthcoming.<sup>14</sup> Despite improved training and equipment from the international community, police forces in bases outside the capital remain poorly motivated. The shortage of basic supplies<sup>15</sup> and widespread administrative failures escalate violence and foster the emergence of new jihadist groups.<sup>16</sup>

Corruption and nepotism are particularly widespread within the judiciary, encouraging what has since become a hallmark of the Malian economy, namely, the smuggling of drugs, weapons, currency and people. German development cooperation has enjoyed a strong reputation for decades, and is still appreciated by much of the population. As a result, German programs supporting agriculture and food security continue in Mali's north and center, areas no longer controlled by the central government. Ignoring state institutions, Rebel groups tolerate these programs so long as the focus remains restricted to basic needs. The rebels' de facto tolerance of development cooperation, along with the government's loss of territorial control is obvious to everyone. Implementing organizations discreetly omit such details from their progress reports, while their clients avoid uncomfortable questions as to the status quo.

Worsening security means that projects in central and northern Mali operate increasingly by "remote control", resulting in far greater restrictions to freedom of movement for international personnel. This situation makes it

<sup>12</sup> Philip Münch: Strategielos in Afghanistan – Die Operationsführung der Bundeswehr im Rahmen der ISAF, Stiftung für Wissenschaft und Politik (swp), November 2011

<sup>13</sup> Dennis Tull: VN Peacekeeping in Mali, swp, April 2019

<sup>14</sup> Robin Schröder: Sicherheitssektor (re)formieren – Vier Empfehlungen für Mali, PeaceLab, 8 April 2018

<sup>15</sup> According to "Welthungerhilfe" and other international aid agencies the number of people suffering from hunger in 2021 has tripled to 1,2 million in one year (press release December 2021)

<sup>16</sup> Olaf Bernau, Sahel: Ökonomische, politische und ökologische Ursachen der Gewalteskalation, German Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung), Januar 2021



far more difficult to monitor the flow of project funding. As the implementing agent for German development cooperation, the GIZ practices “zero tolerance” for corruption among its staff and affiliated partners. The prosecution of criminals is massively hampered by the inefficiency and corruptibility of the Malian judiciary.

GIZ has detailed evacuation plans for its staff and their families. As in many fragile countries, emergency plans to ensure operational continuity are regularly updated, and include mock exercises. Whereas the sudden departure of international experts would tend to pose major challenges for GIZ and NGO's, a some degree of continuity is still feasible. In the medium term, however, development cooperation would necessarily entail drastic adaptation to changed circumstances.

Plans have not been drafted for the evacuation of Malian staff and their families. In the event of unrest, such employees are less likely to face the same risk as local staff members employed by the German army who remain far more exposed. Nevertheless, the risk factor for national employees demands constant evaluation and precautionary measures similar to those adopted in rural areas.

In many regions of Mali, governmental and non-governmental bodies have reached their absorptive limits for implementing huge development cooperation programs. Owing to the dearth of professionally trained staff, international donors compete for qualified employees. Members of the ‘development industry’, the local NGOs and consultancies, thrive in this environment. Malian employees opt for courses based not on quality of training, but on per diem allowance. Attempts by international donors to establish uniform per diem rates either fail entirely or else agreements are left unimplemented, even at EU level. Here, too, this echoes Afghanistan prior to the withdrawal of foreign aid workers.

Around 13,000 soldiers or more than 75% of the Malian army was trained as part of the EUTM, and Germany has for many years been one of its most important providers of troops. Nevertheless, the benefits of large-scale training for the Malian army's motivation and discipline have proved negligible. In 2019, six years after training commenced, foreign experts still characterized the Malian army as “bureaucrats in uniform” or “a comical theatrical group, suitable only for military parades”.<sup>17</sup> Despite the advance of Islamist terrorist groups and mounting military losses, the professionalism of Mali's army has yet to improve.

The scheduled for February 2022, triggered severe sanctions on Mali in June 2021. Trade disruption, travel bans, and a freeze on assets belonging to military junta members has been the response by ECOWAS.<sup>18</sup> France and other Western nations have imposed sanctions and demanded free elections to restore civilian government.<sup>19</sup> Air France halted flights to Mali.

In January, Mali's government expelled the French ambassador after a heated exchange. The French government, which had earlier already decided to reduce its forces in the Sahel (Operation Barkhane)<sup>20</sup> due to domestic political pressure, and whose presence is increasingly unpopular with Malian public, opted for a complete troop

<sup>17</sup> Dennis Tull: Rebuilding Mali's Army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners, International Affairs, 1 March 2019

<sup>18</sup> Economic Community of West African States

<sup>19</sup> Deutsche Welle (DW) German International Broadcast, 3 June 2021

The French military mission Barkhane has been in operation since 2014 in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. Up until the start of the EU's TF Takuba in 2020, it was the only international mission actively combatting terrorist groups. Barkhane operates a base in Gao adjacent to the camp of the German contingent of MINUSMA.



withdrawal from Mali. This includes the Barkhane mission as well as the French contingent in the “Takuba” Task Force.<sup>21</sup>

In the meantime, hundreds of Russian Wagner mercenaries<sup>22</sup> are active in Mali and anti-French sentiment is still riding high. It is difficult to determine whether public opinion is pulling a government in need of popular support, or whether the junta has intensified this wave of anger against the French. Either way, the break with France marks a turning point in Mali’s post-colonial history.

Tensions with other Western countries have intensified too. The German Air Force was denied overflight rights for the transportation of troops; and a week after landing in Mali, 90 Danish soldiers from the Takuba mission were issued with an ultimatum to leave Mali. Denmark withdrew the soldiers, announcing the cancellation of a portion of its civilian development aid. In the future, Denmark aims to support humanitarian and civil society projects, but has suspended cooperation with government ministries.

Mandate extensions for the Bundeswehr within the MINUSMA and EUTM framework are scheduled for May 2022. The UN Security Council’s mandate for the MINUSMA operation, involving roughly 13,000 soldiers and 2,000 police is scheduled to expire one month later, in June. In view of the deteriorating security situation, the Malian army’s shambolic condition and increasing tension between its military government and the West, above all with France, one anticipates a tough debate in the Bundestag in May. The German government decided to increase military spending dramatically in the wake of Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine. A reassessment of defense priorities in Europe following Russian aggression might lead to a buildup of military forces within Europe and thus to a reduction of Germany’s military commitments outside European territory. A more robust mandate for the German contingent in Mali by way of “mentoring” soldiers during deployments was off the table before the recent federal elections, which is by now more unlikely than ever.

Staying the course is no option. Withdrawing the Bundeswehr without consultation with its MINUSMA and EUTM partners, especially its EU partners, is hardly an alternative. Such a step would not only undermine Germany’s reputation of reliability in the international community, but make Mali even more dependent upon Russia and China.

With vigorous German involvement, the UN and EU would be well advised to carry out a thoroughgoing review of their recent experiences as part of a fundamental rethink of future strategy in Mali: What are the reasons for previous policy failures? What constitute realistic guidelines for future engagement under prevailing circumstances, and to what kinds of progress might they reasonably give rise? What can be done to prevent Mali and its neighbors from slipping further into political and economic chaos? How much time and effort are donors willing to invest in engagement?

As the first country to grant Mali diplomatic recognition, and thanks to its non-colonial past and its successful development cooperation Germany still enjoys an excellent reputation in the country. This suggests that an informal mediating role between Mali and Western partners might be feasible.

---

<sup>21</sup> Takuba is a European military task force established in 2020 to advise, assist and accompany the Malian Army in its fight against terrorists. Germany supports the creation of Takuba, but does not dispatch personnel. The main aim of Takuba was to complement the EUTM mission and to compensate for the drawdown of Barkhane in Mali.

<sup>22</sup> The Russian mercenary army “Wagner” comprises about 3500 soldiers; it has been in existence since 2014 and has been deployed in Syria, Libya, Ukraine and the Central African Republic. It stands accused of massive human rights violations.



In response to the military coup, Germany cut its development cooperation last spring and placed conditions on further projects regarding elections scheduled for early 2022. As a result, no new projects are currently planned. Linking development cooperation to nationwide elections remains problematic at a time when the government faces an extremely tense security situation in many regions and, according to its own estimates, has ceded control to rebel groups in 80 % of the countryside.<sup>23</sup> Previously elected governments are jointly responsible for an environment of political chaos and economic decline.

What quid pro quo can be expected from Mali's military junta? The junta claims to fight corruption and to promote broad-based social, economic and political reforms.<sup>24</sup> The junta should be held to its promises. The scenario for continued development cooperation must be unambiguous: measurable steps for curbing rampant corruption, for shifting more tasks and funding away from the central government to the local level, as had already been proposed in the 2015 peace agreement should also be in place; and finally, an efficient processing of human rights violations, including those of the army and its militias, and victim compensation should also be implemented.

Furthermore, stabilization of the country appears unlikely without long-term development cooperation geared towards basic needs such as food, water supply, employment and security. This suggests that Germany and other donors should follow Denmark's example: limiting support for humanitarian aid and cooperation as are channeled through reliable NGOs and civil society groups, until the junta meets the basic conditions for broader cooperation.

It remains to be seen whether the Malian military government and the country's elites – military, political and commercial – are able and willing to accept conditional cooperation.

In any event, emergency plans for the orderly withdrawal of Bundeswehr units as well as detailed evacuation plans for their national personnel together with their families, should be drawn up so as to avert a potential disaster on the scale of Afghanistan. At the same time, such activities would make it very clear to the Malian partners that for their partners, delay tactics, in the event of non-compliance with agreements, has now come to an end.

\*\*\*

**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

---

<sup>23</sup> Interview with the Prime Minister of the transitional government Choguel Kokalla Maiga with the news agency Anadolu, 4 February 2022

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Lebovich: Mali's Transitional Government: The Dangers of the Junta Clinging to Power, European Council on Foreign Relations, 6 October 2020





### **About the Author of this Issue**

Jürgen Koch studied Economics at the University of Heidelberg, before completing his postgraduate studies at the College of Europe in Bruges. Mr. Koch joined GTZ (German Technical Cooperation, later GIZ), heading its offices in Brussels, Bangkok, and the Gulf regional office in the UAE. From 2015 to 2019, he was GIZ's Director in Mali, and in 2020 served as Interim Department Head for West Africa. Mr. Koch devotes his time to research and lecturing, most recently on the topic of civil military cooperation at the Bundeswehr's Command and Staff Academy in Hamburg.

