By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

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The military junta in Mali has alienated regional and international security partners amid escalating violence by militant Islamist groups, leading to a spike in civilian fatalities.

Since taking power in August 2020, the military junta in Mali has alienated its regional and international security partners and pursued a strategy that has exacerbated the militant Islamist violence threatening the country, thereby accelerating the security crisis in the Sahel.

Violence linked to militant Islamist groups has nearly doubled since the junta seized power in 2020. And annual fatalities associated with this violence more than doubled in 2022.

Civilians have borne the brunt of this violence. There were more civilians killed in Mali in every quarter of 2022 than in any previous calendar year. Fatalities associated with violence against civilians are seven times higher in 2022 than in 2021.

Simultaneous to this escalation, the junta has imposed restrictions on regional and international security partner troop rotations, flight clearances, maneuvers, and patrol routes. This includes:

• Detaining Ivoirian soldiers sent to support MINUSMA
• Expelling senior United Nations officials
• Unilaterally withdrawing Mali from the Sahel G5, including its joint force. This has dramatically reduced security coordination with Mali’s neighbors, increasing the vulnerability of frequently targeted border areas.
• Significantly reducing regional and international forces in northern Mali contributing to a surge in militant Islamist violence in the Gao and Menaka regions. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has capitalized on the reduced presence of international security forces and the inability of the junta to reestablish control over the area. Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)-linked forces and ISGS now openly vie for control of this territory on the borders of Burkina Faso and Niger.

International statutory forces supporting Mali by the end of 2023 represent a 40-percent reduction compared to 2020 levels. Their numbers are projected to decrease by a further 15 percent by the end of 2024.
Malian Military Junta Scuttles Security Partnerships while Militant Violence Surges

Violent events linked to militant Islamist groups and Wagner abuses in Mali

Civilian fatalities connected to the Wagner Group

Personnel levels of international statutory forces supporting Mali

Insecurity skyrockets as Malian junta expels security partners

1,061 violent events in 2022, a 97% increase over 2020

12,066 troops by the end of 2023, a 43% decrease since 2020

February 2020
Wagner-linked network begins disinformation campaign pushing for the disengagement of French and UN troops in Mali.

May 2021
Junta stages false flag demonstration cheerleading Russian intervention in Mali.

June 10, 2021
Announcement of Barkhane drawdown and transformation to European Union’s Task Force Takuba, pursuant to plan first discussed at the January 2020 G5 Sahel Summit.

February 2022
Mali’s military junta begins refusing light clearances to ECOWAS governments that enforced sanctions preventing peacekeepers from Senegal, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana, to rotate in or out of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali.

March 27, 2022
Wagner mercenaries and Malian soldiers allegedly massacre an estimated 450 civilians during 4 days in Moura.

February 17, 2022
Full pullout of Barkhane and Takuba from Mali announced.

April 20, 2022
Wagner mercenaries filmed staging mass grave outside Gossi military base.

May 2, 2022
Junta ends defense accord with France.

May 15, 2022
Junta announces Mali’s withdrawal from G5 Sahel.

May 19, 2022
Benin announces withdrawal from MINUSMA.

November 22, 2022
Germany announces MINUSMA troops to be withdrawn by 2024.

November 14, 2022
UK to withdraw troops from MINUSMA 6 months ahead of planned timeframe.

November 11, 2022
Côte d’Ivoire announces its withdrawal from MINUSMA.

February 6, 2023
Junta declares MINUSMA human rights chief, Guillaume Ngefa-Atondoko Andali, persona non grata.

July 3, 2022
ECOWAS lifts sanctions after junta agrees to hold election by February 2024.

July 10, 2022
49 Ivorian MINUSMA soldiers arrested by junta.

July 15, 2022
Egypt suspends activities of its MINUSMA troops.

July 14, 2022
Junta announces that it will suspend all MINUSMA troop rotations.

June 30, 2022
European Union Task Force Takuba ends.

March 3, 2022
Sweden announces withdrawal of MINUSMA troops.

January 9, 2022
ECOWAS places sanctions on Mali.

September 2021
Wagner-linked network begins spreading disinformation promoting Wagner interventions in Mali and advocating for the postponement of elections.

January 2022
May 24, 2021
Junta stages second coup, ousts civilian transitional president and prime minister. Names Assimi Goïta transitional president.

September 13, 2021
A deal between Mali junta and Wagner mercenaries first reported.

March 17, 2022
Junta bans the broadcasts of RFI and France24 in Mali.

January 17, 2022
Junta expels Danish special forces sent to Task Force Takuba.

January 21, 2022
Junta refuses German military light clearances for transport aircraft.

August 18, 2020
Military coup led by Colonel Assimi Goïta.

September 2020
Junta agrees to an ECOWAS-negotiated plan for an 18-month transition and elections in February 2022.

December 2021
Wagner mercenaries arrive in Bamako.

December 2021
Junta delays elections until 2026.

2024
2023
2022
2021
2020
2019

INSECURITY SKYROCKETS AS MALIAN JUNTA EXPELS SECURITY PARTNERS
Meanwhile, the junta has brought an estimated 1,000 fighters from the notorious Russian paramilitary unit, the Wagner Group.

- The junta alongside the Wagner Group have targeted civilians in approximately 60 percent of Wagner-linked operations.
- Four out of five people killed by the Wagner Group alongside Malian soldiers, were civilians. Often, these victims were women, children, or elderly.
- These deaths accounted for more than 40 percent of all fatalities from violence against civilians in Mali during 2022.
- The Malian junta has repeatedly leveraged coordinated disinformation campaigns to soften the ground for Wagner’s arrival and for expelling or restricting statutory support to Mali.

More than 2.7 million people have been displaced by the escalating violence and insecurity in the Sahel.

**DIMINISHING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT**

**MINUSMA**

With its mandate expiring in June 2023, the UN has presented three potential options for the future of its peacekeeping mission in Mali. The first envisions a larger mission but would require the junta to guarantee freedom of movement to the peacekeepers and to make progress toward a transition to civilian rule. This scenario also entails an increase in troop contributions. A second option proposes the shuttering of the uniformed arm of the mission to be replaced by a special political mission. The third option maintains the current troop configuration with a significantly reduced mandate for the mission.

Given the announced plans of several troop contributing countries to withdraw their forces and no indication that the junta is willing to meet MINUSMA’s proposed parameters, it seems probable that the peacekeeping mission may close, further exposing Malian communities to insecurity. This appears to be by design as the junta and Wagner Group have repeatedly taken actions to hamstring the UN mission and prevent independent investigations of human rights allegations such as in Moura where at least 450 people were killed.

**Sahel G5**

The four remaining member states of the G5—Niger, Chad, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso—have encouraged Mali to return to the regional organization. Given that the efficacy of this joint force is premised around joint cross-border operations, the Malian junta’s withdrawal has effectively rendered the G5 nonfunctional.
Malian Military Junta Scuttles Security Partnerships while Militant Violence Surges

Restrictions on MINUSMA air and ground movements by (Malian) authorities have significantly affected the mission’s ability to maintain situational awareness and to fulfill its mandate.

-UN Security Council report (January 2023)
European-led Missions

The European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) has halved the number of troops it has on the ground in Mali. It continues to support the Malian armed forces on strategic advice and education until the end of its mandate in May 2024. All operational and nonoperational activities are suspended, though with the capacity to resume when conditions are met to support the creation of sustainable and capable armed forces under democratic control.

The European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) is a European Union capacity building civilian crisis management mission in Mali. Its mandate was extended by the European Union’s Political and Security Committee (EU PSC) until January 2025, with over $75 million allocated. EUCAP has adapted its mission due to the volatile situation in Mali focusing on the support of internal security forces, primarily the National Police, in southern Mali. The redeployment of the internal security forces to central Mali could resume if deemed feasible.

Operation Barkhane and Task Force Takuba both ended their missions and withdrew their forces in 2022. Since 2020, there had been plans to reform the French-led Operation Barkhane to the EU-led Takuba mission. The Malian junta’s expulsion of the Danish contingent of Takuba in January 2022, precipitated the termination of the EU force. France withdrew all its troops from Mali at the junta’s behest in August 2022.