

# Meltdown

## On Military Failure and Civilian Perspectives in the Sahel

*The "Sahel" Committee of the Association for African Studies in Germany VAD was founded in 2020 because social scientists considered the Western military and civilian engagement in the Sahel to be fraught with serious strategic and operational failures, and that the existing academic and civil society evidence on crisis causes had not been considered politically. With this in mind, we comment on the German government's decision to phase out the MINUSMA engagement in Mali within 18 months as follows:*

We are perplexed that the German government's decision to withdraw the German contingent from MINUSMA still does not reflect the failure of the Western military mission in the Sahel. Its public justification reads as if the withdrawal from MINUSMA was solely due to the lack of cooperation by the military government in Mali.

We are equally perplexed that the German government and parliament are also unwilling to recognize the less than modest success of decades of conventional development cooperation in the Sahel - the civilian counterpart to military failure despite many good projects.

It is true that the existential crisis of the states and societies in the western Sahel continues to escalate. The terrorist threat is spreading unchecked to the south - to the countries on the Gulf of Guinea. This catastrophic situation can only be influenced in a positive direction by prioritizing the civilian dimension with a strategically repositioned civilian cooperation. Assessing the situation from a purely military perspective is a dead end. The military is essential in the fight against terror, but it can only be effective if national armed forces become part of the solution and not part of the problem.

It is equally disastrous to make civilian cooperation throughout the region primarily dependent on the presence of UN forces. The military coups in the countries of the Sahel are clearly accompanied by a spirit of optimism among the population, who, after decades of development cooperation oriented mainly to European and especially French interests, hope for a new beginning with agricultural and industrial projects for the future that will advance the countries and take their situation into account. Unless new ways for civil cooperation under the leadership of local forces are found, it will amount to turning one's back on the region and leaving local populations to their fate, just like in Afghanistan. Civilian actors in Mali, and in the other affected countries in the Sahel, are crucial in the fight against jihadism and for peaceful coexistence. Instead of a view from above, instead of a central-state-centered view of ministries and parliaments, the local and regional levels below the national elites must play the key role.

MINUSMA did have a circumscribed protective role for the population in its immediate environment, especially in larger cities; it supported local peace agreements and developed some projects that were locally appreciated. This is confirmed by experts from the region. Yet MINUSMA has been operational only in a limited way for some time, due to decisions by the military government in Mali. While this would justify an immediate end to the mission, not just after a year and a half, MINUSMA, as well as other missions in the region, could

usefully continue with a robust mandate and adequate, equal participation of national forces. The central role in this can only be played by the Malian army, which, with the support of the Bundeswehr and other partners in the areas of training and equipment, must be put in a position to reliably protect the civilian population. However, the German government's decision does not indicate whether it intends to use the long transition period to adapt its mandate and operating doctrine, and to convince the Malian government and the UN to do so, if necessary.

The argument, put forth especially by the German Foreign Office, that the German contingent should for now remain in Mali to protect the presidential elections scheduled for February 2024, gives a false orientation. For it is once again based on the unrealistic notion of free national elections that can be held within a short time and usher in a "return" to democracy. This idea ignores the fact that (a) the political class in Mali (as in Burkina Faso) is completely discredited among broad segments of the population and (b) vast territories in Mali and Burkina Faso are no longer under state control, and many more areas outside the cities are under the control of military governors and prefects.

The federal government basically seems to continue to believe that a return of the old postcolonial-style state system to the occupied territories is possible in the Sahel, and that certain "tendencies toward de-democratization" can be contained. This idea does not take the advanced state collapse in Mali and Burkina Faso into account.

In contrast with this, we underscore the perspective of many actors in the region, that a state reconstruction from above and below – a "Refondation de l'État" is necessary. Such a reconstruction should take a decentralized approach to the diverse social, economic, and political realities in the regions of the Sahel, rather than imposing a unitary central state on them. Development cooperation must be oriented accordingly and attempt to provide differentiated support for the restoration of peace and public services in this context. German diplomats and experts, too, would have to adapt to a multifaceted social landscape with many addresses and actors.

Considering the apparently weak situation analysis and lack of objectives, we welcome the fact that the German government intends to adopt an explicit Sahel strategy in 2023, as part of the German National Security Strategy. The rationale for a new strategy provides key points for a modified approach to civilian cooperation in the region. The intention to initiate short-term employment prospects for the young population is one example, since it would address one of the main causes of the crisis. However, such projects should not prioritize migration prevention as their focus.

The published rationale for the MINUSMA decision contains nothing in support of local discussion offers and peace processes involving armed groups, although this is precisely the point that has been critically discussed among military actors in the Sahel countries. Contrary to what the powers in Mali and their Russian allies would have us believe, the terrorism problem cannot be solved by military means alone but requires talks and negotiations with all forces willing to talk. These have already been taking place for a while at the local level with jihadist groups. The armed groups in the Sahel are diverse. Not all negotiations with armed groups have resulted in a better situation for civilians, and many people in Mali simply want the terror in their daily lives to stop. Many are also opting for military solutions out of desperation since their situation continues to deteriorate. We should, however, not overlook the fact that some armed groups accept NGOs that provide

services (e.g., health) that they themselves cannot provide, and may even offer them protection. This provides political entry points.

We are wondering why the German government is still unwilling to express a specified dissent with our French partners on these points, and to make it public in the region. If it continues to refrain from doing so, it risks being fully identified with the actions of France, which is accused of acting overbearingly and even neo-colonially, in differentiated critiques by actors from the region, but also by international (including French) scholars and think tanks, and for good reasons. The German government's "strategic communication" must take this into account.

We recognize clear political differences in the most recent statements by the military leaderships of Mali and Burkina Faso. While the military government in Mali blames external enemies for the crisis, the new leadership in Burkina Faso seems to focus much more on the heavy responsibility of the old and new elites at home. Although it remains to be seen how this translates into concrete action, we suggest that these differences be strategically embraced or that further differentiation and adjustment be requested in political exchanges.

Finally, we call on the German side to take a firm stand in all communications against manifest tendencies to ethnicize the conflicts in the region, which involve deliberately denouncing a particular ethnic group as aiding terrorism and supporting militias of other ethnic groups against it. Such accusations are based primarily on long-simmering conflicts over land use, which the population groups used to negotiate at the local level despite increasing social and political problems, as long as they were not manipulated by politicians and influencers. In view of our history, the Federal Republic of Germany in particular, can and must assume a significant responsibility here.

December 2022

For the VAD Committee "Sahel":

Erdmute Alber, Helmut Asche, Maria Grosz-Ngaté, Christiane Kayser, Cornelius Oepen, Katja Werthmann- Kirscht.