

EU-CANADA NETWORK POLICY BRIEF

EU-Canada Military and Civilian Cooperation in the Sahel: Is there scope for cooperation on COVID-19?

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Background

Since the signing of the Algiers accords in 2015 between the government of Mali and various Tuareg factions, Canada and the European Union (EU) have been cooperating in the EU's civilian training mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali). The program, which trains local police forces, gendarmeries, and the national guard, has been part of the EU's overall growing presence and intensifying involvement in the region since the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and the Al-Qaeda insurgency. The program serves in conjunction with other stabilization programs in the region, such as the EUCAP mission in Niger, the United Nations MINUSMA mission in Mali, the EU Training Mission (EUTM) Mali, and the French counterterrorism Opération Barkhane (EEAS, 2016). The EU programs are part of the EU's regional strategy for security and development in the Sahel, falling under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The purpose of the EU missions is to improve the capacity of local police and military forces to respect the rule of law, both as a way to improve their effectiveness and as a way to reduce the numerous accusations of human rights violations by these groups, which have further alienated populations from the governments.

Canada contributed 250 personnel of the armed forces and 8 helicopters to MINUSMA and is currently contributing two RCMP officers to the EUCAP program in Mali, a number that was significantly lower than a previously promised twenty officers (Pinkerton, 2019). The MINUSMA mission, as of March 2021, was extended until 30th June 2021 (UNSC, 2021). Currently, Canada has 16 personnel deployed with MINUSMA in Mali, consisting of 5 Experts on Mission & staff officers, and 11 police officers (UNSC, 2021). In addition, Canada currently provides tactical airlift support to the UN MINUSMA and to Opération Barkhane through Operation Presence (based out of Entebbe Airport in Uganda). Recently, the global novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has potentially put the EU-Canadian operations and policy for the region on hold, possibly influencing future roll-back of support in the region. In a region with fragile democratic and security institutions, instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a hold on operations could have serious implications for the entire Sahel region, and have an effect on surrounding regions as well.

In response to the declaration of a pandemic of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on March 11th, 2020, by the World Health Organisation, Canada withdrew many of its non-essential personnel from its missions across the globe, leaving its operations and the impact of these operations in the Sahel greatly diminished. Other states have also recalled their non-essential staff from their diplomatic and military missions abroad due to COVID-19. Additionally, the Canadian Armed Forces participation in EU and EU-Member State Missions in the Sahel has been significantly impacted by the pandemic, with the possibility of ceasing of support for airlifts for opération Barkhane due to COVID-19-related requirements on CAF airframes (National Defence, 2020), and a limiting of Canada's operational capacity for participating in MINUSMA airlift support, due to strict isolation measures instituted by the Ugandan government on foreign flight crews (National Defence, 2021). The closing of borders by countries in the region, such as the border between Mali

and Mauritania (UNSC, 2020a, p. 6), has postponed many of the EU and allied operations in the region, with the possibility of affecting further operations in the coming months.

In spite of the number of COVID-19 cases in Mali (officially 517 deaths by early June 2021 (Worldometer), the COVID-19 has an impact on terrorist and counterterrorist operations. In a recent press release from the United Nations, the Security Council brought forward its concerns regarding terrorist groups in the region taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase attacks and usurp authority. The report noted that there has recently been a rise in increasingly complex terrorist attacks, primarily targeting the armed and security forces (UNSC, 2020b). The Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix stated in regard to this that “It will take years to rebuild affected communities in the Sahel, even under the best circumstances” (UNSC, 2020b). Pierre Buyoya, the African Union High Representative for Mali and the Sahel stated in his address to the Security Council that “Intercommunal violence in central Mali continues — despite multiple strategies implemented by the Government — and has led to a significant number of civilian casualties in recent weeks. Such volatility naturally has caused humanitarian conditions and respect for human rights to deteriorate.” (UNSC, 2020b). The most recent military coup in May 2021, which overthrew the interim transitional President Bah Ndaw and comes on the heels of the August 2020 military coup (Paquette, 2021), has the potential to impact the stability of the current EU and UN missions in Mali, despite the presence of the intersecting UN peacekeeping and EU capacity-building missions (ACLED, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 in Mali must be viewed in the context of the various terrorism activities. There have been 415 fatalities in 2020 due to terrorist violence (ACLED, 2020), only 100 less than the fatalities from COVID-19 as of early June 2021.

Policy options

While the current pandemic situation has halted or postponed many of the missions conducted by Canada and the European Union, the situation could provide an opportunity for other avenues of peacekeeping and has the potential to change the way Canada looks at the building and reinforcing of these military and civilian institutions.

- **Promote COVID-19 management among the local security forces by EU and Canadian personnel.** This could have several repercussions: a) preserving the health of police and military forces, b) lessening the possibility that such forces could be a COVID-19 vector to local populations during operations. This could go some way mitigating the spread of the pandemic, and preserving the work that has been done in training and redeveloping those local security forces.
- **Train police and military medical staff to deliver and provide medical services in contested areas of these countries.** This could be aimed specifically at reducing COVID-19 spread, although the lack of specialized equipment such as ventilators would limit the ability of these forces to be involved in assisting recovering COVID-19 patients. If successful, such actions could help restore some confidence among local populations in these forces. The training would allow for efforts in containing and preventing of future pandemics in the region, while also reducing the number of requisite personnel from Canada and the European Union.

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