

RECLAIMING SOVEREIGNTY:



Mali's Assertive Turn in Security Governance and Counterterrorism

Policy Brief

October 2026

Mustapha Abdallah
Anna Mensah



Reclaiming Sovereignty: Mali's Assertive Turn in Security Governance and Counterterrorism

Mustapha Abdallah and Anna Mensah

Policy Brief

October 2026

Abstract

This policy brief examines Mali's sovereignty-centred security strategy following the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA, focusing on military autonomy, territorial control and the reconfiguration of external partnerships. It argues that while the expansion of Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMa) and the recapture of Kidal demonstrate increased national security autonomy, the April 2026 attacks expose persistent weaknesses in intelligence, territorial control and institutional capacity. The paper concludes that Mali's challenge is to transform reclaimed sovereignty into sustainable sovereignty through stronger institutions, accountable governance and carefully managed external partnerships.

Introduction

The Sahel remains one of the world's most volatile regions, with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger making the headlines in regional and global policy discussions on evolving threats of violent extremism.¹ Since 2012, Mali has been at the centre of a protracted security crisis marked by recurring unconstitutional changes in government,² jihadist insurgencies, armed rebellion, intercommunal tensions, and persistent weaknesses in state presence and territorial control.³ Nearly, over the past decade and a half, Mali hosted several international interventions, including African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and France's Operation Barkhane. While these missions contributed to short-term stabilization, they increasingly faced criticism for failing to protect civilians, defeat extremist groups or restore durable state authority⁴ and long-term peace and stability.⁵ Growing frustration with these external interventions culminated in the withdrawal of Barkhane and MINUSMA between 2022 and 2023. In response, Malian transitional government led by Colonel Assimi Goita adopted a more assertive and sovereignty-centred security posture.⁶ It restructured its security architecture, prioritized strengthening the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMA) through increased recruitment, training, and procurement of military equipment.⁷ It also announced reclaiming strategic territories including Kidal in November 2023⁸, and pursued governance reforms emphasizing national sovereignty and reduced dependence on external security actors following the withdrawal of French forces and the UN peacekeeping mission. At the regional level, Mali became a leading force behind the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), established with Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023. The AES represents a broader effort by the three states to strengthen collective security and political autonomy while reducing reliance on traditional external security partners.⁹

¹ Moomin, R. (2023). Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso: Examining Responses From The State Defence And Civil Self Defence [Policy brief 13] KAIPTC < <https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/POLICY-BRIEF-13.pdf> > (accessed 22 September 2026); Ansah Lartey, E. & Abdallah, M. (2022). Fighting The Enemy Without The Community: Interrogating the Strategy of Countering Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso [Occasional Paper 48] KAIPTC.

<https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/occational-paper-48.pdf> (accessed 23 September 2026).

² Birikorang E. & Salihu N. (2020). Revisiting the Trajectory of Regime Change in Accra -The Case of Mali [Policy brief 8]. KAIPTC.

<https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201028-Final-Policy-Brief-8-Birikorang-Salihu.pdf> (accessed 23 September 2026).

³ Bere, M. (2017). Armed rebellion, violent extremism, and the challenges of international intervention in Mali. *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 7(2), 60-84; Francis, D. J (2013) 'The regional impact of the armed conflict and French intervention in Mali', NOREP Report <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/163177/f18726c3338e39049bd4d554d4a22c36.pdf> (accessed July 2026).

⁴ Moe, L. W. (2021). The dark side of institutional collaboration: how peacekeeping-counterterrorism convergences weaken the protection of civilians in Mali. *International Peacekeeping*, 28(1), 1-29.

⁵ Terrasson, C. (2022) 'Why France Failed in Mali — and How Russia Took Advantage' , 14 September, 2022 <<https://eaworldview.com/2022/09/france-mali-russia/>> (accessed 22 September 2026)

⁶ Anand, S. (2025). Five years of military rule in Mali: From coup to consolidation? Vivekananda International Foundation. <https://www.vifindia.org/2025/sepember/11/Five-Years-of-Military-Rule-in-Mali-From-Coup-to-Consolidation>

⁷ APA News (2026, 9 July). Mali's transitional council overhauls security architecture. African Press Agency. APA News article 9. <https://apanews.net/malis-transitional-council-overhauls-security-architecture/> (accessed 13 September 2026).

⁸ Agence France-Presse (2023)'Malian Army Claims Capture of Rebel Stronghold Kidal' Agence France-Presse 14 November 2023< <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/malian-army-claims-capture-of-rebel-stronghold-kidal/7354409.html> > (accessed 05 July, 2026)

⁹ Wilén, N. (2025). Borders, sovereignty, and new partners in the Sahel. In N. Wilén (Ed.), *Securitizing the Sahel: Analysing external interventions and their consequences*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198980704.003.0008>; Laloupo, F. (2026, February 3). Mali, the Sahel: A "reclaimed sovereignty"? Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS). <https://www.iris-france.org/en/mali-the-sahel-a-reclaimed-sovereignty/>

Using both desk and empirical research, this paper examines Mali's sovereignty-centred approach to security governance, focusing on the expansion and the renewed capacity of the Malian Armed Forces, the reconfiguration of external security partnerships as an alternative framework for regional security cooperation, and the weakness in Mali's counterterrorism effort. It assesses the extent to which military autonomy temporarily enhanced Mali's capacity to confront armed groups and assert state authority, while examining whether these gains can translate into sustainable security, effective territorial control, and durable political stability.

This policy paper is structured around three main issues of Mali's sovereignty-centred security strategy. First, it examines the evolution of Mali's security architecture, from dependence on external security interventions to greater national ownership and military autonomy. Second, it assesses the reconfiguration of Mali's external security partnerships, particularly its relationship with Russia, and the implications for the operational capacity of the Malian Armed Forces and territorial control. Third, it examines the limits of this approach, focusing on the April 2026 attacks, persistent intelligence and counterterrorism challenges, and the difficulty of translating military gains into sustainable security and legitimate territorial governance. The paper concludes by proposing measures to strengthen Mali's sovereign security capacity.

Security Dynamics in Mali: From External Dependence to Local Ownership

Mali's security landscape has long been shaped by dependence on international actors to manage extremist threats and separatist movements. Following the 2012 crisis, interventions by Operation Serval, AFISMA, MINUSMA, Operation Barkhane, and the European Union Training Mission became central pillars of the country's security architecture. Although these interventions helped contain immediate threats, they generated growing concerns regarding sovereignty, legitimacy, and effectiveness in dealing with the extremist threats.¹⁰

Over time, public confidence in international interventions declined. A respondent in Bamako indicated that AFISMA's combat mandate was significant in downgrading some terrorist hotspots in Mali.¹¹ However, MINUSMA's stabilization mandate was often perceived as inadequate for addressing escalating terrorist violence, while Barkhane increasingly faced criticism over its effectiveness and alleged political influence. As a result, some respondents expressed the view that the foreign military presence in Mali was influenced by broader resource and geopolitical considerations, which, in their perception, contributed to local distrust and raised concerns about state legitimacy.¹² This perception has fostered scepticism towards international actors, particularly France, whose withdrawal in 2022 triggered a re-evaluation of Mali's security strategy anchored on state assertiveness and self-determination.

¹⁰ Olech, A. (2023). French Operation Barkhane in Africa – Success or failure? *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, 3, 17. <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17737.1> (accessed 22 September 2026)

¹¹ Interview, Military Officer, Bamako, Mali, October 2024.

¹² Interview, Senior Security Officer, Bamako, Mali, October 2024.

State Assertiveness and Reclaiming of Sovereignty

Mali's state assertiveness following the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA was grounded in a conception of sovereignty shaped by the African context. The assertive sovereignty claims of Mali and the other AES states challenge conventional understandings of African sovereignty as either weakened by fragile state institutions and limited state capacity or constrained by international norms such as the Responsibility to Protect. Mali, like other Sahelian states, is not merely defending sovereignty as a legal principle; it is actively asserting and demonstrating it through the expulsion of foreign military forces perceived as neo-colonial, reflecting a broader concern that external security engagements may serve geopolitical interests and, in some cases, economic interests that are viewed as exploitative.¹³

Colonel Assimi Goïta, the leader of Mali's transitional government, while committed to strengthening the Malian military through expanded recruitment, increased budgetary allocations, and modernization of equipment, consistently invokes the language of self-determination, and liberation from neo-colonial tutelage.¹⁴ Interestingly such rhetoric is not limited to the political elites. It also resonates with the broad masses of the citizenry who feel frustrated by decades of perceived Western exploitation and the apparent failure of external security interventions to deliver tangible improvements in everyday security. As one senior Malian security official noted during field interaction, "for many decades, decisions about Mali's security were made in other capitals rather than in Bamako. Our new approach is about taking lead role in decision-making for our state."¹⁵ However, the renewed assertiveness does not suggest total rejection of external partnerships. Rather, a diversification or reconfiguration of the existing relationship with other non-traditional states. In this reconfiguration, Russia emerges as the most prominent new partner, providing military equipment, training, and personnel, including the rebranded Africa Corps operatives to Mali and other Sahel states.¹⁶

The reconfigured security partnership temporarily enhanced FAMa's operational capacity, enabling the Malian state to launch major offensives and regain control of strategically significant territories.¹⁷ The capture of Kidal in November 2023 from the Tuareg separatist coalition, with support from Russian Wagner personnel and Turkish drone capabilities, marked the first return of the Malian state to the city in nearly a decade and provided a powerful demonstration of Bamako's renewed capacity to assert territorial authority.¹⁸

¹³ Duffield, M. (2014). *Global governance and the new wars: The merging of development and security*. Zed Books; Richmond, O. P. (2011). *A post-liberal peace*. Routledge.

¹⁴ Wilén, (2025) op cit; Laloupo, F. (2026, February 3). Mali, the Sahel: A "reclaimed sovereignty"? Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS) <<https://www.iris-france.org/en/mali-the-sahel-a-reclaimed-sovereignty/>> (accessed 12 September 2026).

Interview, Senior Security Official, Bamako-Mali, October 2024.

¹⁵ Interview, Senior Security Official, Bamako-Mali, October 2024.

¹⁶ Minde, N. (2024). Russia's Africa Corps: More than old wine in a new bottle. *ISS Today*, March 7, Institute for Security Studies. <<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/russias-africa-corps-more-than-old-wine-in-a-new-bottle>> (access 14 September 2026)

¹⁷ Ochieng, B. (2023), Mali army seizes key rebel northern stronghold Kidal, BBC Monitoring, November. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67418482> (accessed 15 September 2026).

¹⁸ Ibid.

The capture of Kidal was followed in 2024 by efforts to consolidate this territorial gain, with the junta declaring the year “Year 1 of Reclaimed Sovereignty”. Additionally, the Junta focused its military operations on securing the Gao–Kidal highway, both to sustain military logistics and to restore commercial traffic, with Gao serving as the principal operational and logistical hub for these efforts.¹⁹ The question that remains is whether Mali’s radical posturing and the forging of new alliance could be translated into durable peace and permanent downgrade of the terrorist and insurgent groups in the northern enclave of Mali. The following section examines this, highlighting the April 2026 coordinated attacks as a loophole in the Malian security and intelligence architecture.

The Limits of Reclaimed Sovereignty: Territorial Control and the April 2026 Attacks

The apparent consolidation of state authority in northern Mali was subsequently challenged by developments in April 2026. The loss of Kidal to the Front de Libération de l’Azawad (FLA), following coordinated attacks that reportedly forced FAMa and Russian Africa Corps personnel to retreat, exposed the fragility of the territorial gains achieved since November 2023.²⁰ On 25 April, JNIM and the FLA coordinated attacks across several locations, including Bamako, Kati, Gao, Kidal and Mopti, in what was described as the largest coordinated offensive since 2012.²¹ The killing of Defence Minister General Sadio Camara and intelligence chief Modibo Koné further exposed serious vulnerabilities within the state’s security architecture.²²

As one Civil Society Organisation (CSO) in Bamako reiterated, “the coordinated attacks also exposes the intelligence failures in the current security arrangement”.²³ Although the Malian state had demonstrated its capacity to recapture strategically important territory, its inability to sustain control over Kidal and protect other cities in central and southern parts of Mali highlights the distinction between military occupation of territory and the establishment of durable state authority. The continued attacks on military positions around Gao further suggest that insurgent and separatist groups retain significant operational capacity despite the expansion and modernization of FAMa.

The April 2026 reversal therefore complicates the junta’s narrative of “reclaimed sovereignty.” It suggests that sovereignty, understood not merely as the physical presence of state forces but as the sustained capacity to secure territory, protect populations, maintain essential routes and exercise legitimate authority, remains contested. The reported withdrawal of Russia’s Africa Corps from Kidal further illustrates that external military support cannot by itself guarantee durable territorial control.

¹⁹ Agence France-Presse. (2023, November 14). Mali junta seizes rebel stronghold of Kidal. VOA <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1273111/mali-junta-seizes-rebel-stronghold-of-kidal.html#Africa> (accessed 23 September 2026).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Aljazeera (April, 2026) ‘Mali attacks updates: Coordinated attacks in Bamako, Kidal and elsewhere’ 25 April 2026. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2026/4/25/mali-attacks-live-gunfire-heard-near-bamako-airport-and-in-several-cities>> (accessed 13 September 2026). The Guardian (April, 2026) ‘Mali in turmoil after insurgents seize towns and kill defence minister’ 27 April 2026

²² The Guardian (April, 2026) ‘Mali in turmoil after insurgents seize towns and kill defence minister’ 27 April 2026 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/27/mali-attacks-insurgents-seize-towns-kill-defence-minister> (accessed 13 September 2026).

²³ Online Interview, CSO Actor, Bamako, July 2026.

Conclusion

Mali's sovereignty-centred security strategy represents a significant departure from its previous dependence on traditional external security actors. The expansion of FAMa, the recapture of Kidal and the creation of the AES demonstrate a deliberate effort to strengthen national and regional autonomy. However, the April 2026 attacks reveal that greater autonomy in security decision-making has not yet translated into equally durable control over territory and population.

The central lesson is that sovereignty cannot be measured solely by the withdrawal of foreign forces or the freedom to choose new external partners. It must ultimately be reflected in the state's capacity to secure its territory, protect its population and exercise legitimate and accountable authority. Mali has made important progress in reclaiming sovereignty, but the consolidation of that sovereignty remains unfinished. The policy priority should therefore be to move from reclaimed sovereignty to sustainable sovereignty—where military capability, effective institutions, accountable governance and carefully managed external partnerships combine to produce durable security.

Policy Recommendations

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Mali's efforts to reclaim sovereignty have generated important military and political gains, but these remain constrained by persistent security and intelligence failures as well as governance challenges. The policy challenge is therefore how to translate greater autonomy into sustainable sovereign capacity, which requires the Transitional Government to undertake key measures. We recommend the following policy recommendations:

i. Prioritise Intelligence and Security Sector Coordination

The April 2026 attacks demonstrate that military expansion alone cannot compensate for weaknesses in intelligence and inter-agency coordination. Mali should strengthen intelligence fusion, surveillance, early warning and information sharing among FAMa, intelligence services and other relevant security institutions. The objective should be to shift from a predominantly reactive security posture towards greater anticipation and prevention of coordinated attacks.

ii. Move from Territorial Recapture to Sustainable Territorial Governance

Sustained civilian administration, justice, basic services and protection of transport and economic corridors should follow the recapture of territory. This is particularly important in areas where armed groups have historically exploited weak state presence. Territorial control becomes meaningful sovereignty only when the state can maintain security and provide governance after military forces have regained an area.

iii. Strengthen Institutional Legitimacy and Accountability

Mali's sovereignty-centred approach should extend beyond coercive capacity to the quality of state institutions, which will ultimately make it legitimate. Without legitimacy and accountability, expanded military capacity may secure territory temporarily without consolidating durable state authority.

iv. Reconfigure External Partnerships as Force Multipliers

Mali should retain the autonomy to determine its external security partnerships while ensuring that these partnerships strengthen rather than substitute for national capabilities. Russian and other external support should therefore be leveraged for specialised capabilities, training, equipment and technical assistance while Mali progressively develops the institutional capacity to sustain its own security architecture. At the regional level, the AES should similarly prioritise practical cooperation in intelligence, border security, logistics and rapid response over political symbolism.

About the Authors

Dr Mustapha Abdallah (PhD) is the Head of Programme, Climate Security and Migration Programme at the Department of Applied Research and Innovation in Peace and Security (DARIPS), KAIPTC. He also Acting Head, Peace Operations, Stabilisation and Peacebuilding Programme.

Anna Naa Adochoo Mensah Medi (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Academic Affairs (FAA) of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC). She holds a PhD in Law and Political Science from the Mohammed V University, Morocco. Her research focus includes; Conflict Resolution in Africa, Protection of women and children in armed conflicts, Gender implications in violent extremism, Gender mainstreaming in Peace Support Operations and in Maritime Security.

How to Cite

Abdallah, M. & Mensah, A. (2026). Reclaiming Sovereignty: Mali's Assertive Turn in Security Governance and Counterterrorism. Policy Brief October, Accra: KAIPTC

About the project

This study was conducted with support from the Government of Norway to undertake Field Research on Governance and Violent Extremism in the Sahel

About the Centre

Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) is an ECOWAS Centre of Excellence that provides globally recognised capacity for international actors on African peace and security through training, education and research to foster peace and stability in Africa.



KAIPTC
...where peace begins



Norwegian Embassy
Accra

KOFI ANNAN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTRE
PMB CT 210, CANTONMENTS, ACCRA-GHANA | T: 233(0)302718200 | F: 233 (0)302718201