

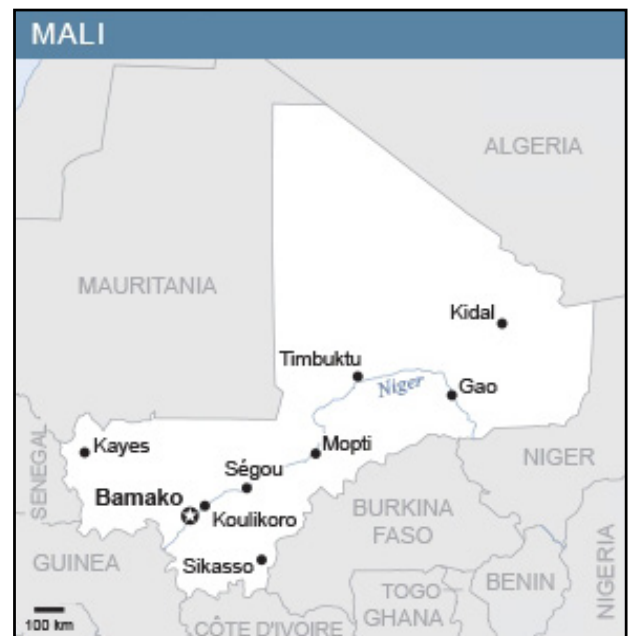
Mali Defends Reliance on Russian Counterterrorism Assistance

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

Mali and Russia's security relationship appears to be ever-deepening. Even as both are criticized for their approaches to dealing with jihadist violence in Mali,¹ with many analysts suggesting that the Wagner presence is exacerbating the problem,² Malian leadership is full-throated in its defense of its Russian partner. In the accompanying article from *Le Journal du Mali*, Mali's Foreign Minister dispels any pretense that international condemnation of its partnership with Russia may change its decision. One of the most important sentiments from his statements is that Russia is willing to provide Mali with the requisite material to make effective gains against the al-Qaeda and Islamic State-aligned groups that have, since January 2023, shown a clear interest in moving toward the capital, Bamako.³ Implicitly, this nod is a slight directed at both France and the United States whose unwillingness, Mali and Burkina Faso have argued, to give more assistance to West African states to address their internal security challenges has forced them to turn to Russia.

What matters...is how [Mali and Russia] work together to fight against jihadism, recalling that in certain cases, terrorism is manufactured to destabilize our countries.

A second prevailing position in the Malian Foreign Minister's remarks is that Mali views its partnership with Russia as one that is based on Bamako's own autonomy to make sovereign security policy choices: in this instance, this is an implicit slight to the longstanding French military and counterterrorism presence that has been essentially expelled from the country, not least because of declining citizen opinion of France. Finally, a third, though more subtle line of rhetoric is the suggestion that "in certain cases, terrorism is manufactured to destabilize our countries." This notion that external actors—again, namely France—have actually worked to support terrorist groups in the country has been a common false claim that the interim government has made, going so far as to bring the assertion to the UN Security Council in August 2022.⁴ Such vociferous defenses of military collaboration with Russia are likely to continue, not only from Mali but from other African countries as well.



Map of Mali.

Source: <https://southafrica-info.com/africa/africa-from-a-to-z/attachment/map-of-africa-and-mali/> Attribution: Creative Commons 4.0

Continued: Mali Defends Reliance on Russian Counterterrorism Assistance

Source: Abdoulaye Diop, “La Russie est ici à la demande du Mali (Russia is here at Mali’s request),” *Journal du Mali* (West African news aggregator), 8 February 2023. <https://www.journaldumali.com/2023/02/08/la-russie-est-ici-a-la-demande-du-mali-abdoulaye-diop/>

According to the Malian Minister of Foreign Affairs, this stay “is part of the new dynamic, initiated by the government, consisting in broadening and diversifying Mali’s partnerships with a view to an effective response, and in sincerity, to the challenges we face.”

For the diplomat, his country has chosen to “strengthen” its cooperation with Russia to “demonstrate” that it is free to decide with whom to walk on the basis of the essential pillars defined by the president of the transition: “respect of Mali’s sovereignty, respect for strategic choices and the choice of Mali’s partners, but also taking Mali’s interests into account in all decisions.”

Thus, the Malian Minister of Foreign Affairs insisted on the fact that “Russia is here at the request of Mali.” And it “responds effectively to the needs of Mali in terms of capacity building of its defense and security forces” in the context of the fight against terrorism.

Because what matters, added Mr. Diop, is to see “how to work together to fight against jihadism” recalling that “in certain cases, terrorism is manufactured to destabilize our countries.”

In this sense, he deplored the instrumentalization and politicization of human rights for “hidden” or “barely hidden” agendas often aimed “to overthrow the regime in order to be able to achieve a certain number of objectives.”

The day before Sergei Lavrov’s visit, Mali expelled the director of the human rights division of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) who is accused of having chosen Aminata Dicko to speak on behalf of Malian civil society during the recent review of the United Nations Secretary General’s report on Mali. The latter, in her intervention by videoconference, denounced the abuses committed against Fulani civilians by the army and its Russian auxiliaries.

In his communication, the Malian Minister of Foreign Affairs also wished to welcome the “interest” that Russia gives to “the regular supply of Mali with basic necessities in a particularly difficult context.”

Finally, Abdoulaye Diop expressed his solidarity with Russia undergoing sanctions from Western countries in response to the war between it and Ukraine.

Notes:

[1] For instance, in January 2023, a UN human rights group called on authorities in Mali to launch an investigation surrounding the mass executions of several hundred civilians in Moura, Mali in March 2022. The executions were believed to have been carried out by the Malian military, which was operating alongside Wagner mercenaries. See “Mali: Independent rights experts call on probe into Wagner Group’s alleged crimes,” *UN News*, 31 January 2023. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1133007>

[2] For more on how the Wagner Group’s presence is contributing to violence in the Sahel, see: Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group is aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel,” *CTC Sentinel*, 15 (11), November/December 2022. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>

[3] For more on how al-Qaeda and Islamic State groups in Mali are increasingly moving toward Bamako as of early 2023, see: Caleb Weiss, “Al Qaeda’s JNIM pushes closer to Malian capital,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, 17 January 2023. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2023/01/al-qaeda-jnim-pushes-closer-to-malian-capital.php>

[4] For more on Mali’s claims to the UN that France funded terrorists in the country, see: Jason Warner, “Mali Claims France Funded Terrorists; France Denies,” *OE Watch*, 10-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/428171>