



## Conflict in Mali

Mali has faced severe security and governance challenges since a northern separatist rebellion, an Islamist insurgency, and a military coup shook the country from 2011 to 2013. Security conditions have worsened despite a 2015 peace deal between the government and northern rebels, as an Islamist insurgency has expanded from the north into central Mali, leveraging and fomenting local tensions and resentment toward state actors. Ethnic militias—some of which appear to enjoy state backing or tacit support—have carried out large massacres, contributing to worsening insecurity. Bamako (**Figure 1**) has also been a target of terrorist attacks, with some targeting Western nationals. Rebel, terrorist, communal defense, and criminal networks are fluid and shifting, complicating conflict resolution.

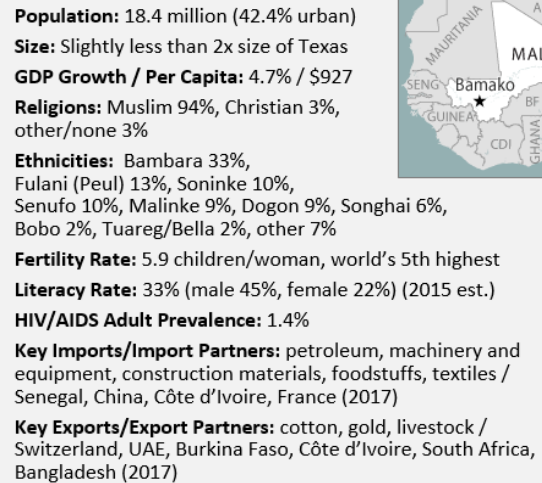
These challenges have undermined already daunting development prospects in Mali. As of late 2019, over 201,000 Malians were internally displaced (roughly double the number from a year earlier) and nearly 139,000 were refugees in neighboring countries, per U.N. figures. Food insecurity is widespread. Security threats and limited donor funding have constrained humanitarian relief.

President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta won reelection to a second five-year term in 2018. Security threats disrupted or prevented voting in some areas. Turnout was low; Kéïta's margin of victory and the number of votes cast for him were lower than in 2013, when his election restored civilian rule after a military coup. Corruption scandals, along with the government's inability to improve living standards, ensure security, or assert state control over the north, appear to have undermined public faith. Legislative elections due in 2018 have been repeatedly delayed.

Foreign troops are in Mali to help bolster stability and counter terrorism. In addition to a U.N. peacekeeping operation (discussed below), over 1,000 French troops are in Mali under Operation Barkhane, a regional counterterrorism mission that evolved from France's 2013 intervention in Mali. The European Union (EU) has a multi-year program to train and restructure the Malian military. In 2017, the G5 Sahel—comprising Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad—launched a “joint force” to counter security threats in border regions. A lack of capacity, mutual distrust, and divergent priorities among participating countries have hampered its effectiveness. Donors have pledged funds, but not all have materialized.

The north-south peace process may have contained seeds of Mali's further destabilization. It arguably rewarded those who took up arms, while forcing both Bamako and separatist leaders to make concessions that are deeply unpopular with their respective constituencies. The accord also arguably alienated communities, in the north and elsewhere, that felt victimized by both the state and ethnic or communal rivals who were granted a seat at the table. Designated jihadist groups were not party to the talks.

**Figure 1. Mali at a Glance**



**Source:** CRS graphic. Facts from CIA *World Factbook* and International Monetary Fund; 2018 estimates unless noted.

### Background: Mali's 2011-2013 Crisis

In 2011, members of the semi-nomadic ethnic Tuareg minority launched a separatist rebellion in the north, with fighters and arms flowing from Libya. In early 2012, soldiers angered by their leaders' mishandling of the war ousted Mali's elected president. Amid the ensuing military collapse, the rebels declared an independent state of “Azawad.” By mid-2012, however, local affiliates and offshoots of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, an Algerian-origin regional network)—some of which had fought alongside the rebellion—had outmaneuvered the separatists and asserted control over the north, a sparsely populated desert area about the size of Texas. These events displaced hundreds of thousands and exacerbated a humanitarian emergency spurred by drought.

In early 2013, citing a sudden southward jihadist advance, France deployed its military to oust Islamist fighters from northern towns. The United States provided logistical support, while Chadian soldiers aided ground operations. Separatist rebels then reasserted control over some areas vacated by Islamist groups. A mid-2013 ceasefire between a transitional government and separatist groups paved the way for elections and peace talks, while French strikes appeared to weaken Islamist insurgents. MINUSMA deployed, succeeding and absorbing a nascent African Union (AU) intervention. Kéïta, a veteran politician, was elected in late 2013 and his coalition won a majority in parliament. The same year, charges were brought against coup leader Capt. Amadou Haya Sanogo for the killings of rival soldiers, but trial proceedings have been subject to repeated delays.

## A Stalled Peace Accord

The signatories to the 2015 peace accord, mediated by Algeria, are the Malian government and two rival coalitions of northern armed movements: the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), led by former separatists, and the Platform, led by groups favoring national unity that have at times aligned with the government. The two have periodically fought one another, and each has struggled to contain internal schisms. New groups have emerged since 2015, with differing views on the accord and the state.

Under the 2015 accord, the government committed to increasing political decentralization and development for the north, while armed groups agreed to recognize Malian territorial unity and, ultimately, to disarm. Some combatants are to be integrated into the military, which then is to redeploy to rebel-held areas. The accord also aims to foster northern representation in the central government, advance justice reforms, and ensure accountability for past abuses. The mediators and Bamako ruled out discussions of federalism or altering the secular nature of the state.

Hopes that the accord would deliver a peace dividend, unify the country, and isolate Islamist extremists have not materialized. Malian state actors are absent from much of the north and, increasingly, the center. Groups that signed the accord have not disarmed and maintain parallel governance structures. Decentralization, institutional reforms, and development initiatives have been slow to advance, at best. Spoilers, including jihadists, continue to undermine peace. U.N. sanctions monitors have reported collusion between signatory armed groups and designated terrorists, as well as involvement of signatory group members in drug trafficking, ethnic conflict, and obstruction of humanitarian aid. More broadly, U.N. monitors describe a complex war within the north among armed factions and the communities they represent, seeking control over territory, trafficking routes, and patronage.

## Islamist Insurgency

Despite territorial losses in 2013, Islamist armed groups have proven resilient, withstanding French strikes against top leaders and exploiting the evolving conflict to their advantage. In late 2015, AQIM and an offshoot, Al Murabitoun (“the sentinels”), jointly claimed a siege at a Bamako hotel that killed 19 civilians, including an American. In 2017, AQIM’s Sahel branch merged with Al Murabitoun and two Malian-led groups to form the Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM). Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Malian Tuareg, heads JNIM, which has claimed attacks on U.N., French, and Malian targets, along with large attacks in Burkina Faso. A 2018 JNIM attack on the G5 Sahel force headquarters in central Mali forced it to relocate to Bamako. A separate AQIM offshoot has affiliated with the Islamic State and claimed the October 2017 deadly attack on U.S. soldiers in Niger.

Islamist attacks have continued to escalate in the sub-region, increasingly targeting military outposts in border regions. Alleged abuses by Malian state security forces and ethnic militias may fuel Islamist armed group recruitment by offering a means of self-defense and retribution. Some Malians have proposed peace talks with jihadists, but the idea remains controversial.

## U.N. Peacekeeping Operation

The U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is authorized at up to 15,209 uniformed personnel. Renewing its mandate in June 2019, the U.N. Security Council decided that MINUSMA’s “second strategic priority”—after support to implementing the 2015 north-south accord—is to “facilitate” a new strategy to stabilize central Mali. MINUSMA faces stark logistical and force-protection challenges. Although several Western countries have contributed troops, African troops comprise many of the largest contingents, which are often reportedly under-equipped and have suffered the most fatalities in violent attacks. MINUSMA does not have an explicit mandate to pursue counterterrorism operations. The Security Council has authorized MINUSMA to provide logistical support to the G5 force on a reimbursable basis.

## U.S. Policy and Aid

Since 2013, U.S. policy has focused on encouraging the north-south peace process, supporting Mali’s development, and addressing humanitarian needs. Congress appropriated \$140 million in bilateral aid in FY2018 (latest available), and U.S. emergency humanitarian assistance for Mali totaled \$89 million in FY2019. The Department of Defense (DOD) provides logistical support to France’s Operation Barkhane (which Congress has explicitly authorized on a non-reimbursable basis), and DOD and the State Department have provided substantial security assistance to neighboring countries. The Trump Administration has pledged \$111 million in military aid specifically for G5 Sahel forces since 2017. The implications, for Mali and the Sahel, of ongoing DOD discussions about drawing down troops and missions in Africa remain to be seen.

As a veto-capable permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, the United States shapes MINUSMA’s mandate and the scope of a U.N. sanctions regime established in 2017. In January 2020, U.S. diplomats called for MINUSMA to be downsized and reoriented toward civilian protection in central Mali (versus support to implementing the 2015 north-south accord), and for new sanctions designations “on all sides of the conflict.” U.S. funding for MINUSMA’s budget was estimated at \$327 million in FY2019; separately, U.S. military and police aid supports African troop and police contributors. The United States has designated five individuals for financial and travel sanctions under a Mali-specific Executive Order issued in July 2019, in line with Security Council actions. The Security Council has designated another three individuals for travel restrictions alone. Other Mali-based individuals and groups have been designated for U.S. and U.N. sanctions related to global terrorism.

Mali participates in the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), but has not been a major regional recipient of U.S. military aid since the 2012 coup. Instead, U.S. security assistance has focused on defense sector reforms and building the capacity of Mali’s civilian security forces and gendarmes. Mali’s designation under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (Title IV of P.L. 110-457) triggers certain U.S. security assistance restrictions; in FY2020, President Trump waived most of these for Mali under the Act, citing national interest.

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