



# Crisis in Mali

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## Summary

For the past 18 months, Mali has been mired in overlapping security, political, and humanitarian crises. A separatist rebellion launched in 2011 aggravated intra-military and political tensions in the country. In March 2012, junior military officers—led by a former participant in U.S. training programs—carried out a coup that overthrew a democratically elected government. Islamist extremist groups, including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, took advantage of the ensuing chaos to expand their presence in Mali's vast, Saharan north. In the capital, Bamako, located in the south, the interim government formed in the wake of the coup has faced internal divisions, military interference, limited popular legitimacy, and economic constraints. Mali's crises have been driven by both internal and external factors, including a surge in regional arms and combatant flows from Libya. In turn, insecurity in Mali has displaced nearly half a million people and exacerbated poor regional humanitarian conditions.

On January 11, 2013, France launched military operations in Mali, following a request from the Malian government for help in repelling a sudden insurgent advance toward the south. This marked a sudden and major shift in international responses, as regional and Western policymakers had previously emphasized that any solution in Mali had to be African-led. French forces have made rapid gains in the north, but whether these can be sustained remains to be seen. African militaries also have begun deploying to Mali under the U.N.-authorized African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Some—notably those from Chad—may be prepared for desert counterinsurgency, but nearly all suffer from severe capacity shortfalls. France has expressed a desire to begin withdrawing troops in April, while the U.N. Security Council is currently considering options for transitioning AFISMA into a fully U.N.-conducted operation. Whether a U.N. operation can be successful, and in what conditions, is under discussion.

The United States has provided logistical and intelligence support to ongoing French operations in Mali, pledged \$96 million in support for AFISMA, and provided new security assistance to neighboring states. U.S. policymakers have also reportedly debated the potential for unilateral action against terrorist actors in the region. As a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, the United States is playing a key role in discussion of AFISMA's future status and funding. The Obama Administration also continues to call for Mali to organize national elections, and for reconciliation efforts to address political, ethnic, and regional cleavages.

Congress authorizes and appropriates funding for foreign aid and defense programs in Mali and the Sahel region, and may further shape U.S. policy through legislation and oversight activities. Direct U.S. assistance to the Malian security forces—along with several other types of foreign aid—has been suspended in line with congressionally mandated restrictions triggered by the coup. The aid restrictions do not affect humanitarian assistance, of which the United States is the leading bilateral donor in the region, or election support. Looking forward, Congress may consider issues related to U.S. support for international military operations in Mali; whether unilateral U.S. action is required or wise; and future U.S. aid to Mali and the region. Congress may also seek to assess the successes and failures of previous U.S. security engagements in Mali and the region, and consider the possible implications of the situation in Mali for U.S. counterterrorism and good governance efforts in Africa and beyond. See also CRS Report RS21532, *Algeria: Current Issues*, by (name redacted); and CRS Report RL33142, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted).

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## Overview and Recent Developments

Mali faces multiple overlapping crises. A separatist rebellion launched in late 2011 by members of the northern-based minority ethnic Tuareg community, known as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), aggravated intra-military and political tensions in the country.<sup>1</sup> In March 2012, junior military officers overthrew a democratically elected government in a coup, a month ahead of scheduled national elections. The coup led Mali's military and state presence in the north to collapse, effectively leaving a vacuum for armed groups. Islamist extremist groups, who had initially fought alongside the separatists, took advantage of the ensuing chaos to expand their presence in Mali's vast, Saharan north.

The civilian-led interim government that took office in the wake of the 2012 coup is headed by President Dioncounda Traoré, former Speaker of the National Assembly. It has suffered from internal divisions, military interference, and limited popular legitimacy. Years of corruption and mismanagement also appear to have hollowed out many state institutions. Furthermore, Mali's leaders face a national recession and revenue crisis.<sup>2</sup> A regional food security crisis, exacerbated by Malian population displacements, also continues to cause suffering.

As of late 2012, three loosely connected Islamist extremist groups—Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the AQIM splinter faction Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA/MUJAO), and the Malian Tuareg-led Ansar al Deen—had asserted control over all major towns in northern Mali, an area roughly the size of Texas (**Figure 1**). These groups appeared increasingly entrenched, having gradually ousted Tuareg separatist leaders.<sup>3</sup> AQIM and associated groups were reportedly leveraging this expanded terrain to run training camps, pursue connections to other extremist organizations, bolster arms stocks, and recruit new fighters. International concerns heightened with reports of foreign fighters traveling to northern Mali, and given long-running reports of involvement by Sahel-based extremists in transnational narcotics trafficking.<sup>4</sup> AQIM-associated groups imposed harsh behavioral codes on local residents and carried out amputations and at least one execution by stoning, inspired by an extremely conservative interpretation of *sharia* (Islamic law). They also destroyed historic and cultural sites,

<sup>1</sup> This report uses the term *Tuareg* to refer to the internally diverse ethnic community in the Sahara/Sahel whose members refer to themselves as *Kel Tamasheq*. The MNLA was formed when Tuareg combatants returning to Mali from Libya joined with other former rebels. The group initially reportedly fought alongside elements of AQIM and other Islamist armed groups; however, as of mid-2012, the latter had turned against and largely defeated the MNLA.

<sup>2</sup> Mali is estimated to have experienced an economic contraction of 1.5% in 2012, although the recent release of some donor budget support and an International Monetary Fund disbursement of \$18.4 million may support a possible recovery in 2013. *Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali*, March 26, 2013, U.N. doc. S/2013/189; see also International Crisis Group (ICG), *Mali: Pour une action internationale résolue et concertée*, September 24, 2012, on contracting state revenues and projected impact on spending.

<sup>3</sup> A U.N. report in late 2012 estimated the number of “core combatants” in northern Mali at “around 3,000” adding that insurgents were actively recruiting and had “relatively sophisticated equipment obtained from Libya” and from Malian stocks. Other reports estimated extremist combatants at 4,000-6,000 or up to 15,000. *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, November 29, 2012, U.N. doc. S/2012/894; “Mali: Report on Jihadists’ Military Capabilities, Weapons,” *Jeune Afrique*, November 12, 2012; and “French Endeavor to Convince Algerian Leader of Mali-based Terrorist Threat,” *Le Canard Enchaîné*, December 12, 2012; both via U.S. government Open Source Center (OSC).

<sup>4</sup> Mali—like other countries in West Africa—is widely reported to be a transit point in the flow of cocaine between South America and Europe. A range of reports, including by U.S. government agencies, reference AQIM involvement in drug trafficking, although the scale and nature of involvement remain disputed. See CRS Report R41004, *Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Foreign Policy Issues for Congress*, by John Rollins and Liana Sun Wyler.

including UNESCO World Heritage-designated ancient mosques and tombs, and recruited child soldiers, among other abuses.

France launched military operations in northern Mali on January 11, 2013, after Islamist fighters—following months of stalemate—suddenly advanced toward the south and defeated Malian military forces in the central town of Konna. France’s decision marked an abrupt, major shift in international responses to the situation in Mali, as policymakers had previously emphasized that any solution in Mali had to be African-led. French President François Hollande justified the intervention based on the Malian government’s request for help, portraying French action as necessary to prevent Mali’s capital from falling into terrorist hands and to protect some 6,000 French residents.<sup>5</sup> French troop reinforcements in Bamako also appeared aimed at deterring actors who might try to further destabilize or attack Mali’s interim government.

Since then, French forces have made rapid gains in reclaiming cities and towns in the north. U.S. logistical support for French operations has included military transport for French troops and equipment, aerial refueling for French airstrike campaigns, and intelligence sharing.<sup>6</sup> Most core terrorist/insurgent fighters have reportedly withdrawn to Mali’s remote, mountainous northern border, although some, namely Malian nationals, appear to have blended into local communities. French and Chadian troops have engaged in particularly intense combat operations in AQIM strongholds in the far north, where they claim to have killed several hundred insurgents, including at least one senior AQIM regional commander, an Algerian national known as Abu Zeid.

Despite these successes, the durability of French gains remains to be seen. Recent insurgent attacks in Gao and Timbuktu, including several suicide bombings and attacks in urban areas, point to stark potential challenges. The difficult terrain and social complexity of northern Mali also present particular difficulties for counterinsurgency operations. The Tuareg rebel conflict has not been brought to a close, inhibiting the extension of Malian state authority to French-cleared areas, while long-standing friction between Tuaregs and other ethnic groups in the north has reportedly fed local support for Islamist extremists in some areas. Tuareg communities are also internally divided over religious ideology and support for separatism.

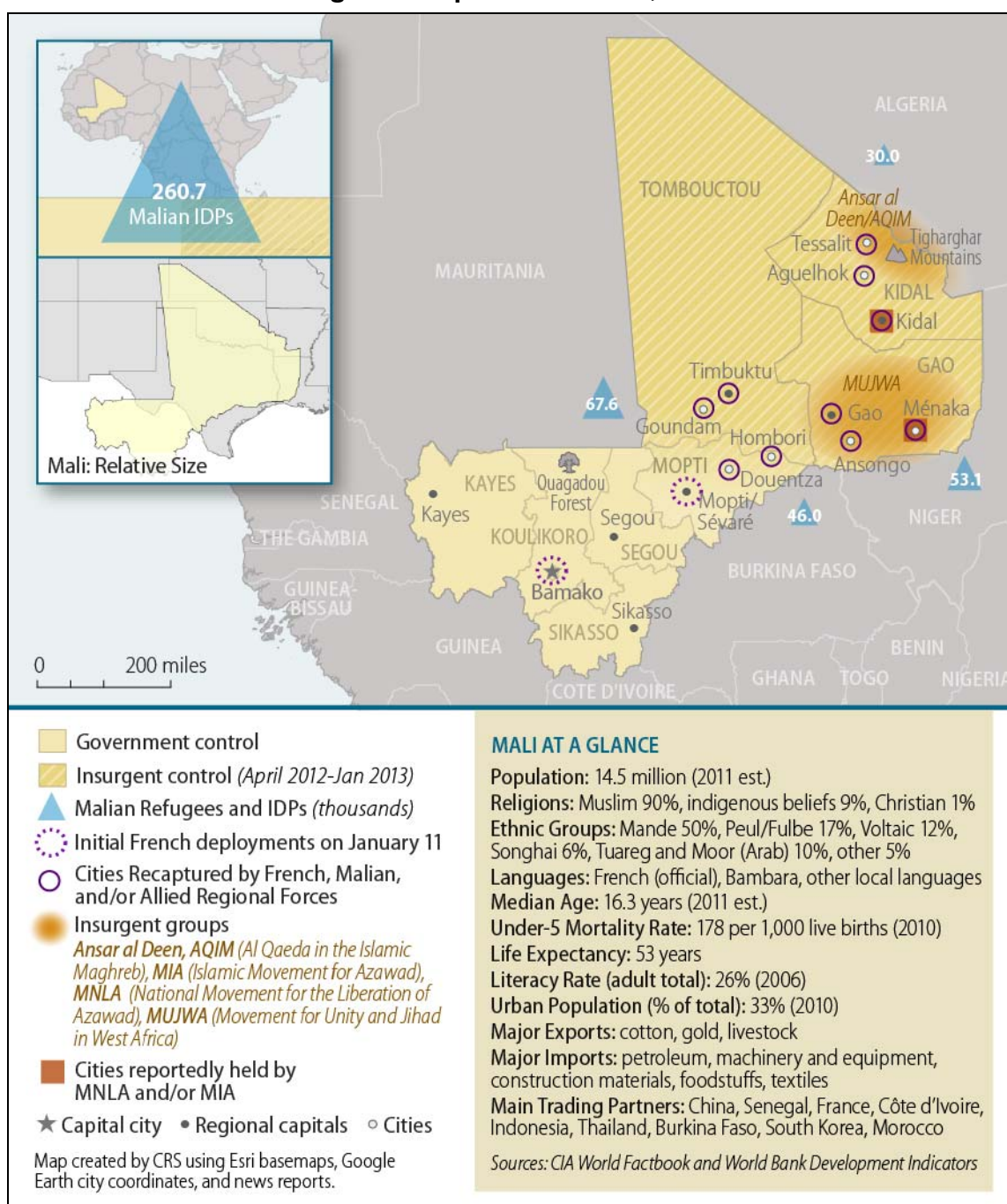
The future role of French forces in Mali is uncertain. French President François Hollande has stated plans to begin withdrawing troops in late April from the current level of 4,000, to about 1,000 by year’s end. This timeline may reflect domestic pressures and a fear of being drawn into an enduring conflict. Thousands of African troops have deployed to Mali under the U.N.-authorized African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), but their capacity to counter an insurgency or prevent terrorist attacks is likely to be limited. The poor human rights records of some of the regional militaries involved may also be counterproductive. Meanwhile, Mali’s ongoing political divisions, along with its own military dysfunction and abuses, have rendered Mali’s fragile state authorities unreliable, and in some cases undesirable, partners for international actors. The U.N. Security Council is currently considering options for transitioning AFISMA into a fully U.N.-conducted operation. Debate appears centered on the likely capacity and appropriate mandate for U.N. troops, as well as on a proposal for a separate, rapid-reaction force—of as-yet-undetermined composition—to continue counterterrorism operations.

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<sup>5</sup> French Presidency, “Déclaration du Président de la République sur la situation au Mali,” January 11, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Defense Department News Briefing, January 29, 2013; and Adam Entous et al, “U. S. Boosts War Role in Africa,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 2013.

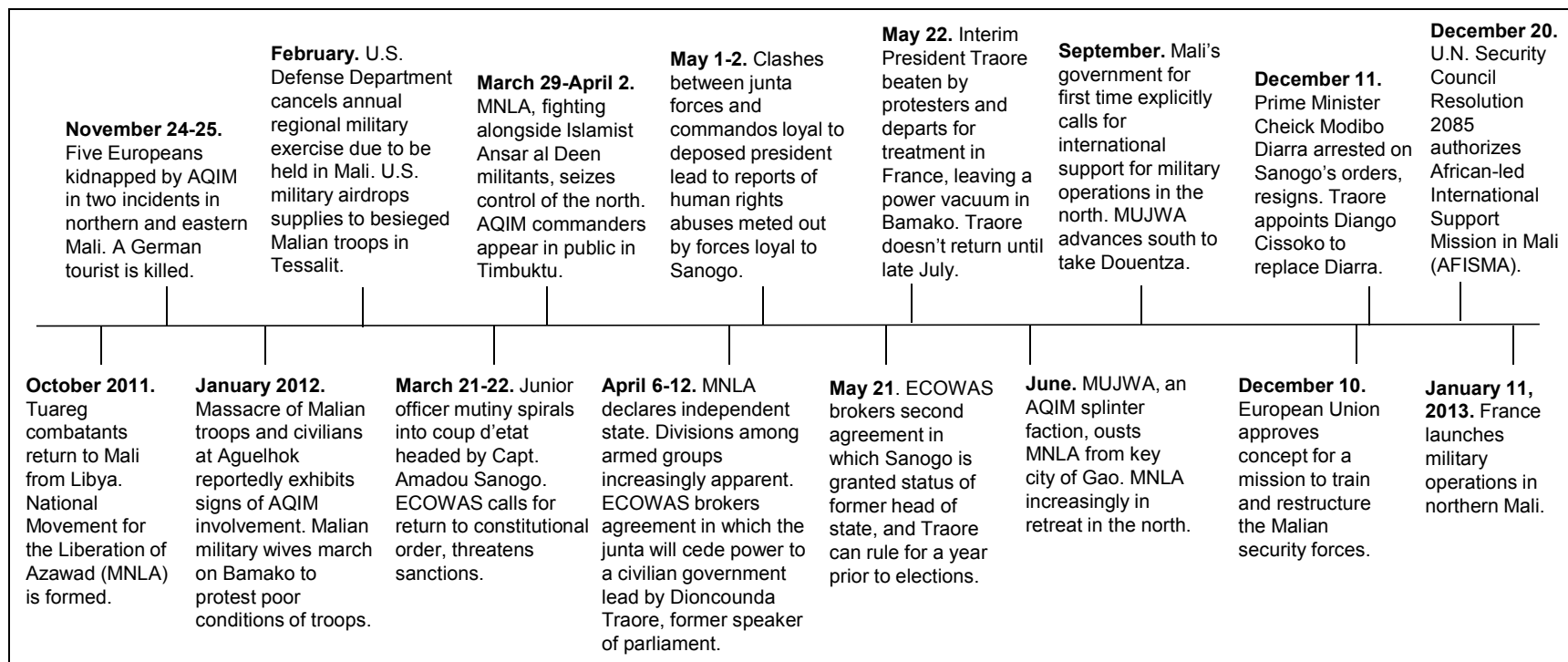
Figure 1. Map as of March 13, 2013



**Source:** CRS. Basemap created by (name redacted) using Esri Data 2012. Projection: Winkle II, March 13, 2012. Sources of information depicted include U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) humanitarian updates, news reports, and CRS interviews.

**Notes:** Insurgent group concentrations are approximate and shifting – particularly in the context of French military operations – and are based on open-source accounts. IDP refers to Internally Displaced Persons.

**Figure 2. Mali: Timeline Up To French Military Operations**



**Source:** CRS

**Notes:** Further analysis of recent events is available from CRS on request.

## Key Issues for Congress

U.S. policy attention to the Sahel region of North-West Africa escalated in 2012 in response to developments in Mali. Attacks on U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012; an assault on the U.S. embassy and American school in Tunisia three days later; and the January 2013 hostage crisis in the southeastern Algerian town of In Amenas further heightened U.S. concerns about terrorism in the region. The United States has generally viewed AQIM as the primary transnational terrorist threat in the North-West Africa region,<sup>7</sup> although AQIM is part of an increasingly complex regional picture for violent extremism. An AQIM splinter faction claimed responsibility for the In Amenas siege, and U.S. officials have pointed to links between AQIM and the Benghazi attackers.<sup>8</sup> U.S. policy deliberations on Mali therefore overlap with debates over regional and global counterterrorism approaches, in addition to assessments of political stability in West Africa and U.S. diplomatic and foreign aid relationships in the region.

President Obama's 2011 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, which appears to consider AQIM an Al Qaeda "affiliate,"<sup>9</sup> argues that U.S. efforts to counter AQIM "must draw on and be closely integrated with the broader U.S. regional strategy, especially since the long-term eradication of AQIM will not be addressed by traditional CT tools alone." In practice, divergent assessments of the terrorist threat emanating from the Sahel region have dovetailed with broader U.S. policy debates over how best to approach cross-border terrorist actors who may not be engaged in imminent plans to attack the U.S. homeland, and over how to prioritize sometimes divergent U.S. policy goals in the region. Recent developments in Mali and North Africa have heightened the stakes of these debates, but without necessarily resolving them. In the meantime, a U.S. emphasis on cultivating regional partnerships has been complicated by political instability in North Africa and the limited capacities of West African states.

Generally, instability in Mali appears to reflect multiple conflicts and struggles—within the Tuareg community, between separatists and loyalists, between terrorist groups and state actors, over the spoils from transnational crime, and between competing religious ideologies. Whether the United States can secure its interests while not further fueling instability is at issue. To date, the United States has supported French and African military operations in Mali, bolstered U.S. surveillance capacities in the region,<sup>10</sup> and provided new aid to neighboring states to help repel insurgent infiltration. Officials have reportedly also considered adding terrorist individuals based in the region to a U.S. target list, which, if true, could indicate a shift in the U.S. approach to

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism 2011, July 31, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> *The New York Times*, "Clinton Cites Clear Link Between Al Qaeda and Attack in Libya," September 26, 2012; and Amanda Dory, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Africa, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs, "Assessing Developments in Mali: Restoring Democracy and Reclaiming the North," December 5, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> The *Strategy* distinguishes between "affiliates," a term "intended to reflect a broader category of entities against whom the United States must bring various elements of national power, as appropriate and consistent with the law, to counter the threat they pose," and "associated forces," a "legal term of art that refers to cobelligerents of al-Qa'ida or the Taliban against whom the President is authorized to use force (including the authority to detain) based on the Authorization for the Use of Military Force" (i.e., P.L. 107-40, enacted in 2001 following the 9/11 terrorist attacks).

<sup>10</sup> *The New York Times*, "U.S. Opens Drone Base in Niger, Building Africa Presence," February 22, 2013. President Obama had earlier notified Congress, consistent with the War Powers Resolution (P.L. 93-148), that approximately 100 U.S. military personnel had deployed to Niger in support of intelligence collection and sharing.



AQIM.<sup>11</sup> U.S. officials have simultaneously urged Mali to organize a peace process and hold elections as part of a political transition to a more legitimate, effective national government.

A more direct U.S. role in countering violent extremists in Mali and neighboring states may well hinge on an evaluation of the extent to which AQIM and associated groups and individuals in North-West Africa pose a threat to the U.S. homeland, and/or the extent to which they are linked to “core” Al Qaeda. News reports suggest that Administration officials may disagree over the nature of the threat posed by these groups; over the degree to which existing legal authorities permit U.S. kinetic strikes on terrorist targets in the region (if at all); and over whether such strikes are desirable given potential unintended consequences.<sup>12</sup> For example, U.S. direct intervention could prompt otherwise non-cohesive or locally-focused groups to rally around anti-U.S. or anti-Western sentiment, or to boost recruitment and fund-raising. A more prominent U.S. role in the region could also potentially cause diplomatic friction with regional allies.

Congress authorizes and appropriates foreign aid and defense funding, and conducts oversight of U.S. policies and programs. U.S. security assistance to Malian forces has been suspended in line with congressionally mandated restrictions triggered by the coup (see “U.S. Policy”). Looking ahead, Congress may weigh the authorities, available funding, and policies related to ongoing U.S. support for French and regional military deployments to Mali, and whether unilateral U.S. action is required, justified, or wise. Congress may seek to assess previous U.S. security engagement in Mali and the region, and explore options for future U.S. aid and policy initiatives.

As mentioned above, the U.N. Security Council is discussing options for transitioning AFISMA into a fully U.N.-conducted and financed operation. This discussion (see below) has implications for U.S. policy and resource budgeting. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the driving force behind AFISMA, has estimated the mission’s cost at \$950 million.<sup>13</sup> The United States is also the leading bilateral donor of humanitarian aid to Mali and the Sahel region in response to the ongoing regional food security emergency. The issue of humanitarian access could rise on the international policy agenda if armed groups in northern Mali try to attack aid agencies, or if concerns arise over terrorist diversion of aid.<sup>14</sup>

Before the coup, U.S. officials and many others viewed Mali as a democratic success, despite governance challenges and indications that the Malian public resented perceived official corruption and cronyism. Mali has been a longtime recipient of U.S. development aid, with modest gains achieved by health, education, and food security programs. U.S. military professionalization training emphasized civilian control and respect for human rights.

<sup>11</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, “Push to Expand U.S. ‘Kill List,’” February 9, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> See, among others, *Washington Post*, “Mali Conflict Exposes White House-Pentagon Split,” January 18, 2013, and “U.S. Counterterrorism Efforts in Africa Defined by a Decade of Missteps,” February 4, 2013; and *CQ Weekly*, “The Battlefield Grows Larger” and “Al-Qaida Ties Not Always So Clear,” January 28, 2013. Regarding debates over domestic legal authorities, P.L. 107-40 authorized the President “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons.” It is unclear whether the Obama Administration considers that direct U.S. strikes against terrorist actors based in North-West Africa would be permissible under the P.L. 107-40, or on other possible legal grounds, such as an argument of “imminent” threat.

<sup>13</sup> Radio France International (RFI) via BBC Monitoring, February 26, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Such dynamics have challenged U.S.-funded humanitarian efforts in Somalia. See CRS Report R42046, *Horn of Africa Region: The Humanitarian Crisis and International Response*, coordinated by (name redacted).

Developments over the past year may bring into question these programs' effectiveness and have jeopardized accomplishments in all of these areas.

### Background on Mali

**Politics.** Mali peacefully gained independence from France in 1959, initially as part of a short-lived federation with Senegal. Founding President Modibo Kéita installed a one-party, socialist-leaning dictatorship. In 1968, Kéita was ousted in a military coup by Moussa Traoré, who went on to serve as president for over two decades. (Former Interim Prime Minister Modibo Diarra, who resigned in December 2012, is Traoré's son-in-law.) Starting in 1989, Malians increasingly began calling for multiparty democracy, echoing movements that emerged across Africa at the end of the Cold War. In 1991, Amadou Toumani Touré (popularly known as ATT) overthrew Traoré in a military coup and organized democratic elections. Longtime opposition activist Alpha Oumar Konaré was elected president. Mali's growing reputation for democratic rule was enhanced in 2002, when Konaré stepped down at the end of two constitutionally permitted terms, and ATT, running as an independent and leveraging his reputation as Mali's "soldier of democracy," was elected president. It was Mali's first democratic transition between civilian leaders.

ATT, who was reelected in 2007, pursued a broad and flexible ruling coalition and a style that he referred to as "consensus" politics, in the absence of clear ideological preferences or platforms among political parties. Although peaceful and permissive, this system appears to have incentivized corruption and patronage among political elites, or at least contributed to public perceptions that the system was corrupt. Civil society, likewise, largely revolved around the centers of political power and state patronage. As of early 2012, the future of the "consensus" system was uncertain, given ATT's stated determination to step down once elections scheduled for April 2012 were held, and his lack of a clear successor. Anxiety over an anticipated political vacuum may explain local speculation that ATT—despite all reports to the contrary—wished to prolong his time in office on the pretext of insecurity in the north.<sup>15</sup>

**The Tuareg Issue.** Members of the semi-nomadic and diverse Tuareg community, who inhabit parts of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya, have periodically rebelled against the Malian state. (Tuaregs have also rebelled periodically in neighboring Niger.) Tuaregs are a small minority within Malian society, although no precise population figures are available. Tuareg rebel groups have claimed greater control over what they see as their historic homeland in the north, which they refer to as *Azawad*. At times, *Azawad* has been defined to include Tuareg areas across the region. They have also complained of neglect and discrimination by the Malian government, which has been dominated by southern ethnic groups since independence. Most recently, negotiated settlements in the early 1990s and 2006–2009—mediated by the government of Algeria—laid the groundwork for fragile peace by promising greater regional autonomy, the integration of Tuareg combatants into the military, and more state aid for the impoverished north. The government never fully implemented these agreements, and non-implementation became a grievance unto itself. Prospective control over potential oil and gas resources in northern Mali may have fueled conflict as well.

**Islam in Mali.** Mali's population is over 90% Muslim, with animist and Christian minority communities. Pre-colonial empires based in Malian cities played a key role in the spread of Islam in West Africa. Notably, the Saharan city of Timbuktu, then a vital cross-roads of regional commerce, was a major center of Islamic scholarship between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Malian state is secular (although it plays a role in regulating religious activities), and moderate approaches to Islamic beliefs are generally predominant. Yet, more conservative and radical views have also gained ground in recent years.<sup>16</sup> In 2005, the International Crisis Group warned that although, in its view, the risk of Islamist extremism in West Africa had been overstated by some Western policymakers, Mali "runs the greatest risk of any West African country other than Nigeria of violent Islamist activity."<sup>17</sup> While this risk is currently on display in the north, it has also affected politics in Bamako. For example, in 2009, a draft family code that would have expanded and guaranteed a number of women's rights was fiercely opposed by Malian civic and religious groups. The enacted version was revised with input from religious leaders, and lacked many progressive provisions of earlier iterations.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Kader Toé, "Intime conviction : La République poignardée par ses privilégiés," *Le Matin*, March 22, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> "Bamako Under Growing Pressure From Islamist Thinking, Practices," *Libération* (France) via U.S. government Open Source Center (OSC), June 4, 2012. The conservative Salafist movement has been present in Mali for over 60 years, and has reportedly made the greatest inroads among urban populations and in communities recently converted to Islam. See *Dimensions transnationales de l'islam africain et mutations contemporaines du Sahel*, study prepared for the French Ministry of Defense by Sciences Po-Bordeaux, March 2011; and Benjamin F. Soares, "Islam in Mali in the Neoliberal Era," *African Affairs*, 105, 418: January 2006.

<sup>17</sup> ICG, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?*, March 31, 2005.

## Context and Current Issues

Mali's instability stems from both internal and external factors. These include poor governance, the corrosive impact of drug trafficking and other illicit commerce, military fragmentation and collapse, limited implementation of previous peace accords with Tuareg rebel groups, and an uptick in regional arms and combatant flows from Libya since 2011. High-level corruption, reportedly tied, in part, to criminal trafficking networks, contributed to public distaste for the government and to initial support for the coup against then-President Amadou Toumani Touré.<sup>18</sup>

Rank-and-file soldiers blamed corruption and mismanagement for defeats at the hands of Tuareg rebels in early 2012. Such sentiment may have been the proximate driver of the 2012 coup, but military dysfunction runs much deeper. The military remains in disarray due to internal tensions and political uncertainty. The military's personnel levels and equipment stocks, already relatively low, have reportedly been eroded by mismanagement, defections (namely of Tuareg troops who defected to the MNLA in early 2012), desertions, and the collapse of the operational command in the north in March 2012. Over the past year, the military has initiated a recruitment drive and has reportedly provided support to allied irregular militias, which are organized largely along ethnic lines.<sup>19</sup> Factionalization of the military and police, among other problems, have been illustrated by violent clashes and reports of abuses carried out within and by the security forces.<sup>20</sup>

The withdrawal of violent extremists from northern towns has led to some human rights improvements. However, the conditions under which the north could conceivably be reintegrated into the Malian state in a sustainable way remain unclear, and the path to achieving such an outcome uncertain. Malian elites do not appear to have reached consensus on how to achieve national reconciliation amid deepening ethnic tensions, which have torn at Mali's social fabric within the north and between north and south.<sup>21</sup> Should a bona fide national reconciliation process take place, the secular structure of the post-colonial Malian state, in a country that is over 90% Muslim, could also be up for negotiation.

Tuareg grievances over cultural rights, political autonomy, and a historic lack of government investment in the north remain relevant for many. Yet the Tuareg community is internally diverse, and is divided over issues of political Islam and ethnic separatism.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Tuaregs are a

<sup>18</sup> A 2010 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) study noted that "even though it is not a recent phenomenon, corruption seems to have worsened with the democratization process, higher levels of development assistance and the growth of the private sector... In addition, the search for compromise, which characterizes the social, political and economic life in Mali, has generated a culture of tolerance and impunity." *Mali: Réforme de l'administration publique, accès à l'information et gouvernance électronique*, 2010. Some observers have posited that U.S. military aid fueled corruption, although this is difficult to assess. *Africa Confidential*, "Mali : Rebels and Putschists," March 30, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> On the militias, see Amnesty International, "Mali: Civilians Bear the Brunt of the Conflict," September 20, 2012, which, among other things, accuses the militias of recruiting child soldiers.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Mali: Security Forces 'Disappear 20,' Torture Others," July 25, 2012, and "Prosecute Soldiers for Abuses," February 21, 2013; and *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali*, U.N. doc. A/HRC/22/33, January 7, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> See Andrew Lebovich, "Post-Conflict Mali: Reprisal or Reconciliation?" Think Africa Press, February 27, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Tuareg communities have generally adhered to a moderate form of Islam, and Tuareg rebel movements have often portrayed themselves as best placed to fight Islamist militancy in the Sahel. At the same time, AQIM has long had opportunistic links to Tuareg smuggling networks in northern Mali, and religious ideology varies considerably within Tuareg communities. The Malian Islamist extremist group Ansar al Deen is led by Iyad ag Ghali, a leading figure in previous Tuareg rebellions who also has longstanding connections to AQIM. See Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*: (continued...)

minority even within the north, and often acrimonious inter-ethnic relations present an additional wrinkle for efforts to resolve the various aspects of Mali's crisis.<sup>23</sup> Under international pressure, President Traoré has stated that he is willing to negotiate with the MNLA. However, many Malians strongly oppose talks with the MNLA, whom they hold responsible for Mali's calamities.<sup>24</sup> Efforts by Burkina Faso and Algeria in 2012 to facilitate negotiations with the MNLA and certain Islamist armed groups appear have halted in light of recent developments and what appears to be limited Malian government commitment to pursuing talks. More broadly, efforts by ECOWAS and African Union (AU) to lead the international response to Mali's crisis have been hampered by regional divisions, rivalries, and a lack of planning and military capacity.

The current status of the Kidal region, over which the MNLA has reasserted its authority in the wake of French operations to dislodge Islamist extremist groups, presents particular challenges to both national reconciliation and reunification. The Malian military has not deployed to Kidal in the face of MNLA objections to its presence.<sup>25</sup> Instead, France continues to conduct counterterrorism operations in conjunction with Chadian—i.e., foreign—troops. How long this situation may be tolerated by Mali's national authorities and military commanders—and what options they might have for addressing it—remains to be seen. MNLA forces have also clashed with Arab militias, pointing to possible future tensions. MNLA leaders have sought to position themselves as ideal partners for Western counterterrorism operations, pointing to their unique knowledge of the Saharan terrain and secularist ideology; yet opportunism, rather than ideology, appears to have motivated MNLA leaders' behavior over time.

### French Policy in Mali

France's urgent focus on Mali appears to stem from an assessment that AQIM and affiliated groups pose a direct security threat. AQIM has kidnapped French nationals and threatened attacks in Europe, and France declared "war" on the group in 2010. Recent fears could center on concerns that French citizens—including dual nationals hailing from France's sizable West African immigrant populations—could be drawn to fight with AQIM and allied groups in northern Mali, and/or receive AQIM training or financing to perpetrate terrorist attacks in France or against French interests elsewhere. (Several French nationals fighting with the insurgents have been captured during the military operations in Mali.) AQIM and other extremist groups in the Sahel reportedly hold eight French hostages—four kidnapped in northern Niger in 2010, two in northeastern Mali in 2011, one in western Mali in November 2012, and one in northern Nigeria in December 2012. AQIM claimed to have killed one French hostage in March 2013.

## Assessing AQIM and Associated Groups

AQIM, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO),<sup>26</sup> has seized opportunities from the past two years of instability in North Africa and in Mali to increase its regional influence and,

(...continued)

*Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali*, Boston: Brill, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Historically tense—if co-dependent—relations among ethnic groups in the north have worsened due to recent cycles of interethnic violence coinciding with previous Tuareg rebellions. On current dynamics, see HRW, "Mali: Rising Ethnic Tensions Threaten New Violence," December 20, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> CRS interviews with Malian interlocutors, 2012-2013. See also, among many similar opinion pieces, "Article Says MNLA, MIA not 'Credible' Negotiators With Malian Government," February 1, 2013, via OSC.

<sup>25</sup> The MNLA contends that it must protect local populations from abuses by national military forces, and indeed, Malian soldiers have been accused of abuses and extrajudicial killings targeting conservative religious activists and Tuaregs. MNLA, "Déclaration de la Conférence des Chefs d'Etats de la CEDEAO relative au désarmement du MNLA," March 6, 2013; AP, "Massacre of Preachers in Mali Sign of Broken Army," September 22, 2012; and HRW, "Mali: Soldiers Torture Detainees in Léré," March 26, 2013; and "Prosecute Soldiers for Abuses," February 21, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> AQIM was first designated under its previous moniker, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, in 2002. It (continued...)

possibly, its capacity. The group emerged as one of many armed factions in Algeria's 1990s civil conflict. It reportedly continues to be primarily Algerian-led, although some Malian and Mauritanian nationals have been promoted to command positions, according to AQIM statements and regional media. AQIM's leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, is reportedly based in northeastern Algeria, but the group has reportedly had a presence in northern Mali for over a decade.

Prior to 2012, AQIM attacks had largely consisted of strikes against Algerian security forces in northeastern Algeria; kidnappings—mostly of Europeans and mostly for ransom—in southern Algeria and in the poorer Sahel states of Mauritania, Mali, and Niger; and attacks on military and government targets in Mauritania and, occasionally, Mali. At times, the group's Sahel-based commanders appeared primarily focused on lucrative criminal activities. Prior to the In Amenas attack, in which three Americans were killed, AQIM had killed a single American, in 2009. AQIM's most high-profile attack against a Western target was the bombing of U.N. facilities in Algiers in 2007, although AQIM also reportedly has ties to a Nigerian extremist group, Boko Haram, which claimed responsibility for the bombing of U.N. offices in Nigeria's capital in 2011.

In addition to AQIM, the other main violent extremist groups in northern Mali are Ansar al Deen (alt: Ansar al Dine, "Defenders of the Faith"), and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA, or MUJAO after its French acronym).<sup>27</sup> In December 2012, the United States named MUJWA and two of its leaders "Specially Designated Global Terrorists" (SDGT).<sup>28</sup> Ansar al Deen leader Iyad ag Ghali was designated an SDGT in February 2013, and in mid-March, Ansar al Deen was designated as an FTO and SDGT. A State Department press release stated that Ansar al Deen "has received support from AQIM since its inception in late 2011, and continues to maintain close ties to the group."<sup>29</sup> Some news reports suggest Ansar al Deen led the insurgent advances toward the south in January 2013, which prompted France to intervene.

At times, these groups have appeared to cooperate closely and share personnel. Yet they also exhibit divisions and potentially divergent interests.<sup>30</sup> Many analysts view AQIM itself as internally divided over leadership, goals (e.g., Algeria regime change vs. local governance vs. global jihad), and tactics (e.g., regarding the legitimacy of criminal activity as a fund-raising

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renamed itself AQIM in 2007, and the U.S. designation was amended in 2008 to reflect this. FTOs are designated by the Secretary of State in accordance with the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended. The legal criteria are the following: (1) it must be a foreign organization; (2) it must engage in terrorist activities, as statutorily defined, or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism; and (3) the organization's terrorist activity or terrorism must threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security of the United States. See State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism, at <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/index.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Northern Mali has also hosted a range of other armed groups, including an AQIM splinter faction led by a longtime AQIM Sahel-based commander, Mokhtar bel Mokhtar; elements of the Nigerian extremist group Boko Haram; the Islamic Movement of Azawad (an Ansar al Deen splinter faction); Malian Arab militias; and armed bandits and smuggling networks. A group referring to itself as Ansar al Sharia—a name used by several Salafist groups in North Africa—emerged in late 2012, but its membership and relationship with other armed groups in the north are unclear.

<sup>28</sup> SDGT designations are made under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, which targets terrorists and those providing support to terrorists or acts of terrorism. As a result of the designation, all property subject to U.S. jurisdiction in which designated individuals or entities have any interest is blocked and U.S. persons are prohibited from engaging in any transactions with them or to their benefit.

<sup>29</sup> "Terrorist Designations of Ansar al-Dine," Media Note, March 21, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., "AQIM Leader in Sahara Yahya Abu-Al-Hammam Interviewed on Situation in Mali," January 22, 2013, via U.S. government Open Source Center (OSC), in which Al Hammam criticizes Ansar al Deen for its national-level (rather than international) focus.

mechanism). Indeed, “AQIM” appears to refer to a loose affiliation of actors, who may not be bound by command or shared goals, and whose motivations and capabilities may diverge. It is furthermore not clear what AQIM’s connection with Al Qaeda means in practice.<sup>31</sup>

AQIM’s capacity and ultimate intentions are debated among analysts and policymakers. The group has regularly threatened attacks against Western powers (particularly France), but has yet to carry out an attack outside North-West Africa. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) Commander-Designate General David Rodriguez stated to Congress in February 2013 that AQIM “likely does not pose a threat to U.S. and Western interests outside its immediate operating area of Algeria and northern Mali in the near term, but could in the future.” In March, Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper testified that AQIM’s “intentions and capability remain focused on local, US, and Western interests in North and West Africa.”<sup>32</sup> Given AQIM’s reported contacts with other extremist groups, U.S. officials appear concerned that AQIM could share its funds with other terrorist actors.<sup>33</sup> AQIM’s reported ability to amass tens of millions of dollars by holding kidnapped Westerners for ransom and through involvement in regional smuggling operations has led some U.S. officials to refer to it as “Al Qaeda’s best-funded affiliated organization.”<sup>34</sup> Still, estimates of the group’s resources vary, and the rate at which AQIM is forced to spend money (e.g., on supplies, recruits, and patronage networks) is unclear.

Broadly, the seemingly ascendant trajectory of violent extremist groups in North-West Africa appears to be in stark contrast to that of “core” Al Qaeda, which U.S. officials have described as “decimated.”<sup>35</sup> These Africa-based groups generally appear to be leveraging broader regional political and security fluidity, as fragile transitional governments in North Africa confront myriad security threats without the capacity or will to exercise their predecessors’ style of authoritarian control. They are also drawing on long-standing national- and local-level contestation over identity, governance, and access to resources. These groups may be in contact with each other and/or coordinating certain activities, but the extent and nature of links remain uncertain.

<sup>31</sup> The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, in its analysis of selected communications by Osama bin Laden, stated that “while there is mention of [AQIM] in the documents released to the CTC, these discussions are not substantive enough to inform an understanding of the relationship between al-Qa’ida’s senior leaders and these groups.” The CTC study also cites at least one appeal by Bin Laden for financial support from AQIM. *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?*, May 3, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Statement of General David M. Rodriguez to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 14, 2013, via *Congressional Quarterly* (CQ); Clapper, Statement for the Record, “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, March 12, 2013. France’s Defense Minister has stated that AQIM wanted to use Mali as a base for “international actions.” Reuters, “Al Qaeda Rebels Wanted Mali as a Base for Global Attacks-France,” March 8, 2013. Representative Mike Rogers, Chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, has stated that Mokhtar bel Mokhtar “has the ability, I believe, to get operatives outside of that region.” CQ transcript, “Rep. Mike Rogers Interviewed on CNN,” January 31, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Remarks of Under Secretary of the Treasury David Cohen at Chatham House on “Kidnapping for Ransom: The Growing Terrorist Financing Challenge,” October 5, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> *Financial Times*, “Mali Intervention Creates Dilemma for US,” January 14, 2013. The State Department’s 2011 *Country Reports on Terrorism* states, in contrast, that “AQIM is significantly constrained by its poor finances and lack of broad general appeal in the region.” A 2011 report by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)—an inter-government body for combating money laundering, terrorist financing, and related financial system threats—estimated that AQIM had collected at least \$65 million in kidnap-for-ransom payments since 2005, and cited “US and EU estimates” of AQIM’s annual budget of approximately 15 million Euros (\$19.9 million) per year. (FATF, *Organised Maritime Piracy and Related Kidnapping for Ransom*, July 2011.) These figures are a topic of debate, and AQIM outlays have presumably evolved along with its positioning in northern Mali.

<sup>35</sup> Testimony by John O. Brennan at his nomination hearing as CIA Director, February 7, 2013.

While the popular appeal of extremist Islam in predominantly Muslim Mali appears low, AQIM figures have reportedly cultivated extensive family and economic links with some local populations over a number of years. Grassroots movements advocating conservative Islamic practices have also gained momentum in Mali (including in the south), having been active in the region for decades.<sup>36</sup> Ansar al Deen's stronghold is in the Tuareg-dominated Kidal region, while MUJWA appears to have leveraged anti-Tuareg sentiment and religious conservatism in Gao to rally support from some local communities. Still, many Malians object to extremists' ideology and methods, and to these groups' associations with drug traffickers. A document attributed to AQIM leader Droukdel and recovered in Timbuktu instructs AQIM leaders in Mali to "extend bridges" to all ethnic communities, to take a background role vis-à-vis Malian-led armed groups, and not to impose *sharia* too hastily—a point some local commanders appear to have ignored.<sup>37</sup>

Among the Sahel states most affected by AQIM (Mali, Niger, and Mauritania), Mali has been seen as the least willing or militarily able to counter the group's presence. This may reflect the relative prioritization of scarce state resources, or calculations that an increased military presence in Tuareg areas in the north could be destabilizing. Some analysts have posited a tacit agreement under which the pre-coup Malian government did not vigorously pursue AQIM while, in turn, AQIM did not directly threaten Bamako.<sup>38</sup>

## Mali's Political Transition

In the aftermath of the March 2012 military coup, ECOWAS brokered an agreement under which coup leader Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo agreed to step down, while National Assembly leader Dioncounda Traoré assumed the presidency pending elections. In January 2013, the National Assembly adopted a vaguely stated "roadmap" for Mali's political transition that emphasizes the restoration of Mali's territorial integrity and the organization of elections. President Traoré has stated that elections will be held in July 2013, and preparations are nominally ongoing. However, there is no clear consensus on key issues such as the voter registry or the appropriate voting procedures for displaced Malians, and it is unclear whether voting will be possible in the north.

The timeline for elections presents a policy dilemma for Malians and their international partners. On the one hand, elections may be seen as necessary to form a legitimate government capable of sidelining the military from politics, spearheading security sector reform, and making credible commitments in any future peace or reconciliation talks. On the other hand, electoral campaigning could contribute to ethno-regional divisions, and elections that lack sufficient credibility could increase instability. Whether an electoral process is well suited to address apparently widespread public disaffection with the Malian state is also uncertain.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Regional experts note that religiously conservative grassroots movements in West Africa have not generally been associated with violence against Western targets. Nor have "traditional" forms of Islam in the Sahel been strictly non-violent; for example, some pre-colonial Islamic states used force to spread Islam into neighboring regions. See Mike McGovern, "Chasing Shadows in the Dunes: Islamist Practice and Counterterrorist Policy in West Africa's Sahara-Sahel Zone," in *Securing Africa: Post-9/11 Discourses on Terrorism*, Malinda Smith, ed., Ashgate, Burlington: 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Document translated and published by the Associated Press as "Mali—Al-Qaeda's Sahara Playbook."

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., ICG, *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*, July 18, 2012, which states that collusion among actors within the government and AQIM "has seemed increasingly likely and has become the dominant doctrine in the foreign affairs departments of Western and neighboring countries."

<sup>39</sup> In 2011, U.S.-based democracy organizations pointed to "widespread political disengagement and Malian citizens' increasingly evident dissatisfaction with the state of their country's nascent democracy." International Republican (continued...)

Captain Sanogo—previously a relatively obscure officer who received U.S. training—holds no formal position in the government, but continues to wield significant influence. This was starkly illustrated on December 11, when interim Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra resigned after Sanogo ordered his arrest, and by the recent arrest of a local journalist whose newspaper questioned Sanogo’s reportedly elevated salary.<sup>40</sup> President Traoré appointed Diango Cissoko, a veteran public servant, to replace Diarra as Prime Minister. As noted above, troops loyal to Sanogo have been accused of serious abuses against rivals within the security forces. Several key cabinet positions are also held by military officers widely viewed as Sanogo allies. Sanogo heads a commission on security sector reform, potentially placing him in a position to influence international military aid aimed at restructuring Mali’s security forces.

## AFISMA and Potential U.N. Peacekeeping Operation

The African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) grew out of an ECOWAS/ AU proposal developed in 2012. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2085 (December 20, 2012) authorized AFISMA to build the capacity of the Malian defense and security forces; “support the Malian authorities” in recovering territory in the north and reducing the threat posed by terrorists; “transition to stabilization activities”; and support the Malian authorities in protecting civilians, among other activities. The initial, mid-2012 ECOWAS/AU concept of operations envisioned an external regional force of 3,300 supporting some 5,000 Malian military personnel.

AFISMA was initially expected to require nearly a year of preparation before deploying, but deployments have been accelerated following the French intervention. The concept of operations has also been revised to reflect a need for much higher troop levels (i.e., over 9,000 regional troops), given the terrain and the inability of Malian forces to lead most operations. About 6,000 African troops have reportedly arrived in Mali to date. These include over 2,000 Chadians, many of whom have deployed in heavy combat operations alongside French forces in Kidal.<sup>41</sup> Other than the Chadians and troops from Niger, some of whom are deployed in the Gao region, most other AFISMA forces have remained in the relatively stable south. Concerns persist regarding regional troops’ capacity and will to work together, to uphold human rights standards, and to defend against insurgent attacks. The European Union has initiated a mission to train and restructure the Malian security forces, but this process may take months, even years.

The future goals, presence, and role of French forces in Mali have yet to be clarified. Current international policy attention to AFISMA is focused on its role in any potential exit strategy for French forces, and on its longer-term ability to help unify and stabilize the country. The U.N. Security Council is currently considering options to transition AFISMA into a U.N.-conducted

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Institute (IRI), International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), National Democratic Institute (NDI), and Internews, “CEPPS Mali 2012 General Elections Support: Pre-Election Assessment Report,” July 8, 2011. Voter turnout in the past decade has hovered around 30%-40%, low by regional standards. A long-running process of government decentralization, aimed at enhancing state responsiveness and service-delivery, has also never been fully implemented. This has contributed to northern grievances and may undermine the impact of national-level elections.

<sup>40</sup> Sanogo accused Diarra of obstructing the workings of the interim government in the service of his own political ambitions, an assessment some analysts agreed with. Some observers speculated that Diarra’s stated support for external military intervention, which was reportedly opposed by Sanogo, played a part as well.

<sup>41</sup> Chad is not a member of ECOWAS, although it is an AU member. Its troops are nominally part of AFISMA, but their command-and-control relationship with AFISMA (headed by a Nigerian general) is unclear.



and financed peacekeeping operation, conceivably pending certain security benchmarks and the anticipated winding down of French operations. This could bring a wider range of troop contributors and assets to bear in Mali, but also presents its own policy and resource challenges. ECOWAS has estimated the mission's cost at \$950 million, based on the new concept of operations, and costs could conceivably run higher depending on final troop levels and logistics. If the Security Council authorizes a U.N.-conducted operation, the United States would be obligated to pay a specific portion of the expense (roughly 27%). In contrast, the United States currently supports AFISMA through voluntary contributions. Whether the total cost to the United States would change may depend on the tasks mandated to be accomplished.

The AU has requested that the Security Council authorize a U.N. "peace enforcement" operation "within the framework of action-oriented assistance to the Malian government." However, the U.N. Secretary-General has opposed tasking any U.N. operation to "undertake combat operations against terrorist groups," stating that "the United Nations is not configured to oversee such operations at a strategic level, nor are its peacekeepers typically trained, equipped, or experienced in the kind of operations that would be required."<sup>42</sup> This would seem to suggest that either AFISMA will not transition into a U.N.-conducted operation in the short-run, or that a separate counterterrorism force—possibly composed of or directly supported by the French military—will remain active for the foreseeable future. Questions remain as to whether a U.N. stabilization operation can be effectively deployed in the midst of ongoing counterterrorism operations, and in a volatile and dangerous security environment. International troops are likely to face asymmetric attacks, and terrorist groups have threatened to target troop contributing countries at home.

### **The Role of Algeria**

Given its size, experience in counterterrorism, and large military, Algeria's role in responding to Mali's security crisis has drawn intense international attention. Noninterference in other states' sovereignty is a cornerstone of Algerian foreign policy. Still, Algeria could potentially provide support for regional and international operations in Mali without deploying troops beyond its borders. Amid apparently intense U.S. and French diplomatic pressure to do so, Algerian officials have oscillated between opposing and tacitly accepting the concept of regional military deployments like that of AFISMA. In part, Algerian objections in 2012 may have stemmed from the perception that a regional deployment could serve as a front for Western intervention. According to some news reports, Algeria's security services also initially pursued ties to Ansar al Deen as a proxy and potential counterweight to Mali's separatists.<sup>43</sup> Algeria may also fear for the safety of several Algerian consular employees kidnapped in Mali by MUJWA in 2012.

The aftermath of the In Amenas hostage crisis and the French decision to intervene may have changed the calculus for Algeria, and French officials have stated that Algeria is cooperating with the French operations in Mali. Still, Algerian leaders have made few clear public statements, other than to acknowledge that the situation in Mali is a danger to regional security and to call for a political—rather than primarily military—resolution. Algerian leaders' focus on domestic politics and opaque decision-making apparatus, along with regional rivalries and tensions, have also complicated Algeria's claims to regional leadership in the Sahel.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The Secretary-General proposed either (1) mandating a strengthened U.N. political mission in Mali to support AFISMA, which would in turn lead combat operations until "a smooth transition" to a U.N. stabilization mission could be envisaged; or (2) mandating a U.N. stabilization operation to protect civilians and U.N. personnel, under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, in tandem with a separate "parallel force... to conduct major combat and counter-terrorism operations and provide specialist support beyond the scope of the United Nations mandate and capability." See U.N. doc. S/2013/163 and *Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali*, March 26, 2013, U.N. doc. S/2013/189.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., *New York Times*, "Algeria Sowed Seeds of Hostage Crisis as it Nurtured Warlord," February 1, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> See Laurence Aïda Ammour, *Regional Security Cooperation in the Maghreb and Sahel: Algeria's Pivotal Ambivalence*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 2012; Arieff, *Algeria and the Crisis in Mali*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), July 2012; and Anouar Boukhars, *The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 22, 2012.

## Humanitarian Conditions

Insecurity in Mali has aggravated a regional food security emergency.<sup>45</sup> As of late March, some 177,000 Malians were refugees in Mauritania, Niger, and Burkina Faso, while over 282,000 more were displaced internally. About 60% of the latter are reportedly in central and southern Mali. Despite relatively good harvests in late 2012, U.N. agencies assess that more than 4 million Malians are in need of humanitarian assistance, including an estimated 500,000 located in the north.<sup>46</sup> Although aid groups have been able to work in the north through local staff and partner organizations, security threats to personnel have challenged aid delivery. Ongoing security threats, along with efforts by neighboring countries to close their borders with Mali, have also reportedly disrupted regional commerce, including of food and basic goods, in some areas. Local-level violence could increase if and when displaced Malians return to their home areas, which may renew or create conflict over access to land, water, international aid, and other resources.

The United States is the largest bilateral humanitarian donor to the region. U.S. humanitarian aid to the drought-affected Sahel countries has totaled about \$519 million in FY2012 and FY2013 (combined), including over \$148 million in aid allocated for Mali's complex emergency to date. Donor pledges as a whole, however, have lagged behind U.N. appeals for funding. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) reported that it received about 70% of its 2012 CAP for the Sahel.<sup>47</sup> The 2013 U.N. CAP of approximately \$1.5 billion for the drought-affected Sahel region represents a decrease from \$1.65 billion requested in 2012, reflecting a general improvement in regional conditions following the mid-2012 rainy season.

## U.S. Policy

In congressional testimony in February 2013, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson characterized the crisis in Mali as “one of the most difficult, complex and urgent problems West Africa has faced in the past two decades.”<sup>48</sup> Carson argued that the United States must address four major challenges in Mali “comprehensively and simultaneously”: (1) the presence of violent extremists in northern Mali, (2) Mali's political transition, (3) national reconciliation and dialogue with the north, and (4) the humanitarian crisis in Mali and the Sahel.

Despite this stated “simultaneous” approach, the prospect of a safe-haven for AQIM and other extremists and criminal actors in Mali would appear to be a principal concern for U.S. policymakers. As noted above, the United States has provided support for French and African military operations, bolstered U.S. surveillance capacities in the region, and provided new aid to neighboring states to repel insurgent infiltration, while reportedly debating direct U.S. targeted strikes on terrorist targets. The Administration initially appeared hesitant to support France's intervention, possibly due to concerns that it could aid terrorist recruitment or otherwise further destabilize the region. In early February, however, Vice President Joseph Biden stated that “the

<sup>45</sup> The regional food crisis, which peaked in mid-2012, stems from a number of factors on top of long-running root causes, including a 2011 drought, high global food prices, and a drop in remittances from migrants due to the global economic crisis and instability in Libya.

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *Mali—Humanitarian Update #19*, March 27, 2013; U.N. doc. S/2013/189, op. cit; and AFP, “UN Eyes North Mali Aid Access Within Days,” February 6, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> See “Funding Summary,” at <http://www.unocha.org/crisis/sahel>.

<sup>48</sup> Carson prepared statement, House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on the Crisis in Mali, February 14, 2013.

United States applauds and stands with France” and that “the fight against AQIM may be far from America’s borders, but it is fundamentally in America’s interest.”<sup>49</sup> With regard to the other components of the U.S. response, Administration officials have urged Mali to hold peace talks with groups that reject terrorism and accept Mali’s territorial integrity, and to hold elections as part of a larger political transition, while continuing to provide humanitarian aid. The Administration has also imposed a travel ban on at least 87 individuals either involved in or supportive of the 2012 coup.<sup>50</sup>

Prior to France’s military intervention, Administration officials had urged an African-led approach to Mali while expressing serious concern over ECOWAS’s lack of capacity, and over the potential unintended consequences of regional military intervention.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, the Administration has pledged at least \$96 million to support AFISMA. Of this, the State Department has identified at least \$86 million in Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) funds—a foreign assistance account with broad authorities related to support for stabilization activities—for contracted airlift, training, equipment, and vital supplies for AFISMA personnel. An additional \$5 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funding has been identified for training Formed Police Units deploying under AFISMA. Separately, the Defense Department has airlifted some Chadian troops into Mali, as part of support to French operations.<sup>52</sup>

In public statements, Administration officials have, at times, expressed divergent assessments of the threat emanating from northern Mali, and of the urgency required to address it. For example, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson testified before Congress in June 2012 that “AQIM has not demonstrated the capability to threaten U.S. interests outside of West or North Africa and it has not threatened to attack the U.S. homeland,” adding that “we are nevertheless working to counter its influence.” In contrast, General Carter Ham, the commander of AFRICOM, stated in December that AQIM “aspire[s] to conduct events more broadly across the region, and eventually to the United States.” Defense Secretary Leon Panetta stated in December that “the main goal of Al Qaeda is to attack the United States... And if we’re not going to allow it to happen, we’ve got to go after them in Yemen, in Somalia and yes, in Mali if necessary.”<sup>53</sup> Other recent statements are reported above (see “Assessing AQIM”).

## U.S. Foreign Assistance

Prior to the coup, the United States was one of the largest bilateral donors to Mali, with aid programs focusing on food security, health, education, governance, counterterrorism, and military professionalization. Bilateral foreign aid appropriations totaled about \$100 million-\$140 million annually in recent years, in addition to a five-year, \$461 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact, which began being implemented in 2007 and focused on improving

<sup>49</sup> *The New York Times*, “French Strikes in Mali Supplant Caution of U.S.,” January 13, 2013; White House, “Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden to the Munich Security Conference, February 2, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> White House News Briefing, January 15, 2013; Assistant Secretary of State Carson testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, February 14, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Carson testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 5, 2012; and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights, June 29, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> *Justification for Drawdown to Provide Airlift and Refueling Services to Chad and France*, February 6, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Carson, testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, June 29, 2012; Adam Entous and Drew Hinshaw, “U.S. Sets Sights on Al Qaeda in Mali,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 2012; *Wall Street Journal*, “Terror Fight Shifts to Africa,” December 7, 2012; CNN, “Panetta on Al Qaeda in Mali,” December 13, 2012.

agricultural development along the Niger River and constructing a new international airport in Bamako.

Many types of U.S. bilateral foreign aid for Mali are now prohibited under the FY2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act, P.L. 112-74, as amended and extended, which bars State Department and USAID-administered aid to the government of any country in which a military coup or decree has overthrown a democratically elected government.<sup>54</sup> This notably applies to State Department-administered assistance to the Malian security forces. According to the Defense Department, the United States had spent approximately \$41 million to train and equip the Malian military between FY2009 and FY2012.<sup>55</sup> Mali's MCC compact has also been terminated.

The coup-related restrictions do not apply to elections-related or humanitarian aid, which has been defined, in the case of Mali, to include health and food security programs. The restriction also does not apply to indirect assistance (i.e., not implemented with the Malian government), or to funding administered by U.S. agencies and departments other than the State Department and USAID. Due to policy concerns, the Administration has suspended some potentially legally permissible programs, including Defense Department-administered security cooperation.<sup>56</sup> Still, some \$70.4 million in U.S. bilateral foreign assistance, in addition to \$148 million in humanitarian aid, has either continued under existing authorities, or been approved to resume.<sup>57</sup>

## **U.S. Counterterrorism in the Sahel: Challenges and Prospects**

For over a decade, the U.S. approach to terrorism threats in the Sahel has largely focused on training and equipping the security forces of "weak states" in the region, encouraging states in the region to cooperate with each other on security initiatives, and attempting to counter local religious radicalization. These efforts have been organized under the multi-year, State Department-led interagency Trans Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which was initiated in 2005.<sup>58</sup> Through Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans Sahara (OEF-TS), which supports TSCTP, U.S. military forces work with their regional counterparts to improve intelligence, coordination, logistics, border control, and targeting. Other Defense Department-

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<sup>54</sup> Similar provisions have been included in annual foreign operations appropriations legislation since at least 1985, and have been carried over into FY2013 via continuing resolutions. Section 7008 of P.L. 112-74 reads: "None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available pursuant to titles III through VI of this Act shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d'etat or decree or, after the date of enactment of this Act, a coup d'état or decree in which the military plays a decisive role: Provided, That assistance may be resumed to such government if the President determines and certifies to the Committees on Appropriations that subsequent to the termination of assistance a democratically elected government has taken office: Provided further, That the provisions of this section shall not apply to assistance to promote democratic elections or public participation in democratic processes."

<sup>55</sup> Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs Amanda Dory, prepared testimony, House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on the Crisis in Mali, February 14, 2013. This figure appears to reflect largely State Department-administered security assistance funding (much of it implemented by the Defense Department), and may not include funding for multinational military exercises and other Defense Department activities.

<sup>56</sup> Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Dory testimony, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 5, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> State Department response to CRS query, November 2012. About \$247 million in cumulative bilateral foreign assistance funding (appropriated in multiple prior fiscal years) that would have gone to Mali has been terminated, suspended, or placed on operational hold due to the combination of legal and policy restrictions. This is in addition to terminated MCC funds. At least \$4.1 million more has been redirected to other countries.

<sup>58</sup> TSCTP is a successor to the 2002-2004 Pan Sahel Initiative, which focused on Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. TSCTP added as partner countries Algeria, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia.

administered funds, such as “Section 1206” train-and-equip programs, also support TSCTP goals.<sup>59</sup> U.S. funding for TSCTP-related activities—both military and non-military—appears to have totaled about \$120 million-\$150 million annually in recent years.<sup>60</sup>

Successive Administrations have claimed improvements in regional security cooperation as a result of TSCTP programming. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), however, the program has not established a comprehensive strategic design or ensured effective interagency coordination. It has also faced difficulties in measuring outcomes.<sup>61</sup> As the case of Mali illustrates, the disruption of funds due to political or human rights concerns in partner countries also presents a challenge to program continuity and capacity building efforts. Mali is the third TSCTP partner country to undergo a military coup since 2008 (after Mauritania and Niger). Each has caused disruptions in U.S. engagement and have led some to question TSCTP’s effectiveness in promoting stability and civilian control of the armed forces (although these countries’ history of repeated coups predates the program). Some critics have further accused TSCTP of focusing on military assistance to the detriment of other types of U.S. engagement, resulting in what critics allege has been a “militarization of U.S. policy” in the region or a misbalancing of U.S. resources that could fuel, rather than dampen, extremism.<sup>62</sup>

Problems related to U.S. security assistance in Mali have contributed to policy debates over the design and effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. Because AQIM has been present in Mali for years, and because Mali—unlike its neighbors at times—was seen as relatively democratic and respectful of human rights, Mali has been a focus of TSCTP activities over the past decade. This was the case even amid persistent indications that Mali’s capacity and commitment to counter AQIM were limited. The events of the past year have now dramatically undermined any gains, and may place the value of such programs into question.

## Outlook

International policymakers face complex challenges in addressing the situation in Mali, because the threads of Mali’s political and security crises are intertwined, and are also tied to a difficult regional context. Notably, given the Malian military’s internal problems and capacity shortfalls, it is unclear whether Malian forces will be able or willing to follow French military strikes by securing and holding territory liberated from insurgent groups. Similar concerns apply to probable regional troop contributors, who face significant capacity, logistics, and financial shortfalls. International military operations could also prompt a backlash among northern communities, terrorist attacks by extremists, or additional frictions within the Malian military. As

<sup>59</sup> On Section 1206, see CRS Report RS22855, *Security Assistance Reform: “Section 1206” Background and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted).

<sup>60</sup> CRS analysis based on funding figures in the annual *Congressional Budget Justification-Foreign Operations*, responses to CRS queries provided by the State Department and Defense Department, and congressional notifications.

<sup>61</sup> Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Actions Needed to Enhance Implementation of Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership*, July 31, 2008. In 2012, GAO categorized its three main recommendations as “Not Implemented.” Evaluation of USAID’s counter-extremism programs under TSCTP has suggested that the impact is positive but limited. *Mid-Term Evaluation of USAID’s Counter-Extremism Programming in Africa*, February 2011.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Concerned Africa Scholars, *US Militarization of the Sahara-Sahel Security, Space & Imperialism*, Spring 2010; Ron Capps, *Drawing on the Full Strength of America: Seeking Greater Civilian Capacity in U.S. Foreign Affairs*, Refugees International, September 2009; and ICG, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?* 2005.

noted above, the path to achieving territorial reunification—which Malians may prioritize above international terrorism concerns—is fundamentally uncertain.

Long-running debates over the framework and effectiveness of TSCTP appear to have been accompanied by significant interagency friction over how aggressively to respond to regional security threats. These debates appear set to continue amid ongoing examination by Congress of the legal and policy environment for U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Mali and the Sahel.

Emerging policy questions include:

- What is the relative importance of the situation in Mali compared to other U.S. policy priorities and national security concerns?
- What is the likely scope and duration of French operations in Mali, and what end-state do these operations seek? What role should the United States play as these operations continue? To what extent are security gains likely to be durable? To what extent has Western military intervention in Mali served as a magnet for foreign fighters, and what has been its impact on local extremism?
- What benchmarks may be considered as prerequisites to any transition to a U.N.-conducted stabilization or peacekeeping operation? What is the appropriate role for such an operation? What are the capabilities and political commitment of regional troop contributors? What policy and funding lessons can be drawn from ongoing U.S.- and U.N.-supported, African-led military operations elsewhere on the continent, including in Somalia and in Darfur, Sudan?
- Do AQIM and associated groups in northern Mali primarily pose a threat to regional security, or do they pose a more direct threat to the United States? What has been the impact of international military operations in Mali on the level of threat these groups pose to U.S. interests? Where might core terrorist actors move as they are pushed out of northern Malian towns?
- How are AQIM and associated groups reacting to international military strikes? What are their capabilities? To what extent do these groups benefit from any local support? What types of external support do they receive, if any?
- What is the likely timeframe for elections in Mali, and under what conditions would elections be perceived as credible? In the interim, should the legal and policy restrictions on U.S. security assistance and cooperation for the Malian security forces be revised, or maintained?
- What are the implications for international policymakers of coup leader Capt. Sanogo's continued role in Malian politics and security sector reform? What is the likely impact of international training—such as the nascent European Union mission to restructure the Malian security forces—on the cohesiveness and behavior of the Malian military?
- What can or should the United States do to encourage civilian-led peace processes and improved governance in Mali?

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