

October 3, 2014

Mali: Current Issues

With substantial international assistance, Mali has emerged from a complex political and security crisis, yet still faces stark challenges. Between 2011 and 2013, Mali experienced a separatist rebellion in the north led by members of the nomadic minority ethnic Tuareg community, a military coup that overthrew an elected government, a regional drought that caused a food security crisis, and ultimately the takeover of the northern two-thirds of the country by Islamist extremists.

By mid-2012, three Islamist extremist groups had routed or integrated most of the separatist fighters and asserted control over most of northern Mali. These groups were: *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)*, a regional network led primarily by Algerian nationals; the *Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA)*, an AQIM splinter faction founded by Mauritanian and Malian Arabs; and a Malian Tuareg-led group, *Ansar al Dine*. In 2013, MUJWA and another AQIM splinter faction merged as *Al Murabitoun*, a group described by the State Department as “the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and international interests in the Sahel.” These groups reportedly have ties to the Nigerian group *Boko Haram*, elements of which reportedly received training in northern Mali in 2012.

France launched a military intervention in January 2013 that ousted Islamist commanders from major towns in the north. Acting under a bilateral agreement with Mali, French operations have killed or captured a number of extremist fighters and disrupted their logistical networks. The French were assisted in early 2013 by Chadian military forces that had deployed as part of an African Union (AU) stabilization operation. Some extremist commanders reportedly moved to other countries—notably Libya—while others remain active in Mali. France is expected to maintain roughly 1,000 troops in Mali as part of an evolving counterterrorism deployment in West Africa, known as Operation Barkhane.

Mali held presidential and parliamentary elections in the second half of 2013, leading the United States to lift coup-related aid restrictions and African regional organizations to restore Mali’s membership. **President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta**, a veteran Malian politician and former opposition leader, successfully campaigned on a platform of “reconciliation, peace, and sovereignty,” promising a break from past patterns of poor governance. His record in office has been marred, however, by deteriorating security trends and a series of high-level corruption scandals.

The United Nations (U.N.) Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established in July 2013, largely absorbing the AU operation. As of August 31, it comprised about 9,300 uniformed personnel out of a total authorized strength of 12,640. MINUSMA is mandated to

Capital: Bamako
Comparative Size: about 2x the size of Texas
Population: 16.5M
GDP Per Capita: \$716
Religions: Muslim 95%, Christian 2%, other/none 3% [2009]
Median Age: 16
Key Exports: cotton, gold, livestock
Key Imports: petroleum, machinery & equipment, construction materials, foodstuffs, textiles



Sources: Graphic created by CRS. Map data from Esri (2013). Fact information from CIA World Factbook and IMF.

help stabilize key areas and protect civilians; assist with political dialogue, national reconciliation, and the conduct of anticipated local-level elections; support the reestablishment of state authority; and promote human rights, among other tasks. MINUSMA does not have a direct counterterrorism role, unlike French forces. Logistical hurdles and security threats—including regular attacks by Islamist insurgents—have hindered the mission’s ability to deploy its forces beyond large towns in the north.

Security conditions in the north have improved since 2012, but rebel groups have not been demobilized and Islamist extremists have not been fully defeated. In May 2014, deadly clashes erupted between Malian troops and the Tuareg-led *National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)*, along with other rebel forces, in the MNLA stronghold of Kidal, when Prime Minister Moussa Mara attempted to visit the area. The rebels killed a number of Malian soldiers and officials, and went on to reassert control in Kidal and other areas. The military largely collapsed and withdrew from much of the north.

Humanitarian needs remain extensive in both the north and south, with about 1.9 million Malians (over one in ten) facing “severe” food insecurity, according to U.N. figures. As of mid-2014, nearly 130,000 Malians remained internally displaced as a result of the 2011-2013 crisis, and about 140,000 remained refugees in neighboring countries.

Peace Process in Algiers

In June 2013, a cease-fire accord was signed by the then-interim government, the MNLA, and other northern rebels, paving the way for the 2013 elections. Known as the Ouagadougou agreement, it called for “inclusive” peace talks within 60 days of the formation of a newly elected government. Such talks are widely viewed as necessary to address the grievances of northern nomadic populations who perceive a long-running pattern of exclusion and

persecution by the central state in Bamako. However, a peace process has been slow to take shape, in part due to disagreements on the prerequisites, scope, and range of parties to be included. Lack of political will on both sides has been a key factor. Many southerners—i.e., President Kéïta's base—ardently oppose peace talks with the MNLA due to its role in Mali's crisis. For their part, MNLA commanders have rejected the government's calls for them to disarm, and cease-fire provisions calling for armed groups to be confined to camps have not been implemented.

Peace talks began in July 2014, hosted by Algeria, after the Kidal clashes led to a renewed push. On July 24, a preliminary framework was signed by the government and two northern rebel coalitions. The signatories agreed to accept Mali's territorial integrity and a secular state. A second round of talks began in Algiers in September, with the aim of ultimately signing an agreement in Mali. The current round of talks is expected to address substantive issues such as how to achieve meaningful decentralization of political power in the north; the potential integration of rebel combatants into the security forces and administration; and the potential for acknowledgment and prosecutions of abuses committed during cyclical conflicts.

Conflict in the north is rooted in multi-layered disputes over political power; shifting social hierarchies; control of smuggling routes and patronage opportunities; and access to natural resources such as water and arable land. Communal tensions that arose in past conflicts, notably in the 1990s, have deepened. The current peace talks are unlikely to address all of these issues. Many observers emphasize the importance of community reconciliation, but there is little consensus on how best to pursue it.

Governance Concerns

Corruption and the reported involvement of state actors in illicit trafficking remain concerns. The crisis showed that corruption and mismanagement had hollowed out many state institutions, notwithstanding adherence to democratic processes such as regular multiparty elections. Despite President Kéïta's campaign promises, the International Monetary Fund and other donors suspended budget support in May 2014, citing improper fiscal management and a lack of budget transparency. The government has agreed to auditing and reforms in the hope of restoring funding.

Military dysfunction was a key factor behind both insurgent gains and the military coup in 2012. The European Union is conducting a multi-year initiative to reform and retrain the Malian armed forces, but the Malian military's collapse during the May clashes in Kidal pointed to how difficult and time-consuming this effort is likely to be. President Kéïta has also restructured the military chain of command and initiated a trial of the 2012 coup leader, in connection with alleged intra-military abuses. Critics view the government as less willing to pursue allegations of abuses against Tuareg and Arab civilians in the north.

A weak and sometimes dysfunctional justice sector is widely viewed as contributing to impunity and to northern grievances against the government. Progress has been slow

with regard to implementing promised anti-terrorism prosecutions and a truth-and-reconciliation commission.

U.S. Policy and Issues for Congress

The U.S. response to the crisis in Mali has included humanitarian aid; logistical support for French operations and for African troop deployments; elections support; and security assistance for neighboring states to help prevent spillover. The Obama Administration voted at the U.N. Security Council in favor of creating MINUSMA and contributes to its budget. In April 2014, U.S. Permanent Representative to the U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power testified before Congress that “the need now is to further marginalize the terrorist groups, while fostering national reconciliation, ending impunity, guarding against corruption, and laying the groundwork for a government in which all Malians can have faith.” In May 2014, in response to the Kidal clashes, the State Department spokeswoman called for “an inclusive and credible negotiation process” with rebel groups.

The United States provided an estimated \$116 million in bilateral aid to Mali in FY2014, in addition to MINUSMA contributions (estimated at \$319 million in FY2014—appropriated funds), emergency humanitarian aid (at least \$75 million to date in FY2014), and other funds budgeted on a regional or global basis. The Administration has requested \$122 million in bilateral aid for FY2015. Such aid aims to support health programs, food security, good governance, and “inclusive economic growth,” among other goals. The Administration has also re-started some military aid programs, focusing initially on defense sector reform and professionalization. (Prior to 2012, Mali was a major recipient, within the Sahel, of U.S. counterterrorism assistance under the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership [TSCTP].) Mali is one of six African countries that will be the focus of the Administration's new Security Governance Initiative, announced in August 2014.

Congressional authorizations, appropriations, and oversight have actively shaped the scope of U.S. aid to Mali, contributions to MINUSMA, and defense and counterterrorism initiatives in the Sahel. Congress may consider the implications of developments in Mali for U.S. counterterrorism, stabilization, humanitarian, and democracy promotion efforts, both in Africa and beyond.

Outlook

Mali has overcome many obstacles since early 2013, but enduring governance and security problems threaten the sustainability of these gains. Political instability and security threats in neighboring states may also affect Mali's trajectory. Donors have pledged billions of dollars in aid for Mali's post-conflict recovery, yet the government's ability to absorb and oversee such aid flows may be questioned, as may Malian leaders' capacity and will to address underlying factors of instability. Some observers refer to Mali as having returned to the pre-crisis “status quo ante,” reflecting improvements but also potential risks.