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Mali: Transition from Conflict?

Overview

With substantial international assistance, Mali began to emerge in 2013 from a complex political and security crisis. Despite some progress, the underlying causes of conflict and poor governance have not been resolved, and security conditions have deteriorated since mid-2014. These factors pose policy dilemmas for the United States and others seeking to foster regional stability and prevent a new security vacuum and humanitarian crisis from emerging. Congress authorizes and appropriates funding for U.S. aid to Mali and for U.S. support to a U.N. peacekeeping operation. Congress also oversees long-standing U.S. efforts to address humanitarian needs, promote development, and counter transnational terrorism in Mali and across West Africa's Sahel region.

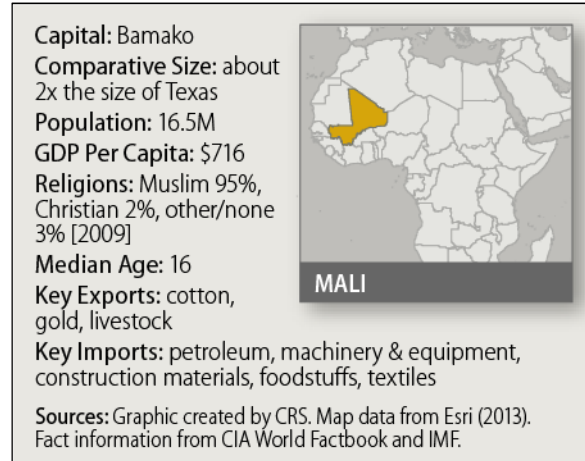
Challenges include an ongoing, multi-faceted conflict in the vast desert north of the country, widespread poverty, and state corruption. Peace talks between the government and northern separatist rebels began in 2014, but have yet to deliver an agreement. In early 2015, the talks appeared to falter. In the meantime, the separatists, Islamist extremist groups, and government actors appear to be backing local-level proxies in intercommunal conflicts, contributing to ethnic tensions and battling over the spoils of endemic illicit smuggling, including drug trafficking.

In 2013, donors pledged about \$4 billion for post-conflict assistance to Mali, about half of which had been disbursed as of late 2014. Foreign troops are also deployed in Mali to support the extension of state authority in the north and for counterterrorism purposes. The U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is authorized to have up to 12,640 uniformed personnel. France, which conducted a military intervention in Mali in 2013, is drawing down from a peak of about 4,500 troops to about 1,000, now considered part of a regional counterterrorism mission, Operation Barkhane.

Background

Members of Mali's semi-nomadic minority ethnic Tuareg community launched a separatist rebellion in the north in 2011, leveraging flows of fighters and arms from Libya. Mid-ranking soldiers, reportedly angry at their commanders' mishandling of the war, overthrew Mali's elected government in a coup. By mid-2012, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an Algerian-led regional network that has had a presence in northern Mali for over a decade, along with two loosely allied groups, had ousted or absorbed most of the separatists and asserted control over most of the north. These events displaced hundreds of thousands of Malians and exacerbated a regional humanitarian emergency caused by a severe drought.

Figure 1. Mali Facts



In January 2013, France launched a military intervention that ousted extremist groups from most northern towns. Mali's transitional government and the main separatist groups signed a ceasefire agreement that called for the start of peace talks as soon as an elected government was seated in Bamako. MINUSMA was rolled out in July 2013, absorbing an African Union military force. Veteran politician Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta (*KAY-tah*, often referred to as IBK) was elected president later that year and his supporters won a majority in parliament, putting an end to a shaky transitional government that was widely perceived as influenced by the former junta.

Security and governance challenges have severely undermined already daunting development prospects in Mali, one of the world's poorest countries. Cotton and gold are key export earners. Some 80% of the labor force is engaged in agriculture. Droughts, poor infrastructure, high population growth, and land degradation have contributed to endemic food insecurity. Security threats and contested political control in the north have reduced humanitarian groups' access to needy populations. About 143,000 Malians are refugees in neighboring states, with the largest populations in Mauritania and Niger, and about 86,000 more were internally displaced as of late 2014. Many refugees reportedly fear that they would not be safe returning to their home regions.

Government Struggles

Despite the 2013 ceasefire agreement, President Kéïta delayed seeking a meaningful peace process for nearly a year after being elected. For their part, northern rebel commanders refused to confine their combatants to barracks or to abandon claims of territorial administration. Broadly, Kéïta faces challenges in meeting the expectations of his southern constituents (e.g., improving living

conditions, fighting corruption, and reasserting sovereignty) while also responding to international pressures to acknowledge and address northern grievances stemming from perceived state neglect and persecution. Meanwhile, a series of high-level corruption scandals have undermined public and donor confidence in his administration.

In May 2014, clashes broke out between the military and rebel forces when then-Prime Minister Moussa Mara attempted to visit the far-northern town of Kidal, which remains under rebel control. The rebels defeated government troops, reportedly killing civilian officials as well as soldiers. Although a ceasefire was ultimately brokered, the military withdrew from much of the north after the Kidal violence. Apparent internal military dysfunction during the clashes revealed continued shortcomings, in spite of European Union-supported efforts to retrain the Malian armed forces. Efforts to re-extend the government's presence in the north were also set back. The Kidal events arguably forced Bamako to the negotiating table, and talks began in Algeria in July 2014.

President Kéïta reshuffled the cabinet in January 2015, appointing as Prime Minister Modibo Kéïta (not a direct relation), a senior advisor and former head of Bamako's peace negotiation team. Observers have portrayed the new prime minister as more experienced and effective than his predecessor, Mara, a populist youth leader. Whether he and his cabinet can salvage the peace process and boost the government's reputation remains to be seen.

Stalled Peace Talks

Northern armed groups, both separatist and loyalist, are represented in Algiers by two fractious alliances. The "Coordination" includes the largest Tuareg-led separatist group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), which broke from the AQIM-aligned Tuareg-led group Ansar al Dine. The second alliance, known as the "Platform," is viewed as close to Bamako. Ceasefire agreements laid out commitments to respect Mali's territorial integrity and secularism, but commitment to these principles likely varies among participants. In late 2014, talks stalled over the government's rejection of federalism, which the Coordination has insisted on. In early 2015, the Coordination threatened to withdraw from the talks after U.N. airstrikes on its positions. (MINUSMA maintained that its troops had come under rebel fire.)

Peace talks are expected to deliver a consensus on thorny issues such as the decentralization of political power; security arrangements in the north; the potential integration of rebel combatants into the security forces and state administration; and justice and reconciliation issues. Similar issues were nominally addressed in peace accords in the 1990s and 2000s that broke down, making the path to a sustainable agreement uncertain. The talks are also unlikely to resolve local struggles that have fed conflict in the north, related to disputed political legitimacy, shifting social hierarchies, control of smuggling routes and patronage, and access to scarce water and arable land.

U.N. Peacekeeping Challenges

The U.N. Security Council has mandated MINUSMA to help stabilize the north and protect civilians, promote the reestablishment of state authority, and assist with political dialogue, among other tasks. In northern Mali, MINUSMA faces severe logistical constraints and security threats, and its troops have suffered high casualty rates in extremist attacks. Leading troop contributors include impoverished African states—such as Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Togo—as well as frequent U.N. peacekeeping contributors such as Bangladesh, and several European countries, notably The Netherlands. The operation has reached only three-quarters of its authorized size, and many troop contingents remain under-equipped by U.N. standards.

Strained Donor Relations

In December 2014, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) resumed lending to Mali after the government agreed to independently audit several controversial spending decisions. In May 2014, the IMF had suspended its Mali programs, stating that the purchase of a new presidential jet and a set of defense procurement contracts had demonstrated improper fiscal management and a lack of budget transparency. The decision prompted other donors to suspend their budget support as well. According to news reports, the purchases were overvalued; spending was not included in the official budget; and contracts involved middle men reputed to be close to President Kéïta.

U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. officials have emphasized the need to improve governance, foster reconciliation, and marginalize violent extremist groups. U.S. aid aims to support peace and reconciliation, development, and health programs in Mali. The United States has also provided humanitarian assistance; financial support for MINUSMA's budget; logistical support for French military operations; training and equipment for African troops in MINUSMA; and security assistance for neighboring states seeking to prevent terrorist spillover. U.S. bilateral aid in FY2014 totaled \$116 million, in addition to \$319 million for MINUSMA's budget, emergency humanitarian aid, and other funds budgeted on a regional or global basis. For FY2015, the Administration requested \$122 million for bilateral aid and contributed an estimated \$291 million to MINUSMA.

Prior to 2012, Mali received substantial U.S. counterterrorism assistance under the State Department-led, multi-country Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). Mali continues to receive TSCTP assistance, notably for countering extremist ideology. In the near-term, U.S. security assistance appears likely to focus on defense sector reform rather than building counterterrorism capacity. Mali is one of six African focus countries under the Administration's new Africa Security Governance Initiative (SGI), but the program's scope and the level of funding for Mali remain to be seen.

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