



Conflict in Mali

Mali faces intertwined security and governance challenges. The government signed a peace accord with northern separatist rebels in 2015, but key provisions remain unimplemented. Signatory armed groups continue to assert territorial control in much of the vast desert north. At the same time, Islamist insurgent groups have expanded from the north into previously stable central Mali, leveraging (and fomenting) interethnic violence and local resentment toward state actors to recruit supporters. Islamist extremists have also carried out attacks in and near the capital, Bamako. In the center and northeast, civilian massacres by ethnic militias—some of which appear to have the tacit backing of state actors—have contributed to worsening insecurity. Rebel, terrorist, communal, and criminal armed networks are fluid and shifting, complicating conflict resolution. Some Malians have proposed peace talks with jihadist groups, but the idea remains controversial.

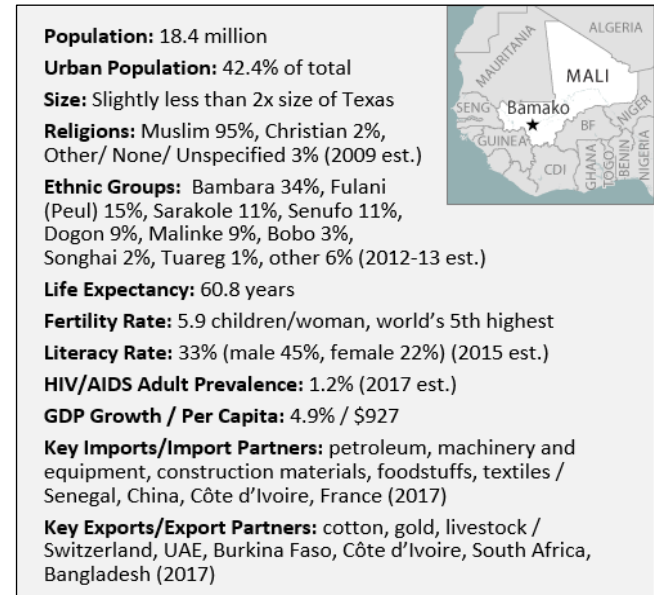
These challenges have severely undermined already daunting development prospects in Mali, one of the world's poorest countries. Poverty, high population growth, poor infrastructure, environmental factors, and conflict have driven widespread food insecurity. Security threats and limited donor funding have constrained humanitarian relief. As of mid-2019, about 148,000 Malians were internally displaced (roughly double the number in 2018) and nearly 140,000 were refugees in neighboring states. Insecurity and a lack of basic services have impeded refugee returns.

President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta won reelection to a second five-year term in 2018 in a vote featuring low turnout and some procedural irregularities. Security threats disrupted or prevented voting in hundreds of polling stations, many of them in central Mali. Kéïta's margin of victory and the number of votes cast for him were lower than in his 2013 election, which restored civilian government after a military coup. Corruption scandals may have undermined faith in Kéïta's leadership among members of his largely southern constituency, along with his government's inability to improve living standards, ensure security, or reassert state control over the north.

Foreign troops have deployed to Mali in an effort to bolster stability and counter terrorism. The mandate of the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) includes supporting the 2015 peace accord and protecting civilians. Over 1,000 French troops are also based in the country as part of Operation Barkhane, a regional counterterrorism mission that grew out of France's 2013 military intervention in Mali. The European Union (EU) has a multi-year program to train and restructure the Malian military. In 2017, the G5 Sahel—a regional grouping of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad—launched a “joint force” to counter security threats in border regions. The initiative has received donor backing but has conducted few operations to date; a lack of capacity

and resources, mutual distrust, and divergent priorities among states in the region have hampered its effectiveness.

Figure 1. Mali at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic, drawn from CIA *World Factbook* and IMF; 2018 estimates unless noted.

Background: Mali's 2011-2013 Crisis

Between 2011 and 2013, a complex political, security, and humanitarian crisis devastated Mali's military, central government institutions, and northern populations. In 2011, members of the semi-nomadic Tuareg minority launched a separatist rebellion in the north, leveraging fighters and arms flowing from war-torn Libya. They were supported by a local group linked to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an Algerian-led regional terrorist network and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). In early 2012, soldiers angered by their leaders' mishandling of the war ousted Mali's elected president in a coup. Amid the ensuing military collapse, the northern rebels declared an independent state of “Azawad.” By mid-2012, however, AQIM and its local allies and offshoots had outmaneuvered the separatists and asserted control over most of the north, an area about the size of Texas. These events displaced hundreds of thousands and exacerbated a regional humanitarian emergency spurred by a severe drought.

In early 2013, citing a sudden southward jihadist advance, France deployed its military to oust jihadists from northern towns. The United States provided logistical support, while Chadian soldiers aided French ground operations. Separatist rebels then reasserted control over some of the territory vacated by Islamist groups. A mid-2013 ceasefire between the transitional government and separatist rebels paved the way for elections and peace talks. MINUSMA deployed

and absorbed an African Union (AU) intervention force. Kéïta, a veteran politician, was elected in late 2013, and his coalition won a majority in parliament.

A Stalled Peace Accord

The signatories to the Algerian-mediated 2015 peace accord are the Malian government and two rival northern armed group coalitions: the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), whose stronghold is in far-north Tuareg-majority Kidal, and the Platform, rooted in the more ethnically diverse northeast. The CMA includes former separatist factions, while the Platform includes groups that opposed the separatist cause in 2012. They have periodically fought each other, and the Platform is sometimes seen as a government proxy. Various new factions have emerged since 2015, with differing views on the accord and the state.

The agreement commits the government to greater political decentralization and increased development in the north, in exchange for armed groups ruling out territorial separation. The armed groups also committed to disarm, and potentially integrate into state security forces. Other provisions also aim to foster northern representation in the central government, justice and security sector reforms, and investigation of past abuses. Designated terrorist groups (including Malian-led groups) were not party to the talks; discussion of federalism or altering the secular structure of the state were ruled out by mediators and Bamako.

International hopes that the peace process would lead to deep political reforms and isolate jihadist actors have yet to be fulfilled. Signatory armed groups have yet to demobilize, while steps toward decentralization, structural reforms, accountability, and infrastructure improvements in the north have been slow to nonexistent. A lack of capacity and flagging political will on the part of the government and armed group signatories are key factors, as are actions by spoilers, including jihadists, to undermine peace.

The structure of the 2015 peace process arguably contained the seeds of Mali's continued destabilization. Many signatories are veterans of past conflicts who have cycled through the government, military, and militias for decades. The parties were asked to make concessions highly unpopular with their respective constituencies. Granting largely Tuareg- and Arab-led armed groups a seat at the table also arguably incentivized taking up arms in the name of communal grievances, while alienating those who felt themselves to be victims of both the state and ethnic Tuareg and Arab rivals (such as ethnic Fulani communities in central and northeastern Mali). U.N. sanctions monitors have alleged involvement by some signatory armed group elements in terrorism, drug trafficking, and ethnic conflict.

Islamist Insurgency

Despite territorial losses in 2013, Islamist armed groups have proven resilient, withstanding French strikes and exploiting the evolving conflict to their advantage. In 2015, AQIM and its offshoot Al Murabitoun (“the sentinels”) jointly claimed a siege at a Bamako hotel in which 19 civilians—including an American—were killed. In 2017, AQIM's Sahel branch merged with Al Murabitoun and two other Mali-based groups to form the Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM, after its Arabic acronym). Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Malian Tuareg, heads the coalition. JNIM has since claimed attacks on U.N., French, and local state

personnel in the north and center—as well as large attacks in the capital of Burkina Faso in March 2018. A June 2018 JNIM attack on the G5 Sahel joint force headquarters in central Mali led the command to relocate to Bamako. A separate AQIM offshoot active in Mali has affiliated with the Islamic State and claimed the October 2017 deadly attack on U.S. soldiers in Niger.

While Islamist violence has continued to expand, civilian deaths attributable to intercommunal violence surpassed those from Islamist militants in 2019, according to open-source analysis by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Ethnic militias have carried out a series of civilian massacres since 2017, sometimes in the course of ostensible counterterrorism operations; some militias appear to benefit from the support of state actors. Ethnic tit-for-tat killings may further fuel recruitment by Islamist armed groups that offer a means of self-defense and retribution. Malian soldiers also have been implicated in serious abuses during counterinsurgency operations.

U.N. Peacekeeping Operation

MINUSMA is authorized at up to 15,209 military and police personnel. Renewing its mandate in June 2019, the Security Council decided that MINUSMA's “second strategic priority”—after support for implementation of the 2015 accord—is to “facilitate” a new strategy to protect civilians, reduce intercommunal violence, and reestablish state authority in central Mali, followed by other tasks. MINUSMA faces stark logistical challenges and has had the highest annual fatality rate among current U.N. peacekeeping missions. Many of the top troop contributors are other African countries, and they have borne the brunt of fatalities. MINUSMA does not have an explicit mandate to conduct counterterrorism operations, despite requests from Mali, the G5, and the AU that it be authorized to do so. The Security Council has authorized MINUSMA to provide logistical support to the G5 force, but—reflecting stated U.S. concerns—only on a cost-reimbursable basis.

U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. officials have emphasized the importance of implementing the 2015 peace accord as a step toward greater stability. U.S. bilateral aid, totaling \$140 million in FY2018, supports development, health, conflict mitigation, governance, and military professionalization programs. The United States also provides humanitarian aid (\$82 million in FY2018), financial support for MINUSMA (\$317 million in FY2018), military training and equipment for African troops preparing to deploy with MINUSMA, military aid for G5 Sahel members (\$111 million pledged to date) and logistical support for French operations.

Mali participates in the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), but it has not been a major regional recipient of U.S. military aid since the 2012 coup. Mali is also not expected to be a top recipient of U.S. aid to the G5 Sahel. Instead, U.S. security assistance since 2012 has focused on defense sector reform and building the counterterrorism capacity of civilian security forces, while other countries in the G5 Sahel have received sizable U.S. military training and equipment by regional standards. Mali is designated under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (Title IV of P.L. 110-457) and is thus subject to legal restrictions on certain U.S. security assistance, absent a presidential waiver.

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