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Crisis in Mali

The military seizure of power in August 2020 has heightened political uncertainty in Mali amid severe security, governance, and humanitarian challenges. Security conditions have worsened steadily in recent years as Islamist insurgents have expanded from the north into central Mali. A 2015 peace accord with northern separatists remains largely unimplemented. Ethnic militias, some of which appear to enjoy state backing, have massacred civilians in the rural center and northeast. Bamako (Fig. 1), while comparatively secure, has seen large terrorist attacks in recent years, such as a hotel siege in 2015 that killed 19 civilians, including one American. Rebel, terrorist, communal defense, and criminal networks often overlap.

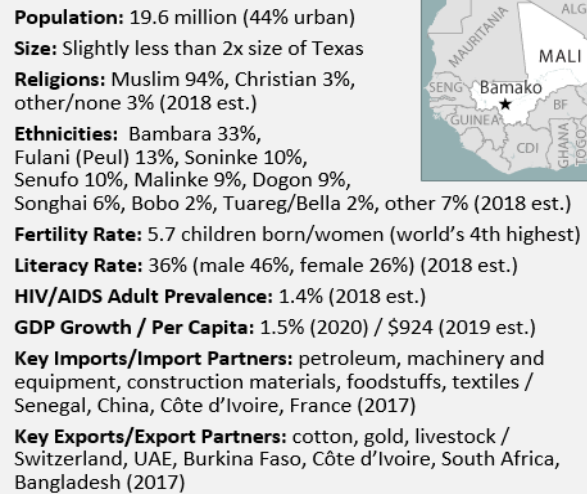
These complex threats and security dynamics have impeded socioeconomic development and humanitarian relief efforts in a landlocked country with limited arable land. More than 287,000 Malians were internally displaced as of July 2020, almost double the previous year, and at least 142,000 were refugees in neighboring countries as of early 2020, per U.N. figures. The novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought new health and economic difficulties.

Foreign troops have deployed to Mali since 2013 to try to improve stability and counter terrorism. MINUSMA, a U.N. peacekeeping operation, comprises up to 15,209 uniformed personnel. France has about 5,100 troops deployed in West Africa's Sahel region, including Mali, under Operation Barkhane, a French-led counterterrorism mission to which the United States provides logistical support (as authorized by Congress under 10 U.S.C. §331) and intelligence sharing. The European Union (EU) runs programs to train and restructure Mali's military and build the capacity of its civilian security forces. In 2017, the countries of the G5 Sahel—Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad—initiated a “joint force” to coordinate military operations in border regions.

Military seizure of power. On August 18, after months of growing anti-government protests, a group of military colonels led by Col. Assimi Goïta, a member of Mali's elite special forces battalion, seized power. The self-described National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) detained civilian officials including President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta, who resigned on television and later left the country for medical care. Popular opposition to Kéïta, who was reelected to a second term in 2018, had built for over a year, spurred by alleged interference in legislative elections held in early 2020, corruption scandals, worsening insecurity, militia violence, and economic hardships. In June 2020, a loose alliance of politicians, civil society actors, and followers of an influential Bamako religious leader called for Kéïta to resign, provoking a violent state crackdown. Regional heads of state attempted to mediate, unsuccessfully. The National Assembly speaker (Kéïta's constitutional successor) was among 31 disputed members

of parliament whom regional mediators asked to step down; Kéïta also dissolved parliament when he resigned.

Figure 1. Mali at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA *World Factbook* and International Monetary Fund; 2020 estimates unless noted.

Some protest leaders applauded the CNSP and pledged to work with it. West African leaders, for their part, decried its actions and imposed trade and financial sanctions on Mali, calling for a civilian-led transitional administration that would govern for no more than a year prior to elections. In mid-September, the CNSP issued plans for an 18-month transition; it did not commit to handing power to civilians.

Background

Mali has been mired in crisis since 2012, when state institutions nearly collapsed in the face of a northern separatist rebellion, a military coup, and an Islamist insurgent advance. After junior military officers seized power from an elected president, northern rebels—fueled by arms from Libya and bolstered by fighters with ties to Algerian-led Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—declared an independent state of “Azawad.” By mid-2012, AQIM and two loosely aligned groups had outmaneuvered the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) to assert control over most of the north. France intervened militarily against the Islamists in early 2013, at which point the MNLA and other factions (re-)asserted control in some areas. MINUSMA deployed in mid-2013, and Kéïta won elections later that year, marking the end of Mali's post-coup political transition. The 2012 coup leader, Capt. Amadou Haya Sanogo, faces charges for the murder of rival soldiers, but his trial has been delayed repeatedly.

Stalled Peace Accord

In 2015, Kéïta's administration signed a peace deal with two northern armed coalitions: one led by ex-separatists, and one by pro-unity groups with ties to Bamako. Mediated by Algeria with broad international backing, the so-called

Algiers Accord aimed to address northern political grievances, reestablish state authority in the north, and isolate designated jihadist groups, which were not party to the talks. Implementation has lagged, however, while conflicts have multiplied and spread.

Today, state actors remain absent from much of the north and, increasingly, central Mali (which is outside the scope of the accord). Signatory armed groups have not disarmed, and maintain parallel administrative structures in some areas. Jihadist groups have acted as spoilers, and maintain ties to some formerly allied signatory groups. U.N. sanctions monitors have also reported the involvement of signatory group members in drug trafficking, ethnic violence, and cooption of humanitarian aid, along with state official involvement in protection rackets and obstruction of the peace process. New armed factions have emerged since 2015, with varying views of the peace accord and the state.

The design and process behind the 2015 accord may also have contained the seeds of further destabilization. While the accord is structured as a deal between Bamako and the north, there is an armed struggle *within* the north over territory, trafficking routes, patronage, and revenge. The talks granted concessions to a relatively small number of actors who had taken up arms, alienating others who felt victimized by the state and/or by signatory groups. The mediators ruled out discussion of federalism or altering the secular underpinning of Mali's political system, issues with wide resonance in and beyond the north. Some Malians, including then-President Kéïta, have proposed peace talks with Malian-led Islamist armed groups, but the idea remains controversial, and Western donors have opposed it.

Islamist Insurgency

In 2017, AQIM's Sahel branch merged with an offshoot and two local affiliates to form the Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM), led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Malian ethnic Tuareg. JNIM has since claimed attacks on U.N., French, and state targets in Mali and Burkina Faso. In 2018, JNIM attacked the G5 Sahel joint force headquarters in central Mali, forcing it to relocate to Bamako. A separate AQIM offshoot has affiliated with the Islamic State and claimed the 2017 deadly ambush of U.S. soldiers in Niger.

These groups have proven resilient, withstanding French strikes on top leaders and exploiting local grievances and communal tensions. They have expanded their areas of operation, enlarged their recruitment base, killed dozens of soldiers in attacks on local military outposts, and forced the retreat of state and rival actors by targeting civilian officials, traditional leaders, and individuals accused of colluding with the state and/or the French. Abuses by state security forces and ethnic militias may fuel recruitment by offering a means of self-defense and retribution.

U.N. Peacekeeping Operation

The U.N. Security Council has tasked MINUSMA with supporting implementation of the 2015 peace accord as a "primary strategic priority," most recently under Resolution 2531 (2020). Support for stabilization and the restoration of state authority in central Mali is the mission's "second strategic priority," followed by protection of civilians and other tasks. MINUSMA has struggled with logistical and force protection challenges. Many troop contingents are reportedly under-equipped; African troops (who make up most of the largest contingents) have suffered the most

fatalities in violent attacks by far. As of mid-2020, nine U.S. staff officers were serving in MINUSMA. MINUSMA is not explicitly authorized to pursue counterterrorism, but can provide logistical support to the G5 force if reimbursed.

U.S. Policy and Aid

Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale testified to Congress in early 2020 that U.S. "diplomatic efforts are focused on supporting the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord, which remains the best mechanism for achieving a peaceful and reconciled Mali." He stated that broader U.S. engagement in the Sahel "promotes inclusive and just political systems; advances regional security by combatting violent extremists and traffickers; and encourages economic growth and opportunity through sustainable development and increased American investment." In March 2020, the State Department appointed Dr. J. Peter Pham to serve as the first U.S. Special Envoy for Sahel Stabilization.

The State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) allocated \$130 million in bilateral aid for Mali in FY2019 (excluding food aid), and \$89 million in additional emergency humanitarian assistance. 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. U.S. security assistance has focused on defense sector reforms and building the counterterrorism capacity of Mali's internal security forces. Mali's designation under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (Title IV of P.L. 110-457) triggers restrictions on certain U.S. security aid; in FY2020, President Trump waived most of these for Mali, citing national interest, as permitted under the Act. Since 2018, DOD has sought to scale back its counterterrorism footprint in West Africa, with uncertain implications for Mali and U.S. support to France's Operation Barkhane.

As of mid-September, the State Department had not determined whether the CNSP's actions constituted a "coup d'état" with regard to §7008 of foreign aid appropriations legislation (most recently, P.L. 116-94 Division G), which would impose restrictions on certain aid to Mali's government (notably, military aid). On August 21, Special Envoy Pham stated that the Administration had suspended support for Mali's military pending further review.

Via the U.N. Security Council, the United States has helped shape MINUSMA's mandate and a U.N. sanctions regime established in 2017. In line with Council actions, the United States has designated five individuals for financial sanctions under a Mali-specific Executive Order. (Other Malian individuals and groups are designated for U.S. and U.N. global terrorism sanctions.) The State Department allocated \$347 million for MINUSMA's budget in FY2019; separate U.S. programs support African troop and police contributors. In early 2020, U.S. diplomats at the U.N. called for MINUSMA to be downsized and reoriented toward civilian protection in central Mali, and for sanctions designations "on all sides of the conflict"—a possible reference to government actors. The Security Council renewed MINUSMA's mandate in June without the proposed scope change, and Council members have not made new Mali sanctions designations to date.

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