



Crisis in Mali

The military’s ouster of Mali’s elected president in August 2020 heightened political uncertainty amid severe security, governance, and humanitarian challenges. Under pressure from economic sanctions imposed by West African leaders, the junta agreed to hand power to a nominally civilian-led transitional government, with retired military officer and former defense minister Bah N’Daw serving as President and former foreign minister Moctar Ouane as Prime Minister. Junta leader Col. Assimi Goïta was named Vice President, a new position, and military officers are serving in four key cabinet posts. The transitional administration is expected to organize elections within 18 months.

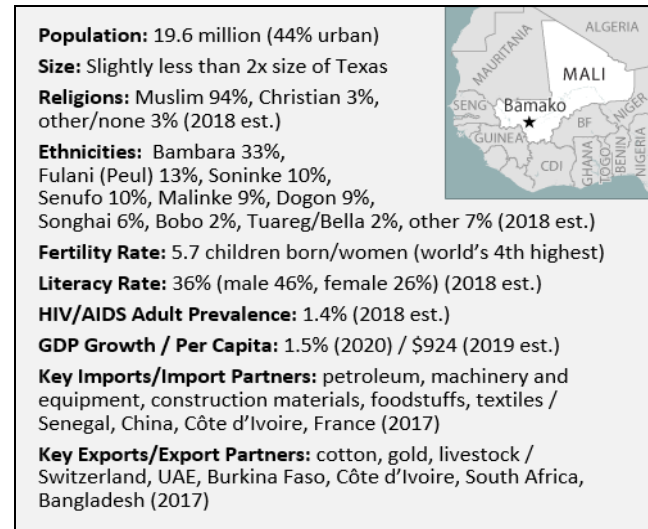
Many in Bamako (**Fig. 1**) welcomed the military’s actions as the culmination of weeks of protests against President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta, who resigned and dissolved parliament after being detained by soldiers. Mali’s new authorities may struggle to meet popular expectations, however. Much of the country’s territory is under the control of Islamist insurgents and other armed groups. A 2015 peace accord with northern separatists has not been fully implemented. Ethnic militias, some of which appear to enjoy state backing, have massacred civilians in rural northeast and central Mali, and military forces have been implicated in extrajudicial killings. While comparatively secure, Bamako has seen several big terrorist attacks, including a hotel siege in 2015 in which 19 civilians (including an American) were killed. Rebel, terrorist, communal defense, and criminal networks often overlap.

These complex threats and security dynamics have impeded development and humanitarian relief efforts in a poor and landlocked country with limited arable land. More than 287,000 Malians were internally displaced as of mid-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 Coronavirus Disease 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, has up to 15,209 uniformed personnel. About 5,100 French troops are deployed in the Sahel region (including Mali) under France’s Operation Barkhane, a counterterrorism mission that receives U.S. logistical support (as authorized by Congress under 10 U.S.C. §331) and intelligence sharing. The European Union runs programs to train and restructure Mali’s military and build the capacity of its civilian security forces. In 2017, the G5 Sahel—comprising Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad—initiated a “joint force” to coordinate military operations in border regions, with donor support.

Background. Mali has been mired in crisis since 2012, when state institutions nearly collapsed in the face of a northern separatist rebellion led by members of the minority ethnic Tuareg community, a military coup, an Islamist insurgent advance, and a regional drought.

Figure 1. Mali at a Glance



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

Military officers seized power in early 2012, and northern rebels—bolstered by arms from Libya and 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.

President Kéïta was reelected in 2018, but opposition mounted over his administration’s apparent interference in legislative elections in early 2020, corruption scandals, and worsening insecurity, militia violence, and economic hardships. In June 2020, a loose alliance of politicians, civil society actors, and supporters of an influential Bamako religious leader convened large protests and called for Kéïta to resign, provoking a violent state crackdown. Regional heads of state attempted unsuccessfully to mediate, including by calling on 31 disputed members of parliament to step down. (The National Assembly Speaker, Kéïta’s constitutional successor, was among them.)

Stalled Peace Accord

In 2015, Kéïta’s administration signed a peace deal with two northern armed coalitions: one led by ex-separatists, the other by pro-unity groups with ties to Bamako. Mediated by Algeria with broad international backing, the “Algiers Accord” aimed to address northern (and specifically Tuareg) political grievances, reestablish state

authority in the north, and isolate designated terrorist groups, which were not party to the talks. Implementation lagged, however, while conflicts multiplied and spread.

Today, state actors remain absent from much of the north—and, increasingly, from 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 also have 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 have contained the seeds of Mali's 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.

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 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 its relocation 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 through targeted attacks on civilian officials, traditional leaders, and individuals accused of colluding with government and/or French forces. Security force and militia abuses may fuel recruitment.

The negotiated release in October 2020 of four prominent hostages held by JNIM—a top Malian opposition politician and three Europeans—appears to have increased interest within Mali in seeking a broader political settlement with Islamist militants, though the prospect of direct talks remains controversial. Bamako freed some 200 terrorism suspects in exchange for the hostage releases, and a sizable ransom was reportedly paid.

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 underequipped; African troops (who comprise most of the largest contingents) have suffered the most fatalities in insurgent 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 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, in addition to \$89 million in emergency humanitarian assistance. Since 2018, DOD has sought to scale back its counterterrorism footprint in West Africa, with uncertain implications for Mali and for U.S. support to France's Operation Barkhane.

In early October, Special Envoy Pham affirmed that U.S. military aid for Mali would remain suspended pending elections. This would be consistent with a provision in annual foreign aid appropriations legislation restricting certain aid to the government of any country in which the military has overthrown an elected leader (most recently, §7008 of P.L. 116-94 Division G, as extended under P.L. 116-159). Recent U.S. security assistance to Mali has focused on counterterrorism, professionalization, and structural reforms, but Mali has not been a top recipient in the region since the 2012 coup. In FY2020, President Trump waived most security assistance restrictions resulting from Mali's designation under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (Title IV of P.L. 110-457).

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 Security Council actions, the United States has designated five individuals for financial sanctions under a Mali-specific Executive Order. (Other Malian individuals and entities are designated under U.S. and U.N. global terrorism sanctions regimes.) The State Department allocated \$347 million for MINUSMA's budget in FY2019; separate U.S. aid programs also support 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 since then.

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