



Crisis in Mali

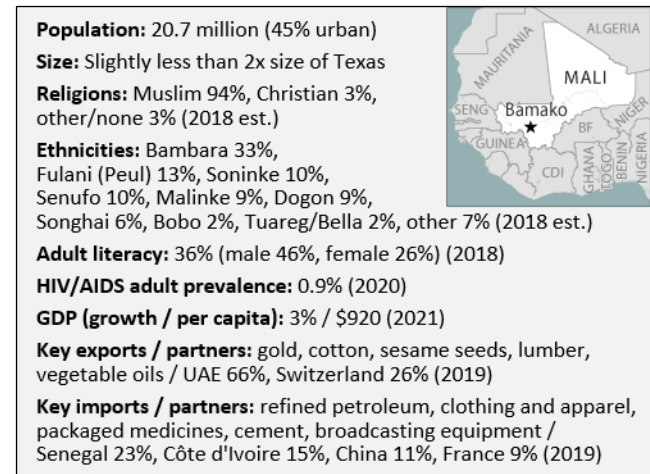
Once seen as a regional democratic leader, Mali has become an epicenter of conflict and instability over the past decade. A military junta ousted an elected president in 2020, then overthrew civilian transitional leaders the following year. Colonel Assimi Goïta now serves as “Transition President” and populist politician Choguel Maïga as prime minister. The junta has engaged in an increasingly bitter confrontation with former colonial power France—which has led counterterrorism operations in Mali since 2013—and with other leaders in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), who have imposed sanctions in response to Mali’s failure to adhere to a previously agreed election timeline.

Local insurgent groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are active across central and northern Mali. Other rebel groups, communal militias, and criminal bands are also active, some with apparent state backing. A 2015 peace deal between Bamako and northern separatist rebels has not been fully implemented. Insurgents, state security forces, allied militias, and private military contractors (PMCs) have been implicated in massacres and other abuses. Conflict-affected areas are experiencing crisis-level food insecurity in 2022; overall, Mali has one of the world’s highest rates of acute malnutrition, while global food and fuel price spikes pose additional burdens. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded hardships.

While these challenges endure, international stabilization efforts in Mali appear to be at an inflexion point. In late 2021, the Malian junta reportedly contracted with the Wagner group, a U.S.-sanctioned Russian private military company (PMC), to aid counterinsurgency operations. In early 2022, amid rising friction over the scope of French operations, Wagner’s role, and other issues, France and the European Union (EU) announced they would withdraw their military forces from Mali, including over 2,000 French troops and hundreds of EU advisors and trainers. Some are expected to relocate to neighboring countries. Mali then announced it was withdrawing from defense accords with France that have underpinned France’s operations in Mali and cooperation with its military. In alleged violation of Mali’s status-of-forces agreement with the United Nations, the junta has also increasingly restricted access and flights by the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali (MINUSMA), raising questions about the mission’s future.

The United States and other donors have supported efforts by a “joint force” of the G5 Sahel (Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad) to tackle regional threats, but the force has struggled with gaps in capacity and commitment, and the recent coups in Mali and Burkina Faso (in 2022) have sapped its cohesion. In May 2022, Mali stated it would withdraw from the G5 Sahel. The U.N. Secretary-General has proposed replacing MINUSMA with an African Union force, but prospects for such a force to materialize and overcome the problems facing the G5 are uncertain.

Figure 1. Mali at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA World Factbook, IMF.

Background. Mali has been in crisis since 2012, when a northern separatist rebellion sparked a military coup and an Islamist insurgent advance. The military collapsed in the north, where rebels—bolstered by arms from Libya and by fighters with ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, an Algerian-led regional network)—declared an independent state. By mid-2012, AQIM and two allied local groups had outmaneuvered the separatists to assert control over much of the north. At Bamako’s request, France intervened in early 2013 to oust Islamist armed groups from major towns in the north. State personnel returned to some areas, while separatist rebels and other factions reasserted control in others. The U.N. Security Council established MINUSMA in mid-2013 to help stabilize the country. Veteran politician Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta was elected president later that year, and donors, including the United States, normalized relations with Bamako. French forces transitioned into Operation Barkhane, a regional counterterrorism mission, in 2014.

Under international pressure to reach a peace deal in the north, President Kéïta’s government signed an accord in 2015 with two armed coalitions: one led by ex-separatists, and the other by pro-unity groups with ties to Bamako. Mediated by Algeria with international backing, the accord aimed to address northern political grievances, reestablish state authority, demobilize rebel fighters, promote development in the north, and isolate designated terrorist groups, which were not party to the talks.

Implementation lagged, however, while conflicts multiplied and spread to new areas—notably central Mali. New armed factions have emerged. State officials remain absent from much of the north and center, while signatory armed groups maintain parallel administrations in some areas. Kéïta’s administration reportedly obstructed the peace process,

while signatory armed groups have been implicated in drug trafficking, ethnic violence, and humanitarian aid diversion.

President Kéïta was reelected in 2018, but opposition mounted over allegedly fraudulent legislative elections, corruption, insecurity, and economic hardships. In mid-2020, a loose coalition of politicians, civil society actors, and supporters of a prominent Bamako religious leader held large protests. State security forces cracked down on the protests, while ECOWAS mediators did not achieve a road-map out of the impasse. The 2020 coup d'état followed. Criminal proceedings against the coup leader of 2012, Captain Amadou Sanogo, were subsequently dropped.

Military Rule and an Uncertain Transition

While the junta has struggled to improve security and economic conditions, its leaders appear to have drawn popular support from their face-off with France and ECOWAS. Human rights groups have also accused the junta of intimidating and repressing critics and journalists, and have attributed extrajudicial killings and other abuses to members of the military and associated PMCs. The government has also banned two French-funded global broadcasters. Officials claimed to have foiled a Western-backed coup in May 2022.

The junta agreed to hold elections by February 2022 during initial negotiations with ECOWAS in 2020. In late 2021, however, officials proposed extending the transition period for up to five more years. In response, ECOWAS—having previously designated junta members for sanctions—imposed broad economic sanctions on Mali, closing their borders with the country, banning commercial transactions (exempting essential goods and medications), and freezing Mali's sovereign assets held in ECOWAS banks. (Two of Mali's neighbors, Mauritania and Algeria, are not in ECOWAS, while Guinea, which had a coup in 2021, has pledged not to apply the sanctions.) Mali and ECOWAS have since been unable to agree on an electoral timeline.

Russian Presence. Wagner's reported entry into Mali has fueled U.S. and European concerns about Russia's regional influence and the role of unaccountable Russian PMC forces in regional conflicts. Street protests increasingly feature pro-Russia, anti-France, and anti-U.N. messages. U.S. officials suggest that Russia may be following a similar playbook as in the Central African Republic, where Russian PMCs have reportedly led counterinsurgency operations, provided personal protection to top officials, engaged in human rights abuses, obtained natural resource contracts, and fueled disinformation.

Economic and Humanitarian Conditions

Landlocked and arid with high population growth, Mali is among the world's poorest countries. Conflict, insecurity, and the COVID-19 pandemic have further hindered development and humanitarian relief. As of early 2022, U.N. agencies estimated that some 7.5 million Malians (one in three) were in need of humanitarian assistance; nearly 363,000 Malians were displaced internally and nearly 163,000 more were refugees. Gold and cotton exports are the backbone of the formal economy, though most of the labor force is engaged in farming, livestock herding, and/or fishing. The economy shrank by 1% in 2020 before rebounding to 3% growth in 2021, a rate unlikely to outpace population growth. ECOWAS sanctions appear to

be hurting Mali's economy, as well as other member states reliant on cross-border trade. Blaming ECOWAS, Bamako defaulted on a scheduled debt repayment in February 2022.

U.N. Peacekeeping Operation

MINUSMA is mandated to prioritize implementation of the 2015 peace accord, followed by support for stabilizing central Mali, then civilian protection and other tasks. While not authorized to pursue counterterrorism operations, MINUSMA may provide reimbursed logistical support to G5 Sahel forces. As of March 2022, eight U.S. staff officers were serving in MINUSMA. The mission's mandate is up for renewal in June 2022. MINUSMA is among the deadliest and most logistically challenging operations for U.N. peacekeepers. Some European troop contributors are reportedly weighing their continued participation amid the drawdown of French forces (which provided medical and casualty evacuations and intelligence sharing) and competing security priorities in Europe.

U.S. Policy and Aid

The State Department characterizes U.S.-Mali relations as “based on shared goals of improving stability and reducing poverty.” The Biden Administration has called for swift democratic elections and expressed support for ECOWAS's leadership and sanctions, albeit without applying analogous U.S. measures against the junta. U.S. officials have assailed Mali's decision to contract with the Wagner Group and criticized constraints on MINUSMA's mobility and access. President Biden has pledged ongoing U.S. military support for French-led regional counterterrorism operations, which are expected to continue in neighboring countries. A U.S. service member was injured in Mali in January 2022, reportedly while providing such support.

Following the 2020 coup, the United States suspended certain aid to the government pursuant to a provision in annual aid appropriations legislation (§7008, “coups d'état”). The prohibition primarily affects military aid and certain economic aid implemented through state entities; humanitarian, democracy, and internal security programs are exempt or authorized to continue “notwithstanding” restrictions. Mali's designation under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (CSPA, Title IV of P.L. 110-457) has also triggered security assistance restrictions.

The United States allocated \$139 million in bilateral aid for Mali in FY2021 (latest available), focusing on health, education, and agriculture. The Administration has proposed \$134 million for Mali in FY2023. The United States provided an additional \$83 million in humanitarian aid for Mali in FY2021, along with \$346 million toward MINUSMA's budget. Funds also have been allocated for Mali under U.S. regional and global aid initiatives, including COVID-19 relief and the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership.

In line with U.N. Security Council actions, the United States has designated five non-government individuals for financial and travel sanctions under Executive Order 13882 (2019), pertaining to Mali. Other Malian individuals and groups are subject to U.S. and U.N. terrorism sanctions.

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