



Crisis in Mali

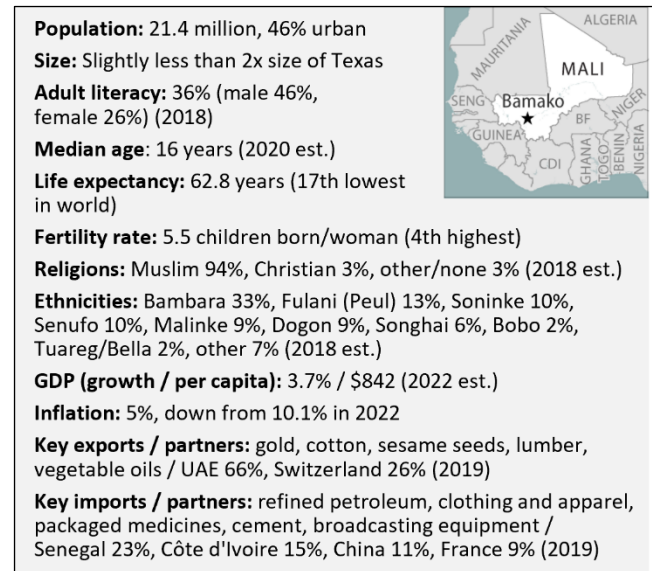
Once seen as a regional democratic leader, Mali has become an epicenter of conflict and instability over the past decade. Insurgent groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State operate widely and have spread across Mali's borders. Other armed groups, ethnic militias, and criminal bands are also active, some with apparent state backing. A military junta seized power in 2020 and ousted civilian transition leaders the following year—heralding a wave of coups in the region.

The junta has overseen major shifts in Mali's foreign relations and security partnerships, embracing Russia and rejecting former colonial power France along with U.N. peacekeepers. In 2021, the junta contracted with Russia's Wagner Group, a nominally private military company (PMC), to assist counterinsurgency operations. In 2022, amid a diplomatic rift with Bamako, France withdrew over 2,000 troops from Mali, ending a decadelong U.S.-supported counterterrorism operation. In June 2023, Bamako called for the withdrawal of the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali, MINUSMA. Malian officials had previously placed growing restrictions on MINUSMA, hindering its ability to fulfill its mandate. In early 2023, Mali expelled the top U.N. human rights official. Wagner's entry and MINUSMA's pending exit have strained an already fragile 2015 peace deal between the government and northern separatist rebels; clashes between the military and signatory groups erupted in the north in August 2023.

Colonel Assimi Goïta, a member of Mali's special forces, is serving as Mali's "Transition President," and populist politician Choguel Maïga as the junta-appointed prime minister. Military officers hold key cabinet posts and lead the interim legislature. Under pressure from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which imposed broad economic sanctions for six months in 2022, the junta agreed to hold elections in February 2024 in which current leaders would not be candidates. Whether Mali will adhere to these commitments is uncertain, however. A new constitution adopted by referendum in June 2023 concentrates power in the presidency and could pave the way for Goïta to run for president.

Although the junta has struggled to improve security and address economic hardships, it has arguably drawn popular support from its face-off with France, the U.N., separatist groups, and other West African leaders. Rights groups accuse the junta and its supporters of intimidating and repressing critics; the government has also banned or suspended several French and local media outlets. Bamako has sought to drive a wedge within ECOWAS, rejecting regional sanctions on neighboring Niger in response to a military seizure of power there in July 2023, and pledging to defend Niger's junta against a threatened regional military intervention. In 2022, Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel, a donor-backed grouping that had sought to coordinate military operations.

Figure 1. Mali at a Glance



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

Background. Mali has been in crisis since 2012, when a northern separatist rebellion led by members of the minority ethnic Tuareg community paved the way for a military coup and an Islamist insurgent advance. Rebels—bolstered by arms from Libya and fighters with ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—declared an independent state of “Azawad” in the north. By mid-2012, AQIM and two allied groups had outmaneuvered the separatists to assert control over much of the north.

At the transitional government's request, France deployed its military in early 2013 to counter an Islamist insurgent advance and ousted insurgent leaders from major towns in the north. A U.N. peacekeeping operation, MINUSMA, was established in mid-2013 to help stabilize the country, absorbing a nascent African-led intervention force. Veteran politician Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta was elected president, at which point donors, including the United States, normalized relations with Bamako. French forces transitioned into Operation Barkhane, a regional counterterrorism mission that received U.S. military logistical support, in 2014.

Under international pressure to reach a peace deal in the north, the 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 Tuareg political grievances, reestablish state authority in the north, demobilize rebel fighters, promote northern economic development, and isolate designated terrorist groups, which were not party to the talks. Implementation lagged, however, and signatory groups maintained parallel governance structures. Meanwhile, armed groups multiplied and Islamist insurgencies expanded into central Mali.

President Kéïta was reelected in 2018, but opposition mounted over corruption, allegedly fraudulent legislative elections, insecurity, and economic hardships. Large street protests erupted against Kéïta's administration in mid-2020. State security forces cracked down on protesters, and ECOWAS mediators failed to achieve a road-map out of the impasse. The 2020 coup d'état followed.

Islamist Insurgencies

The most potent insurgent force in Mali appears to be the Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM), led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Malian national and ethnic Tuareg. State Department public reports suggest that JNIM is the second-largest Al Qaeda affiliate in Africa (after Somalia's Al Shabaab), with some 1,000-2,000 fighters. JNIM is primarily active in north/central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, and appears to be expanding into southern Mali and coastal West Africa. In Mali, the group has led attacks on French, U.N., regional, and local security forces, along with local officials, traditional leaders, and perceived civilian collaborators. JNIM has reportedly broadened its footprint by offering security and judicial services to local communities that may view the state and rival armed groups as ineffective and/or abusive.

A separate AQIM offshoot has affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) and claimed the 2017 deadly ambush of U.S. soldiers in neighboring Niger. This group rebranded in 2022 as IS-Sahel Province, an apparent elevation within the IS global network. IS-Sahel has repeatedly carried out large civilian massacres as a tactic, in contrast to JNIM's more targeted and governance-centric approach. IS-Sahel has competed with JNIM for recruits, and the two have fought each other in northeastern Mali, an IS-Sahel stronghold.

These insurgencies have proven resilient, withstanding nearly a decade of French military strikes and multilateral stabilization efforts by exploiting local tensions and grievances. Abuses by state security forces and their militia and PMC allies appear to have spurred insurgent recruitment. Mali's military leaders have expanded combat operations against JNIM, bolstered by newly acquired Russian aircraft and Wagner Group logistical support. While operations may clear JNIM from some areas, holding and stabilizing them is likely more challenging. JNIM carried out a coordinated assault on the military base outside Bamako where President Goïta resides in July 2022, and the kidnapping of a German priest within Bamako city limits in November 2022. In April 2023, JNIM claimed an attack on a key Malian base in the central town of Sèvaré.

Wagner Group Role. Although Wagner's future is uncertain following its June 2023 mutiny in Russia, Moscow has asserted that Africa operations will continue. Some 1,000-1,600 Wagner personnel were reportedly in Mali as of mid-2023. Most are reportedly supporting Malian military operations in central Mali. The head of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) stated in 2022 that Bamako had agreed to pay Wagner \$10 million per month. U.S. officials have accused Wagner of using gold mined in Mali (and elsewhere in Africa) to finance operations in Ukraine; of seeking to move weapons via Mali for use in Ukraine; and of helping to "engineer" MINUSMA's exit. Street protests in Bamako have increasingly featured pro-Russia, anti-France, and anti-U.N. messages.

Economic and Humanitarian Conditions

Landlocked and arid with high population growth, Mali is among the world's poorest and least developed countries. Gold and cotton exports are the backbone of the formal economy; the vast majority of Malians are engaged in farming, livestock, and fishing. Conflicts have internally displaced over 400,000 Malians and shuttered some 1,500 schools; nearly 9 million Malians (over 40%) are reportedly in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023. Several parts of the country are at crisis-level food insecurity in 2023, with possible emergency-level (worse) projected for the northeastern Menaka region. Mali has one of the world's highest rates of acute malnutrition; over 30% of children under five years old exhibit stunted growth.

U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. policymakers have sought to improve stability and development, counter terrorism, and address humanitarian needs in Mali, although the tools available for doing so have progressively diminished. Over the past decade, the United States has supported multiple stabilization initiatives (e.g., the G5 Sahel "joint force," France's Operation Barkhane, and MINUSMA), none of which are fully operational today. Legislative and policy restrictions have constrained U.S. security and development cooperation with Mali and a growing number of neighboring states. Successive Administrations have called for implementation of the 2015 peace accord, which may now be moribund. U.S. officials have voiced concern that the junta's partnership with Wagner and MINUSMA's withdrawal in 2023 will worsen security and humanitarian conditions.

Aid. The United States allocated \$147 million in bilateral aid for Mali in FY2022 (latest public data)—focusing on health, agriculture, education, and governance—along with \$90 million in emergency humanitarian assistance and \$362 million for MINUSMA's budget. The Administration has proposed \$142 million in bilateral aid for Mali in FY2024. Certain aid to the government of Mali, including military aid, has been subject to coup-related legal restrictions since 2020 (see CRS In Focus IF11267, *Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations*). Mali has also been subject to security aid restrictions under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (Title IV of P.L. 110-457).

Sanctions. In July 2023, the Biden Administration imposed financial and visa sanctions on Mali's Minister of Defense and two top Malian Air Force officials under a Russia-related executive order, citing ties with the Wagner Group. This followed U.S. sanctions designations of two Russian nationals identified as key Wagner operatives in Mali. The Administration also imposed visa restrictions on two mid-level Malian military commanders, citing their role in a civilian massacre in central Mali. In 2022, the Administration designated the son of deposed former President Kéïta under the "Global Magnitski" sanctions program, citing corruption. Separately, in line with U.N. Security Council actions, the United States has designated five individuals linked to armed groups under a Mali-specific sanctions program. Other Malian and Mali-based individuals and groups are under U.S. terrorism sanctions.

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