



Conflict in Mali

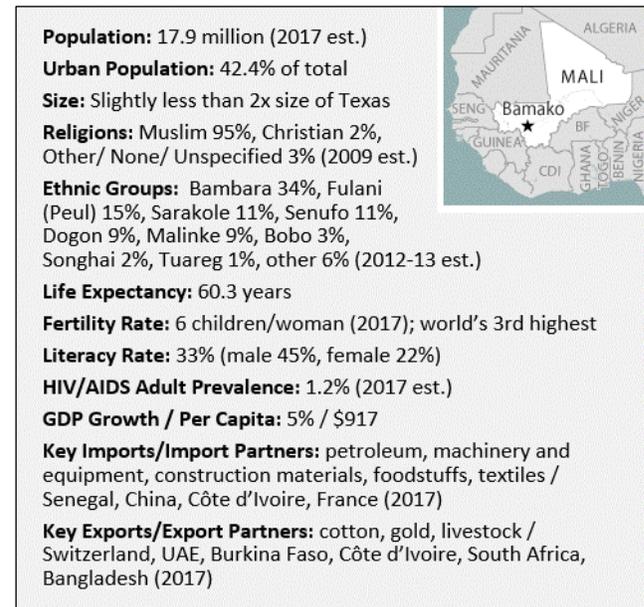
Mali faces intertwined security and governance challenges. The government signed a peace accord with northern separatists in 2015, but key provisions remain unimplemented. Signatory armed groups continue to assert territorial control in much of the vast desert north. At the same time, an Islamist insurgency has spread from the north into previously stable central Mali, where jihadists have leveraged interethnic grievances and local resentment toward state actors. The capital, Bamako, has also been targeted in terrorist attacks. Rebel, terrorist, communal, and criminal networks are fluid and shifting, posing an obstacle to conflict resolution. Some Malians have proposed peace talks with jihadist groups, but the government and Western donors have rejected the idea.

These challenges have severely undermined already daunting development prospects in Mali, one of the world's poorest countries. Recurrent droughts, poor infrastructure, high population growth, and land degradation underlie endemic food insecurity. Security threats and limited donor funding have further constrained humanitarian relief. As of mid-2018, more than 75,000 Malians were internally displaced and over 140,000 were refugees in neighboring states—more refugees than at the height of Mali's north-south war in 2012-2013. Insecurity and a lack of basic services in northern Mali have impeded refugee returns.

President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta won reelection to a second five-year term in August 2018, but the contest was marred by low turnout and procedural irregularities. Security incidents 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 his inaugural election in 2013, which restored civilian government after a military coup. These trends may suggest declining confidence in the electoral process and political elites. Corruption scandals have undermined citizens' faith in Kéïta's leadership, as has his government's inability to improve living standards, bolster security, or reassert full control of the north.

Foreign troops have deployed to Mali in an effort to bolster stability and counter terrorism. Over 1,000 French troops are in Mali under an enduring regional counterterrorism operation, *Barkhane*. The U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is tasked with protecting civilians and supporting the peace process. 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 large terrorist attack targeting the G5 operational headquarters in central Mali in June 2018 highlighted ongoing challenges for the force.

Figure 1. Mali at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic; CIA World Factbook and IMF data (2018).

Background: Mali's 2011-2013 Crisis

Mali's complex 2011-2013 crisis devastated the military, central government institutions, and northern populations. The crisis began when members of the semi-nomadic Tuareg minority launched a separatist rebellion in the north. They leveraged flows of fighters and arms from war-torn Libya, as well as support from a local group linked to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an Algerian-led regional terrorist network. In early 2012, soldiers angered by their leaders' mishandling of the war ousted Mali's elected president in a coup. The northern rebels took advantage of the ensuing military collapse to unilaterally declare an independent state of “Azawad.” By mid-2012, however, AQIM and its local allies and offshoots had outmaneuvered the separatists to assert control over the north, an area about the size of Texas. These events displaced hundreds of thousands and exacerbated a drought-related regional humanitarian emergency.

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 rebel groups 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 2015 peace agreement, mediated by Algeria, are the Malian government and two rival northern armed group coalitions. The Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), whose stronghold is in far-north Kidal province, comprises pro-independence factions, while the Platform, based in the ethnically diverse northeastern Gao region, comprises groups that oppose the separatist cause. These groups have periodically fought each other, and the Platform is sometimes seen as a government proxy. Various new and splinter factions have emerged since 2015, some pledging support for the accord (“compliant” groups).

The accord aims to increase the political autonomy and representation of northerners; foster the integration of rebel fighters into the state security forces; and encourage development, justice, and reconciliation, among other goals. However, signatory armed groups have yet to demobilize, while progress toward decentralization, justice sector reform, the investigation of human rights abuses, and infrastructure improvements in the north has been slow and halting. A lack of capacity and flagging political will on the part of the government and armed group signatories are key factors, as are efforts by spoilers, including jihadists, to undermine the peace process.

The structure of the north-south peace process arguably contained seeds of Mali’s continued destabilization. Many of the signatories are veterans of past conflicts who have passed in and out of the government, military, and proxy militias for decades. Civil society groups have not meaningfully participated in implementation of the deal. The accord commits the parties to concessions that are unpopular among their respective constituencies. Moreover, in granting largely Tuareg- and Arab-led armed groups a seat at the table, the process arguably incentivized taking up arms while alienating those (such as Fulani communities in central and northeastern Mali) who feel themselves to be victims of both the state and ethnic rivals. The U.N. Security Council has authorized sanctions against those undermining peace in Mali, but has not designated anyone to date. (Some Malian actors are designated under a separate terrorism-related regime.) In August 2018, U.N. sanctions monitors issued a report alleging the involvement of Malian signatory and compliant armed group elements in terrorist activities, drug trafficking, and ethnic conflict.

Islamist Insurgency

Despite territorial losses in 2013, AQIM and its Malian allies have proven resilient, able to leverage the evolving conflict to their advantage and to withstand strikes by Operation *Barkhane*. Islamist armed groups regularly attack U.N., French, humanitarian, and Malian state personnel in the north. Central Mali has seen the rise of an AQIM-allied Fulani-led Islamist insurgency. Terrorist groups have also attacked “soft” targets in and around Bamako, including a siege at a hotel in November 2015 in which 19 civilians—one of them an American—were killed. In 2017, AQIM’s Sahel branch, AQIM’s offshoot Al Murabitoun, and two Malian groups merged to form Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM, “Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims”). U.S.-designated terrorist Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Malian Tuareg, heads the coalition. The State Department designated JNIM a Foreign Terrorist Organization in September 2018. JNIM has claimed attacks on Malian and

international targets, including at a Bamako resort in June 2017, in the capital of neighboring Burkina Faso in March 2018, and at the G5 force headquarters in central Mali in June 2018. A separate Mali-based AQIM offshoot is affiliated with the Islamic State; it claimed the deadly attack on U.S. soldiers in Niger in October 2017.

Malian soldiers have been implicated in grave human rights abuses during counterinsurgency operations in central Mali, while the involvement of ethnic militia groups in state-backed and French-led anti-terrorist operations has apparently heightened interethnic tensions in the north and center. A 2018 study by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum warned that overlapping violence by jihadists, Malian security forces, and communal self-defense groups could spur mass atrocities. These dynamics may also amplify local recruitment by extremist groups who offer means of communal defense and retribution.

U.N. Peacekeeping Operation

The U.N. Security Council extended MINUSMA’s mandate for a year in June 2018, maintaining its troop ceiling of 13,289 military personnel and 1,920 police. The mandate emphasizes peace accord implementation as the mission’s preeminent “strategic priority,” followed by support for the restoration of state authority in central Mali, facilitation of reconciliation, protection of civilians and stabilization, promotion of human rights, and facilitation of humanitarian aid. MINUSMA faces stark logistical challenges and has the highest fatality rate among active U.N. peacekeeping missions. European troops serve in the mission, but most of the largest contingents are from impoverished African countries. MINUSMA does not have a mandate for offensive counterterrorism operations, despite requests by the government of Mali and the AU. The Security Council has authorized MINUSMA to provide logistical support to the G5 force, but only on a cost-reimbursable basis.

U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. officials have called for Malians to implement the 2015 peace accord and marginalize violent extremist groups. U.S. bilateral aid, totaling an estimated \$132 million in FY2017, aims to support development, health programs, conflict mitigation, improved governance, and military professionalism. The United States also provides humanitarian aid (\$48 million in FY2017), financial support for MINUSMA (\$271 million in FY2017), bilateral training and equipment for African troops deploying under MINUSMA, and logistical support for French military operations. Twenty-six U.S. military personnel participate in MINUSMA, the largest number in any U.N. mission.

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. counterterrorism (CT) aid since the 2012 coup. Instead, U.S. security assistance for Mali has focused on defense sector reform and urban crisis-response, while Mali’s neighbors (such as Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso) have received significant CT tactical training and equipment. The State Department has pledged over \$100 million in military aid for the G5 force initiative, but Mali is not expected to be a major recipient.

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