



Crisis in Mali

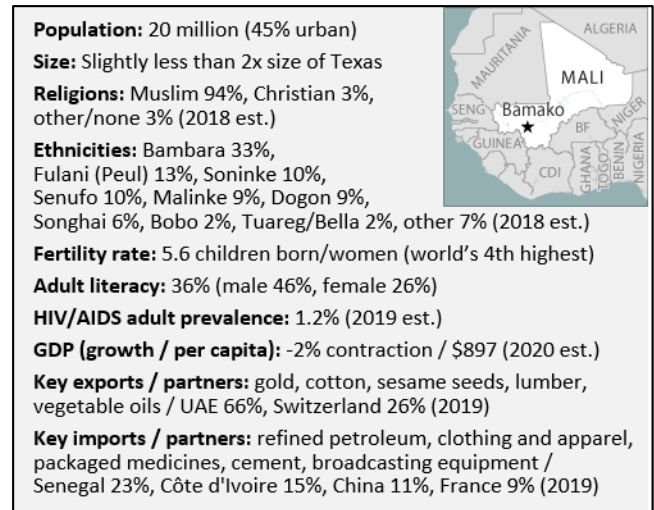
Once seen as a democratic leader, Mali has become an epicenter of regional conflict and instability over the past decade. The military’s ouster of the elected president in August 2020 highlighted governance failings and deepened political uncertainty. In May 2021, the same soldiers overthrew the transitional civilian leaders whom they had put in place, after chafing at Transition President Bah N’Daw’s effort to replace two junta members as cabinet ministers. The leader of both coups, Colonel Assimi Goïta, has replaced N’Daw as Transition President; allied officers hold four cabinet posts and lead the transitional legislature. Under regional pressure, Goïta has promised elections in February 2022 in which he will not be a candidate, but observers question his commitment. Transitional leaders also have pledged a constitutional referendum to advance the government’s 2015 peace deal with northern rebels.

In 2020, many in Bamako (**Figure 1**) welcomed the coup, following weeks of street protests against then-President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta. Reactions to the May 2021 events were more muted, even as Goïta named a leader in the 2020 protest movement, Choguel Maïga, as Transition Prime Minister. Authorities may struggle to meet expectations of improvements in security and socioeconomic conditions, both of which have deteriorated in recent years. Islamist insurgents and other armed groups control much of Mali’s territory. Ethnic militias, some of which appear to enjoy state backing, have massacred civilians in rural areas, and state security forces have been implicated in killings and abuses. Rebel, terrorist, communal, and criminal networks often overlap. Although relatively secure, Bamako has seen several terrorist attacks, including a 2015 assault at a hotel that killed 19 civilians (one of them American).

These complex threats and security dynamics have impeded development and humanitarian relief for Mali, a poor and landlocked country with limited arable land. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has compounded challenges. As of mid-2021, U.N. agencies estimated that 5.9 million Malians (29%) required humanitarian aid, over 372,000 were displaced internally, and nearly 47,000 were refugees in neighboring countries.

Foreign troops have deployed to stabilize Mali and counter terrorism. The U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali, MINUSMA, is one of the world’s largest and most dangerous. Some 5,100 French troops serve in Operation Barkhane, a counterterrorism mission that receives U.S. logistical and intelligence support, although France has announced plans to close Barkhane bases in northern Mali and gradually draw down its forces. France has called for the European Union, which has trained Mali’s military and law enforcement entities, to take on a greater role in regional security. Donors, including the United States, have also sought to build the capacity of a “joint force” established by the G5 Sahel (Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad) to coordinate military operations.

Figure 1. Mali at a Glance



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

Background. Mali has been mired in crisis since 2012, when a northern separatist rebellion led by members of the minority ethnic Tuareg community prompted a military coup and Islamist insurgent advance, all during a regional drought. The coup contributed to the military’s collapse in northern Mali, which the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)—bolstered by arms from Libya and fighters with ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—then declared an independent state. By mid-2012, however, AQIM and two loosely aligned groups had outmaneuvered the MNLA to assert control over most of the north. France deployed its military against the Islamist groups in early 2013, at which point the MNLA and other factions (re-)asserted control in some areas. MINUSMA deployed in mid-2013, and President Kéïta won elections later that year, leading the United States to lift coup-related aid restrictions (discussed below).

President Kéïta was reelected in 2018, but opposition mounted over his administration’s apparent interference in legislative election results, corruption scandals, worsening insecurity, militia violence, and economic hardships. In June and July 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. A violent state crackdown further discredited Kéïta’s leadership, and regional mediation efforts failed. The August 2020 coup d’état followed. Criminal proceedings against the 2012 coup leader, Captain Amadou Sanogo, were dropped in early 2021.

Stalled Peace Accord

In 2015, President Kéïta’s administration signed a peace deal with two northern armed coalitions: one led by ex-separatists including the MNLA, the other by pro-unity groups with ties to Bamako. Mediated by Algeria with

broad international backing, the “Algiers Accord” aims to address northern (and specifically Tuareg) political grievances, reestablish state authority and 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.

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. Islamist insurgents have acted as spoilers, and maintain ties to some signatory groups. U.N. sanctions monitors have reported the involvement of signatory group members in drug trafficking, ethnic violence, and cooption of humanitarian aid and have alleged official involvement in protection rackets and obstruction of the peace process. Various new armed factions have emerged since 2015.

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 motivated by territory, trafficking routes, patronage, and revenge. The talks granted concessions to a relatively small number of actors who had taken up arms, alienating others (in the north and elsewhere) who felt victimized by the state and/or by signatory groups. The mediators ruled out discussion of federalism or altering the secular nature of Mali’s political system, both issues that resonate 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), under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Malian Tuareg. JNIM has 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; it remains active in border areas.

These groups have proven resilient, withstanding frequent French military strikes on top leaders and ably exploiting local grievances and communal tensions. In recent years, they have enlarged their areas of operation, expanded recruitment, carried out complex attacks on local and U.N. military outposts, and forced the retreat of state and rival actors by targeting civilian officials, traditional leaders, and individuals accused of colluding with Bamako and/or France. Human rights abuses by state and militia forces may have helped fuel recruitment.

Prominent Malian politicians, civil society figures, and religious leaders have urged peace talks with Malian-led jihadist groups. The idea gained further steam in October 2020 with the negotiated release from JNIM custody of a top Malian opposition politician and three European hostages. Bamako freed some 200 terrorism suspects in exchange for the hostage releases, and a large ransom was reportedly paid. France opposes the notion of talks with Islamist insurgent leaders, sparking some local pushback.

U.N. Peacekeeping Operation

Authorized at up to 13,289 military and 1,920 police personnel, MINUSMA is mandated to prioritize support for implementation of the 2015 peace accord, followed by support for stabilizing and restoring state authority in central Mali, protecting civilians, and other tasks.

MINUSMA is not authorized to pursue counterterrorism operations but can provide reimbursed logistical support to G5 forces. The mission has struggled with logistical and force protection challenges, despite aircraft and troop contributions from European militaries. African forces have borne the brunt of mission fatalities. As of mid-2021, nine U.S. staff officers were serving in MINUSMA.

U.S. Policy and Aid

The State Department characterizes U.S.-Mali relations as “based on shared goals of improving stability and reducing poverty.” Since 2015, successive U.S. Administrations have emphasized implementation of the 2015 peace accord as the cornerstone of U.S. diplomatic engagement. The Trump Administration appointed the first ever U.S. Special Envoy for the Sahel in 2020; the Biden Administration has not named a successor to date.

Following the 2020 coup, the United States suspended certain aid to Mali’s government—including all military aid and some development programs—under Section 7008 (“coups d’état”) of annual State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs appropriations legislation. Aid for humanitarian, democracy, and certain internal security purposes, among others, is exempted or otherwise not subject to the provision. Once imposed, restrictions under Section 7008 can be lifted only if the State Department certifies that “a democratically elected government has taken office.” Certain U.S. security assistance and arms transfers are subject to additional restrictions due to Mali’s designation under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (CSPA, Title IV of P.L. 110-457), as amended. Mali has not been a top recipient of U.S. security aid in the region since 2012; recent programs have focused on counterterrorism, professionalization, and security sector reforms.

U.S. bilateral aid for Mali totaled \$144 million in FY2020 appropriations, emphasizing health, basic education, and agriculture. The United States provided an additional \$140 million in emergency humanitarian aid in FY2020. In recent years, additional funds have been allocated for Mali under regional and global initiatives, including global COVID-19 relief and the State Department-led Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP); some TSCTP assistance is subject to coup-related and/or CSPA restrictions. The Biden Administration has requested \$124 million in bilateral aid in FY2022, proposing to reduce some rule-of-law, HIV/AIDS, water, and education funds.

The United States has helped shape MINUSMA’s mandate, and the State Department allocated \$356 million for the mission in FY2020; separate U.S. aid programs also support troop and police contributors. In line with U.N. Security Council actions, the United States has designated five individuals for sanctions under Executive Order 13882 (2019), pertaining to Mali. Other Malian individuals and entities are subject to U.S. and U.N. terrorism sanctions.

Alexis Arieff, Specialist in African Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.