

American Foreign Policy Council

MALI

QUICK FACTS

Population: 17,467,108 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 1,240,192 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Bambara 34.1%, Fulani (Peul) 14.7%, Sarakole 10.8%, Senufo 10.5%, Dogon 8.9%, Malinke 8.7%, Bobo 2.9%, Songhai 1.6%, Tuareg 0.9%, other Malian 6.1%, from member of Economic Community of West African States 0.3%, other 0.4%

Religions: Muslim 94.8%, Christian 2.4%, Animist 2%, none 0.5%, unspecified 0.3%

Government Type: semi-presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$14.1 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Mali continues to experience significant Islamist insurgent violence as Malian and international forces struggle to adequately police a plethora of Islamist and non-Islamist armed groups active in the north of the country. The current instability can be traced back to the 2012 coup d'état and subsequent fracture between the country's north and south (though tensions between the two halves of the country existed long before the coup). In the ensuing political turmoil, Islamist groups were able to take control of the north of the country, prompting an international intervention led by France in January 2013. While French forces, with the assistance of Malian and international troops, successfully regained control of the major Northern towns, large swaths of the north remain unstable and insurgent groups launch frequent attacks against Malian, French, and United Nations forces still present there, as well as civilian targets in the

south. As the Malian government struggles to implement the June 2015 peace accord, a durable peace in the country's north remains elusive and it is likely that Islamist activity will continue for the foreseeable future.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Mali declared itself an independent nation in 1960. Since that time, Tuaregs (a Berber ethnic group) that live in the north have repeatedly tried to establish their independence from the Malian government. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg separatist group, was formed in October 2011.¹ MNLA is an explicitly religious group, but has allied with Islamist organizations at different points in its history.²

Mali's current struggles with Islamism can be traced back to the 2012 *coup d'état* that overthrew the country's democratically elected government. MNLA-led rebellions in the north had restarted early in 2012. Many in the military were frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of support from the government in suppressing these rebellions. The soldiers, called the Green Berets, attacked the presidential palace in Bamako and deposed President Amadou Toumani Touré.

Upon taking power, the Green Berets established the National Council for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE). The group suspended Mali's constitution and dissolved its institutions, promising to restore civilian rule.³ Within days, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the UN, and much of the international community condemned the coup, and in some cases ceased their operations in Mali.⁴ ECOWAS suspended Mali from its membership and imposed sanctions against CNRDRE.⁵

Meanwhile, the coup caused enough chaos to benefit the MNLA's cause. On April 2, 2012, the MNLA seized several major cities in the north including Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu.⁶ The MNLA announced a ceasefire on April 6, claiming that they had enough land to form their own state of Azawad.⁷ The country was split in two, with Bamako in control in the south and the rebels holding the north.

The MNLA sought the assistance of Islamist groups in its rebellion. These groups included AQIM, *Ansar Dine*, and the Movement for Unity & Jihad in West Africa (commonly referred to as MUJAO, the acronym of its French name, *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*). In May 2012, the MNLA and *Ansar Dine* agreed to merge to form an Islamist state.⁸ However, the union did not last long. Within less than a week, the two groups clashed over the degree to which *sharia* law would be enforced. Then MUJAO similarly united with the MNLA, and similarly fell out. Thereafter, MUJAO and *Ansar Dine* worked together to push the MNLA out of Gao in June 2012.⁹

In early December 2012, representatives of *Ansar Dine* and the MNLA agreed to a ceasefire with the government.¹⁰ However by early January 2013, *Ansar Dine* suspended its ceasefire agreement with the government, accusing it of preparing for war.¹¹ The Islamists then began aggressively moving south towards Bamako. By January 10, Islamist rebels attacked and took control of Konna, a town less than 40 miles from Mopti, where the Malian army maintains a strategic base.¹²

The French government responded by announcing Operation Serval, in which the French government would support Mali in beating back Islamist forces. With French support, the Malian army regained control of Konna on January 11.¹³ African troops from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also began deployed to the country.¹⁴ French, Malian, and ECOWAS troops quickly retook northern cities and towns in the weeks that followed. However, upon retaking Gao, the French-led forces found themselves conducting counter-insurgency measures, similar to those needed in Afghanistan and Iraq, as the Islamists mounted a counter-attack in February.¹⁵ In August 2014, Operation Serval was replaced by Operation Barkhane. With a mandate focused more on counterterrorism, the 3000-strong force is headquartered in N'Djamena, Chad, and operates across Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Operation Barkhane was still active as of early 2017.

The Malian government has since signed a number of ceasefires with several armed Tuareg separatist groups, including the MNLA. The most recent, known as the Algiers Accord, was signed in June 2015. Among other things, the peace deal included provisions for former separatist fighters to be integrated into the security force in the north, better representation for the north in central government institutions, and the right for the northern region to form local institutions.¹⁶ The implementation of the peace agreement has been stalled, most notably due the ongoing insecurity in the northern regions, a product of the numerous Islamist militant groups that did not participate in the peace process. After several postponements, local elections were finally held in November 2016 amid reports of violence and inconsistencies.¹⁷

Militant Islamist groups did not participate in the peace process and are still active in the north and increasingly in the south of the country. While there are a number of distinct Islamist groups, membership between tends to be fluid. As such, multiple groups tend to credibly claim responsibility for terrorist strikes. Analysts have argued that increased counterterrorism pressure from security forces will encourage further collaboration between Mali's Islamist groups.¹⁸

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Over time, AQIM has evolved from a local terrorist group seeking to replace Algeria's government with an Islamic one to an al-Qaeda group preaching global *ji-had* against the West. Formerly known as the *Group Salafiste Pour la Predication et Combat* (GSPC), AQIM has its roots in the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. In Mali, the group has taken advantage of the country's sparsely populated northern regions

where the government has a limited reach. Mali's three northern regions—Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal—contain only 10 percent of the population while accounting for two-thirds of the country's land.¹⁹ As noted by analysts, the group has periodically turned to smuggling and criminality to raise funds, but, at its core, it has remained a highly resilient and pragmatic Islamist insurgency.²⁰

In September 2006, GSPC formally merged with al-Qaeda.²¹ A few months later, the group rebranded itself as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The evolution of GSPC to AQIM changed the group's focus from the "near enemy" (Algeria) to the "far enemy" (the West, particularly the United States and Israel) and the group increasingly targeted foreigners in its North African operations.

GSPC/AQIM, like many Islamist terrorist groups, finances itself through crime. Prior to its merger with al-Qaeda, the group achieved international notoriety when it ransomed 15 European tourists in Algeria in early 2003.²² It received a reported sum of 5 million Euro.²³ In May 2007, AQIM kidnapped its first foreigner since the 2003 kidnapping. Between 2007 and 2017, there have been a number of additional, high profile kidnappings that illustrate the group's continued ability to operate in northern Mali. The kidnappings serve a dual purpose for AQIM; the activity itself drives foreign investment away from the region, while the ransom payments bring AQIM needed cash for weapons and supplies.²⁴ In addition to kidnapping, AQIM also engages in profitable smuggling operations in the Sahel with routes going through northern Mali.

In 2016, AQIM and its affiliates launched at least 257 attacks in West Africa.²⁵ This dramatic increase in attacks—nearly a 150 percent uptick from 2015—underscores the group's ability to successfully recalibrate its strategy and tactics in the face of ongoing counterterrorism efforts and competition from other Islamist groups in the region.²⁶ At present, there are no credible estimates of force strength for AQIM in Mali available.

While AQIM remains loyal to Al Qaeda's leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the group is facing increasing competition from the Islamic State (ISIS).²⁷

Ansar Dine ("Defenders of the Faith")

Iyad Ag Ghaly formed *Ansar Dine* ("Defenders of the Faith") in 2011. *Ansar Dine* expanded its reach and power in northern Mali throughout 2012. In January 2013, the group was estimated to have around 1,500 fighters.²⁸ As previously noted, the group initially worked with the MNLA to take over the north. However, different positions over the adoption of *sharia* law caused the relationship between the two to deteriorate. *Ansar Dine* took control of Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao in June 2012.²⁹

As *Ansar Dine* took control of more and more of northern Mali, the group increasingly pushed a radical interpretation of Islam on Malians. On July 10, 2012, it destroyed two tombs at Timbuktu's ancient Djingareyber mud mosque, a major tourist attraction, angering the city's residents and drawing international condemna-

tion.³⁰ The Islamist group banned alcohol, smoking, Friday visits to cemeteries, and watching soccer, and required women to wear veils in public.³¹ It whipped and beat those who did not adhere to its strict interpretation of sharia law.³²

As previously discussed, *Ansar Dine* formed and broke a ceasefire with the Malian government in late 2012 and early 2013. As the French intervention gained momentum at the end of January 2013, there were reports that members of *Ansar Dine* crossed into Darfur, Sudan through Niger and Libya.³³

In June 2016, Ag Ghaly released his first video in almost two years, issuing new threats against the West and commending recent attacks against French forces and UN peacekeepers.³⁴ On October 31, 2016, Mahmoud Dicko, the president of Mali's High Islamic Council, told reports that he has brokered a truce with Ag Ghaly.³⁵ However, *Ansar Dine* immediately denied the report, calling the claim "completely baseless."³⁶

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)

MUJAO is a West Africa-based, militant Islamist organization that is allied with *Ansar Dine* and has ties to AQIM.³⁷ The group made its first public statement on December 12, 2011. Soon after its inception, MUJAO reportedly concluded an agreement with both *Ansar Dine* and AQIM to pursue a common goal of spreading Islamism across the region.³⁸ The group appears to target West Africa more than its compatriots. The group is largely black African Muslim, rather than of Arab descent, and identifies itself as "an alliance between native Arab, Tuareg and Black African tribes and various *muhajirin* ("Immigrants," i.e. foreign *jihadists*) from North and West Africa."³⁹ The group appears to fund itself through kidnapping activities.⁴⁰

Like *Ansar Dine*, MUJAO initially had a truce with the MNLA as they jointly fought to take control of Mali's north from Bamako.⁴¹ But in June 2012, MUJAO and its ally *Ansar Dine* pushed the MNLA out of the north-Malian city of Gao.⁴² While *Ansar Dine* appears to have taken control of Timbuktu with AQIM, Gao was held by MUJAO.⁴³ In the advance to Gao, MUJAO reportedly sacked Algeria's consulate and kidnapped seven Algerian diplomats.⁴⁴ Once in control, MUJAO imposed a draconian interpretation of *sharia* law on Malians.⁴⁵ In August 2013, a significant faction of MUJAO merged with a militant group formerly associated with AQIM to form a new group called *Al-Mourabitoun*.⁴⁶

Al-Mourabitoun ("The Sentinels")

Al-Mourabitoun was formed in August 2013 following a merger between a breakaway segment of AQIM led by Algerian commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar and a faction of MUJAO.⁴⁷ Belmokhtar's faction, known as the *al-Mulathamun Battalion* ("the Masked Battalion," AMB), had previously been part of AQIM, but split into a separate organization in late 2012 after an ongoing dispute with AQIM's *emir*, Abdelmalek Droukdel.⁴⁸ Belmokhtar became the commander of *Al-Mourabitoun*,

and under his the group claimed responsibility for the January 2013 attack on the Tiguentourine gas facility near Ame.nas, Algeria, which resulted in the deaths of 39 civilians.

The group aims to unite Islamic movements and Muslims across Africa against secular influences, with a particular focus on attacking French interests and French allies across the region.⁴⁹ *Al-Mourabitoun* has also been involved in several high-profile attacks against foreigners in central and southern Mali, including the August 2015 attack on the Byblos Hotel in Sévaré, which killed thirteen people, five of whom were UN workers;⁵⁰ the March 2015 attack on the La Terrasse restaurant in the capital city of Bamako, which killed five,⁵¹ and the November 2015 attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, in which 170 people were taken hostage and nineteen killed.⁵² The group has also launched attacks outside of Mali, including collaborating on an attack on the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, the capital of neighboring Burkina Faso, in January 2016 and the March 2016 attack on the Grand Bassam beach resort in Côte d'Ivoire.

In May 2015, *Al-Mourabitoun* co-founder Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi alliance to the Islamic State and its founder Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in an audiotape that was released to the Al Akhbar new agency.⁵³ Several days later, however, Belmokhtar dismissed the pledge of alliance, indicating that al Sahrawi's decision had not been approved by *Al-Mourabitoun's* shura council, a move that seemingly indicated a split in the organization.⁵⁴ In the weeks following, local Malian media reported clashes between factions loyal to Belmokhtar and those loyal to al Sahrawi.⁵⁵ Al Sahrawi's faction continued to launch attacks in the region, including on a military outpost in Burkina Faso near the border with Mali and on a high-security prison in Niger thought to house militants from Nigeria's *Boko Haram* and AQIM.⁵⁶ Following the Radisson Blu attack in November 2015, reports indicated that Belmokhtar reunited *Al-Mourabitoun* with AQIM.⁵⁷ In October 2016, more than seventeen months after the fact, the Islamic State's Amaq News Agency officially recognized al Sahrawi's oath of allegiance.⁵⁸

Macina Liberation Front (FLM)

The Macina Liberation Front emerged in January 2015 and is led by Amadou Koufa, an ethnically Fulani radical Islamic preacher. In the explosion of post-coup Islamist activity in Mali, Koufa rose to prominence after he led a joint AQIM, *Ansar Dine*, and MUJAO offensive against the town of Konna in early January 2013, the capture of which triggered the beginning of the French intervention in the country.

Notably, the group blends an extremist Islamic ideology with a local ethnic radicalism that is a product of increased insecurity and competition between ethnic groups in central Mali.⁵⁹ The term "Macina" refers to the 19th century Fulani-led Islamic Macina Empire that stretched across the central Mali, and Koufa has proved adept at capitalizing on the sense of victimization among ethnic Fulani in the central region of the country. The group is reported to target recruiting to young Fulanis by

using local radio stations to broadcast Koufa's Fulani-language sermons, which draw on a narrative of a return to a mythical time when Fulani were the masters of prosperous Islamic faith in West Africa.⁶⁰

Membership in the FLM is estimated to be a few hundred fighters, and the group lacks the numbers to conduct more than small-scale attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs).⁶¹ The FLM does, however, often collaborate with other Islamist groups to launch high profile attacks on United Nations peacekeepers and civilian targets. The FLM claimed a role in the November 2015 attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako⁶² and in the July 2016 attack on the Malian military base in Nampala area of the central Segou Region.⁶³

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Mali has a significant Muslim majority, with 94.8 percent of the population adhering to the religion.⁶⁴ While the north has experienced a significant uptick in Islamist activity, it is not clear that radical ideology has actually gained a significant foothold across the country. The Islamists, their radical teachings and their imposition of justice have reportedly not been embraced by northerners, many of whom have simply fled into refugee camps in neighboring Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Niger.⁶⁵

Malian Islam is not typical of other Islamic nations. The country's practice of the religion incorporates animist traditions of the region, including "absorbing mystical elements [and] ancestor veneration."⁶⁶ Mali's lengthy history figures prominently in the country's contemporary culture; Malians "regularly invoke Muslim rulers of various pre-colonial states and empires and past Muslim clerics, saints, and miracle-workers from the distant and more recent colonial and post-colonial past."⁶⁷ Islam and animism, in other words, have coexisted in Mali for centuries.⁶⁸

Since Islamists took over the north, several French MPs have received reports that Qatar was financing the MNLA, *Ansar Dine*, and MUJAO.⁶⁹ Iran has also attempted to peddle influence in Mali.⁷⁰ Skeptical of the fundamentalists' ability to influence his country, President Toure commented prior to his ouster that: "Mali is a very old Islamic country where tolerance is part of our tradition."⁷¹

When the Islamists were in control of the north, they sought to impose their beliefs on the region and to purge Mali of its religious diversity. There have been several instances of Islamist militants destroying shrines and mausoleums in the north, particularly in Timbuktu, claiming the veneration of Sufi saints and scholars was sacrilegious. 16 of the mausoleums destroyed were listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.⁷² The destruction of these historic shrines was recently ruled a war crime by the International Criminal Court, which sentenced one fighter involved, Ahmad al-Mahdi, to nine years in prison for his participation in the attacks.⁷³

While the northern populations initially welcomed the French intervention, frustrations in the north have grown as the French and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) peacekeepers continue to struggle to effectively provide security. There has also been discontent amongst northern populations regarding certain provisions of the 2015 Algiers Accord. In July of 2016, three were killed and dozens wounded when the Malian military open fired on protestors demonstrating against the nomination of former armed militants as local government authorities, as specified by Algiers Accord.⁷⁴

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In keeping with the French tradition, religion in Mali “is understood as private and confessional.”⁷⁵ The Malian constitution, adopted in 1992, maintains the country as a secular state. However, the 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the number of Islamic associations throughout the country, each with varying motivations and religious interpretations.⁷⁶ The government formed the High Islamic Council (*Haut Conseil Islamique*) in 2002.⁷⁷ While religious political parties are banned under the constitution, Mali’s government supports the High Islamic Council as an “official and unique interlocutor of political authorities for all questions relative to the practice of Islam.”⁷⁸

The Bush administration began the Pan Sahel Initiative in October 2002 to train African nations in counterterrorism.⁷⁹ In June 2005, the program expanded to include more countries from the region, becoming the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTP).⁸⁰ The Initiative’s Operation Flintlock provides anti-insurgency training to the armies of the seven participating states, including Mali.⁸¹ Operation Flintlock has been reprised on several occasions, most recently in February 2016.⁸²

In addition to the American efforts to bolster their military capabilities, Mali and its neighbors have made efforts to coordinate their counterterrorism activities. Algeria held a conference in March 2010 inviting leaders from Burkina Faso, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to build a joint security plan to tackle *jihadists*.⁸³ Subsequently, Algeria, Mauritania, Niger and Mali established a joint military base in Tamanrasset, southern Algeria, in April 2010.⁸⁴ Under Operation Barkhane, France has continued its counterterrorism operations and support in the region. In September 2013, in an effort to discourage the growth of radical interpretations of Islam in Mali Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita signed an agreement with the Kingdom of Morocco that would bring 500 Malian *imams* to Morocco for moderate religious training and make available to Malian students religious scholarships at Moroccan universities.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Mali’s interim government asked the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate possible war crimes perpetrated by the Tuareg and Islamist rebels in the north.⁸⁶ In September 2016, the ICC convicted former fighter Ahmad al-Mahdi of war crimes.

Overall, the government response to Islamist groups has focused heavily on security solutions and building policing capacity. This has catalyzed two problems. First, heavy-handedness on the part of Malian security forces has tended to exacerbate local grievances and runs the risk of increasing support for Islamist groups. This has already happened to an extent with Mali's Fulani populations, and groups like FLM have found success recruiting among young Fulani populations disaffected after abuses by Malian security services.⁸⁷

Second, a focus on security solutions has been at the detriment of the need to address local social and economic issues in the north of the country. Unfortunately, despite a close relationship between the Malian government and its international partners, President Keita's tenure has been hampered by allegations of corruption and nepotism.⁸⁸ Without improving trust in state institutions, service delivery mechanisms, and government accountability, it will be difficult for the government to effectively protect against the allure of Islamist groups to the young and disenfranchised, and these groups will continue to capitalize on local crises and insecurity.⁸⁹

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