American Foreign Policy Council

MALI

Although landlocked and impoverished, the West African nation of Mali has become a surprisingly successful democracy in the past two decades. Despite this progress, however, the country has not been immune from Islamism, or its attendant violence. Most conspicuously, the country's northern regions currently play host to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Nevertheless, by most assessments, AQIM poses a security threat to the Malian state, rather than a political one. Politically, the influence of fundamental Islam has been limited by a state constitution that bans religious-based political parties. More significantly, the evolution of Islam in Mali, which has over time incorporated many animist traditions, has created a syncretic form of the religion that preaches tolerance and delegitimizes Islamist ideas.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Mali's traditions of animist-infused Islam and tolerance have made it difficult for Islamist groups to gain a significant foothold in the country. By its nature, Mali's amalgamation of Islam operates in contrast to the strict interpretations of the religion espoused by Islamists. As a result, significant Malian-based Islamist groups have not emerged in the country. The limited violent Islamist activity has primarily been from al-Qaeda's North Africa syndicate, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which has used Mali largely as a staging ground for its regional activities.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Over time, AQIM has evolved from a localized Islamist terrorist group seeking to replace Algeria's government with an Islamic one to an al-Qaeda group preaching global *jihad* 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. While accounting for two-thirds of the country's territory, Mali's three northern regions—Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal—contain only 10 percent of the population.[1] In the Sahara, AQIM appears to be a hybrid of sorts: part criminal network, part smuggling outfit and part Islamist insurgency.

An experienced operative, Abdelmalik Droukdel, became the leader of the GSPC in 2004. At the time, Droukdel aimed to transform the group into part of al-Qaeda's network. Droukdel used the Internet, propaganda and events like the American invasion of Iraq to gain the attention and respect of al-Qaeda's senior leadership.[2] Droukdel also took advantage of GSPC's access to smuggling routes in the Sahel to funnel fighters to Iraq, thereby making the group an appealing partner for al-Qaeda's leadership.[3] In September 2006, bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, formally announced GSPC's merger into al-Qaeda.[4] Highlighting the widened aims of the group, Zawahiri stated, "May this be a bone in the throat of American and French crusaders and their allies; and sow fear in the hearts of French traitors and sons of apostates."[5] A few months later, the group rebranded itself as al-Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb. The evolution of GSPC into 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.

In solidifying its North Africa network, al-Qaeda ostensibly was looking for another way to push the *jihad* into Europe. However, AQIM has "instead placed increasing emphasis on its Saharan component."[6] AQIM's "southern zone" (the group's area of operation in southern Algeria, extending into the Sahara) was not initially viewed as an integral part of the group.[7] However, this arm gained increasing clout as a result of a number of factors including the decrease of *jihadist* activity in Algeria, AQIM leadership's increased need for financing, and the increased ability of the Southern Zone brigades to control and profit from the smuggling networks in the Sahel.[8] Additionally, the continued counterterrorism efforts of Algerian security forces have put the group on the defensive in Algeria, pushing them progressively further south.[9]

Prior to its merger with al-Qaeda, GSPC achieved international notoriety when it kidnapped 32 European tourists in Algeria in early 2003.[10] Seventeen members of the group were freed by Algerian forces in May 2010.[11] The remaining victims were forced by their captors to trek south across the desert into Mali.[12] In August, the rest of the hostages were released for a reported sum of Euro 5 million, save for one who died from heat stroke while in captivity.[13] The kidnapping was orchestrated by Ammari Saifi, who until his capture in May 2004 was one of the group's core leaders.[14] The incident illustrated GSPC's ability to operate freely in northern Mali's desert regions.[15]

In May 2007, AQIM kidnapped its first foreigner since the 2003 kidnapping. Between 2007 and now, there have been a number of high profile kidnappings that illustrate the group's continued ability to operate in northern Mali as several of these individuals were taken into the region after their capture. The kidnappings serve dual purposes for AQIM. The activity drives foreign investment away from the region and the ransom payments bring AQIM needed cash for weapons and supplies.[16]

In addition to kidnapping, AQIM also engages in profitable smuggling operations in the Sahel, with routes going through

northern Mali. Prior to the group's merger with al-Qaeda, Droukdel used smuggling routes in the Sahel to funnel *jihadist* fighters to Iraq. One of Droukel's commanders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, nicknamed "untouchable" by French intelligence, has become particularly adept at smuggling.[17] Belmokhtar was given command of GSPC's southern zone in 2000.[18] To enhance his smuggling activities, Belmokhtar forged relationships with some members of Mali's northern communities, first marrying into an Arab family in Timbuktu and subsequently taking "additional wives from Tuareg and Barbiche Arab tribes."[19] These relationships have given Belmokhtar the ability to operate in the region relatively untouched. He was able to develop the region as a safe haven for the group and its activities, which included establishing mobile training camps.[20] However, these relationships did not necessarily mean that AQIM and the Tuaregs shared a common goal or motivation. Rather than ideology, the Tuaregs are motivated by "cultural grievances" against the Malian government.[21] Over time, the Tuaregs have come to feel that their relationship with the Malian government was suffering as a result of their ties to AQIM.[22]

While AQIM remains a low-scale threat, its composition limits its reach. In the words of one expert, "AQIM cannot prove its commitment to 'Africanized' *jihad* without Africanizing at least some of its leadership."[23] Indeed, the group does not have any non-Algerian *jihadists* within the group's top echelon.[24] Additionally, there do not appear to be large numbers of Malians joining or training with the group.

AQIM remains a lower level threat in that the group is not launching attacks *en masse*. Rather, its activities appear to be geared primarily towards insuring its continued survival rather than focusing on offense. The group also appears to be limited in where it can conduct it operations; it has not been able to effectively attack targets or conduct operations beyond Algeria and some of the Saharan states.[25] However, the group's mobile commando units in Mali's northern reaches continue to be a security issue for the Malian government and its neighbors.

That AQIM's activities in Mali have been limited to relatively isolated incidents and low grade criminal activity highlights the group as a security threat, rather than a threat to the stability of

the state.[26] The group has also failed to launch large scale attacks in Mali. It appears that the fruits of their labor go primarily to insure their own survival rather than costly well-planned attacks. However, AQIM appears to be digging itself in for the long haul; the group is reportedly building fortified bunkers in the Malian-Algerian border region of the Sahara desert.[27] There are also indications that the group is having more success recruiting new members from Mali. However, those numbers are reported to be small.[29] In all likelihood, AQIM will continue to have a low-level presence in Mali for the foreseeable future. However, its efforts will remain hampered if the Malian government, and its counterterrorism partners, exercise continued vigilance.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Like most African states, Mali is a diverse nation comprised of several ethnic groups speaking a variety of languages. However, while ethic competition has perpetuated conflict elsewhere, Mali remains generally peaceful. The majority of these groups share a common faith: Islam. The religion has a long history in Mali, first brought to the country in the eleventh century from the Mediterranean by Saharan nomads.[30] First settled in the twelfth century, Timbuktu became an epicenter for Islamic scholarship.[31] It is a reputation the city still holds today, with its extensive libraries of Islamic manuscripts.

In terms of composition, Mali is overwhelmingly Muslim, with some 90 percent of the population adhering to the Islamic faith.[32] Malian Islam is not typical of other Islamic states, however. In Mali, scholars have noted, "there is no uniform way of being Muslim."[33] The country's practice of the religion incorporates animist traditions of the region, including "absorbing mystical elements [and] ancestor veneration."[34] 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."[35] Islam and animism,

in other words, have coexisted in Mali for centuries.[36]

Contributing to its relative stability, Malian culture boasts its own conflict resolution mechanisms, which aid the country's culture of tolerance. One such mechanism is called *cousinage*, which has been described as "so-called joking relationships between pairs of ethnic groups."[37] *Cousinage* "forbids conflict between ethnic groups or clans and encourages them to trade humorous insult with impunity."[38] These conflict resolution mechanisms serve not only to keep the peace among the population, but also perpetuate cultural diversity.

Nevertheless, Mali is susceptible to outside influences. Like it has in other countries, Saudi Arabia has attempted to influence Malian society using its wealth to build mosques and religious learning centers in the country.[39] In 2004, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that between 2001 and 2004, ultraconservative Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia "opened 16 mosques in Timbuktu, a development termed disturbing by the city's mayor, Aly Ould Sidi."[40] However, the Wahhabi influence upon Malian society and its Islam is by and large minimal. Former U.S. Ambassador to Mali Robert Pringle notes that the Wahhabis are typically "regarded by many Malians as the over privileged, conceited offspring of a wealthy, clannish merchant class, an image that the movement has never entirely shaken."[41] Iran has also attempted to peddle influence in Mali.[42] "Local observers believe that the Saudis and Iranians control only 3 to 5 percent of mosques in Mali."[43] Skeptical of the fundamentalists' ability to influence his country, President Toure commented, "Mali is a very old Islamic country where tolerance is part of our tradition."[44]

However, there are indications that al-Qaeda has some support among the Malian population. One report highlighted the "proliferation of Osama bin Laden photos in stalls at the Bamako market and the exponential increase of radio stations preaching radical Islam."[45] Still, given Mali's culture of tolerance and its relatively peaceful history, militancy is not inherent in the culture. Thus, while in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks reports surfaced noting that Malians appeared to be embracing bin Laden

while criticizing their government for supporting the U.S. war on terror,[46] there do not appear to be large numbers of Malians willing to take up arms for bin Laden's cause.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The end of the Cold War heralded the end of the strongman era in Africa, and Mali was no different. President Moussa Traoré had led Mali for 23 years under a military dictatorship. But in the early 1990s, opposition movements began to emerge, leading to confrontation with government forces. At a pro-democracy demonstration in March 1991, Malian troops opened fire, presumably on orders from President Traoré, killing several hundred protesters.[47] Within days, Malian army general Amadou Toumani Touré led a *coup d'etat* ending Traoré's reign. In his announcement of the coup to the nation on March 26, Touré stated that he would only hold power until elections took place.[48] A man of his word, Touré stepped aside once the nation's first multiparty elections occurred in April 1992, and Alpha Oumar Konaré became Mali's first democratically-elected president under its new constitution. Prior to his presidency, Konaré was a history and archaeology university professor.[49] Following the mandates in the constitution, Konaré stepped aside after two five-year terms, as Touré became president after winning the 2002 election.

Following the French tradition, religion in Mali "is understood as private and confessional."[50] 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.[51] To oversee these groups, the High Islamic Council (Haut Conseil Islamique) was formed by the government in 2002.[52] 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."[53]

As a Muslim majority state, issues such as marriage and inheritance have traditionally been overseen by *imams* or village elders.[54] How-

ever, the state has attempted to legislate in these areas. In 2001, the state announced a new set of family laws, referred to as the *Code de la Famille* (Family Code), to raise the minimum marriage age of girls, make both men and women equal in marriage and give them the same inheritance rights.[55] The marriage law was formally presented by President Konare in 2002.[56] However, it was "withdrawn in the face of considerable criticism."[57] At the time, leaders of Islamic associations stated that the government's legislative attempts contradicted Islamic law.[58] The current marriage law in Mali states that the husband is responsible for protecting the wife and in turn, the wife must obey the husband.[59]

Nearly ten years later, the government revisited the issue. The law was approved by the National Assembly in early August 2009.[60] However, it was met with widespread opposition spearheaded by Islamic groups, including the High Islamic Council. Instead of signing the law, President Touré sent it back to the Assembly for review, where it currently remains.[61]

While many Malian religious leaders stood in opposition to the legislation, not all Malian imams viewed the proposed law as a threat to Islam or Mali's cultural health. One *imam* from Kati was threatened after he wrote a letter to the High Islamic Council stating that the law in his view did not go against Mali's values or those of Islam.[62] Ultimately, he was relieved of his religious duties.[63]

The renewed opposition to the marriage law may be an indication that religious groups and conservative Islam are gaining influence in Mali. However, there is a difference between increased religious conservatism and Islamism. It does not appear that Islamist rhetoric is gaining significant momentum in Mali, nor does there appear to be a significant portion of the population willing to take up arms in the name of *jihad*.

AQIM's continued presence in the region has ensured that it remains on both the American and Malian security radar. After the 9/11 attacks, the United States placed a higher priority on the threats emerging from the region and attempted to combat the

threat. The Bush administration added GSPC to the country's list of foreign terrorist organizations in March of 2002.[64] The United States subsequently began the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) in October 2002 to strengthen the Sahelian states' ability to fight terrorism and prevent the region from becoming a safe haven for terrorist organizations.[65] The first phase of the U.S. training program concluded in September 2004 involving roughly 1,200 troops from Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania.[66] In June 2005, the program expanded to include more countries from the region becoming the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTP).[67] The Initiative's Operation Flintlock provides anti-insurgency training to the armies of the seven participating states, including Mali.[68] Operation Flintlock has been reprised on several occasions between 2007 and 2010.[69]

In addition to the American efforts to bolster their military capabilities, Mali and its neighbors have made efforts to coordinate their counterterrorism activities. In July 2009, Algeria pledged to assist Mali in bolstering its security structures in the north.[70] Army commanders from Mali, Algeria, Mauritania and Niger met in August 2009 to further coordinate their counter-terrorism activities.[71] The transnational efforts continued into 2010. 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*.[72] Subsequently, Algeria, Mauritania, Niger and Mali established a joint military base in Tamanrasset, southern Algeria in April 2010.[73] The partners aim to use the base to target AQIM's smuggling routes.[74] In the joint efforts, "Algeria will be in charge of air support, with Mali covering ground operations, Mauritania heading up communications, Niger handling logistics and Burkina Faso serving in an observation role."[75]

During the summer of 2010, Mali's counterterrorism cooperation with its neighbors increased in response to AQIM's continued activities. In July, AQIM forces attacked an Algerian security outpost near the Algerian-Mali border, killing eleven.[76] After the attack, Mali allowed Algerian forces to pursue the insurgents into Malian territory.[77]

France has also increased its counterterrorism operations in the region as its citizens have been targeted by AQIM. In an effort to free one of its citizens, who was kidnapped in April 2010, the French military launched a special forces attack in tandem with Mauritanian troops against an AQIM base camp in Mali in July 2010.[78] While the French hostage was not at the camp, security forces killed six AQIM militants in the raid.[79] The permission Mali gave to French forces—and has given to Algerian and Mauritanian troops—to perform operations within their borders illustrates the country's desire to quash the threat that AQIM poses, and its willingness to participate in multilateral actions to do so.

However, Mali's issues of poverty and underdevelopment present a significant challenge to the nation's overall health and, potentially, its susceptibility to fundamentalism. When the government formed the High Islamic Council in January 2002, a delegate to the convention commented, "Extremism here is a consequence of something, like a lack of jobs or development."[80] Mali's current human development ranking is among the lowest in the world; the nation ranks 178 out of 182 countries on the United Nations Development Programme's 2009 human development index.[81] An estimated 77.1 percent of the Malian population lives below the poverty line of $2 per day.[82] According to the CIA World Factbook, approximately 30 percent of Mali's population is unemployed.[83] In the long term, if left unaddressed, these factors may contribute to an increased risk of radicalism.

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