

American Foreign Policy Council

MALI

QUICK FACTS

Population: 15,968,882

Area: 1,240,192

Ethnic Groups: Mande 50%
(Bambara, Malinke, Soninke), Peul
17%, Voltaic 12%, Songhai 6%,
Tuareg and Moor 10%, other 5%

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

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate):
\$10.32 billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated September 2013)

Islamist activity in Mali experienced a significant uptick in 2012, as a perfect storm of events facilitated a fracture between the country's north and south. This political turmoil allowed Islamist forces to take over the north of the country, prompting an international intervention by France in January 2013. French forces, with the assistance of Malian and international troops, successfully began to regain control of Mali's north thereafter, and have begun to take steps to rebuild. However, Islamists in Mali still present a threat. If Mali does not forge a successful peace, it is likely that Islamists will return stronger and deadlier than before.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In 2012, Mali experienced an upsurge in violent Islamist activity after the democratically-elected Malian government fell in a coup. On March 21, a group of Malian soldiers led by Captain Amadou Sanogo attacked the presidential palace in Bamako, deposing President Amadou Toumani Touré. Captain Sanogo and his group of soldiers, called the Green Berets, were frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of support from the government in fighting the rebellions in the north that restarted in January 2012.

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.¹ 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.² ECOWAS suspended Mali from its membership and imposed sanctions against CNRDRE on March 29.³

Since independence in 1960, Tuaregs in the north have staged a number of rebellions seeking independence from the north. After the fall of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi in Libya, large numbers of trained and armed Tuareg soldiers, previously in his employ, came into Mali supporting the burgeoning rebellion in the north. It is not clear exactly how many soldiers came, but reports indicate it was between two and four thousand.⁴ In October 2011, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg rebel group, was formed aiming to create an independent state in northern Mali.⁵ Since its inception, the MNLA has been a secular group. It has not striven to impose radical Islam on its followers. The group singularly aims for independence from Bamako.

The MNLA kicked off its rebellion in mid-January 2012, attacking a military base and barracks in Menaka, Gao region of Mali.⁶ The following day, January 17, the group attacked Aguelhoc and Tessalit in the Kidal region.⁷ Fighting continued between government forces and the MNLA in the months ahead across the north.⁸ As the rebellion progressed, the MNLA was aided by Captain Sanogo’s coup. Taking advantage of the political upheaval in Bamako, the MNLA pressed its advantage. On April 2, the MNLA seized major cities in the north including, Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu.⁹ The MNLA announced a ceasefire on April 6, claiming that they had enough land to form their own state of Azawad.¹⁰ The country was effectively split in two with Bamako in control in the south and the rebels holding the north.

As the MNLA took over, they were aided by Islamist groups with their own aims of building an Islamic state. These groups, including AQIM, Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Oneness & Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), supported the MNLA in its efforts against the government in Bamako. However, they had their own objectives.

On May 26, the MNLA and Ansar Dine agreed to merge to form an Islamist state.¹¹ In the agreement, the pair intended to impose a non-rigorous form of *sharia* law in the new state.¹² However, it did not last long. Within less than a week, the two groups clashed over the degree to which *sharia* law would be enforced. MUJWA similarly united with the MNLA, and then similarly fell out. Together MUJWA and Ansar Dine pushed the MNLA out of Gao in June 2012.¹³

As the Islamist groups took over northern Mali, there were reports of foreign fighters coming to the region to participate in the struggle. The exact numbers of foreign militants in Mali is hard to determine. Timbuktu's mayor Hallé Osman confirmed reports in May 2012 of Pakistani *jihadists* brought into Timbuktu by AQIM to train new recruits.¹⁴ Subsequent reports noted that foreign fighters from Algeria and Western Sahara were arriving in Gao.¹⁵ In October, residents of Gao and Douentza reported seeing fighters from Egypt, Tunisia, and Sudan.¹⁶

Reports indicated that while the Islamists were successful at taking power and physically keeping control of the north, they prove unable to provide residents with basic services and support.¹⁷ The events in the north spurred many northerners to flee the region. Nearly 450,000 have been displaced by the fighting, "creating a vacuum of talent that the Islamists have apparently been unable to fill."¹⁸ Reports indicate that in cities like Kidal, basic services like water, electricity, and telephones run intermittently, in some places even down to one night a week.¹⁹

By the fall of 2012, the international community was solidifying its response to the events transpiring in Mali. In December 2012, the UN Security Council approved plans for an African-led intervention force. However, the UN resolution noted that before the forces could be deployed, Mali needed to take steps toward stabilizing its government, continue peace talks and ensure that its military is properly trained and equipped.²⁰

Responding to the international community's efforts to push the Islamists out, the rebels continued to dig themselves into the north. Islamic fighters reportedly stole millions of dollars worth of construction equipment from companies that had been working in the region. They dug tunnels, con-

structed roads and electrical networks allowing them to transverse the rugged terrain more easily.²¹ Locals in the north reported in December that Islamist fighters were modifying vehicles to hold weaponry, fortifying roads, and digging trenches.²²

Taking the lead in the international response, French Minister of Defense, Jean-Yves Le Drian announced in October that France was planning to launch a military intervention in the coming weeks.²³ Mali was a French colony until it received independence in 1960.

In early December, representatives of Ansar Dine and the MNLA agreed to a ceasefire with the government.²⁴ However in early January, Ansar Dine suspended its ceasefire agreement with the government, accusing it of preparing for war.²⁵ Aggressively, the Islamists began moving south towards Bamako. By January 10, Islamist rebels attacked and took control of Konna, less than 40 miles from Mopti, where the Malian army maintains a strategic base.²⁶

The uptick in Islamist activity prompted the international community to hasten its response. On January 11, the UN Security Council called on member states to assist Mali's defense and security forces.²⁷ The same day, French Prime Minister Francois Hollande announced that France had begun deploying troops to Mali to aid its army's efforts against the Islamists.²⁸ With French support, the Malian army regained control of Konna on January 11.²⁹

French and Malian troops continued retaking 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.³⁰ In mid-March, France announced that it would be putting forth a resolution at the UN for a peacekeeping force to be deployed to Mali to replace French and African soldiers.³¹ The announcement came as France indicated that it would begin withdrawing its troops in April.³² As of this writing, a combination of French and other international forces are continuing operations against Islamists in northern Mali.

In addition to the unrest stemming from the country's recent coup, a number of organized Islamist groups are currently active in Mali.

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 *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. 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 mass.³³ In the Sahara, AQIM appears to be hybrid of groups, part criminal network, part smuggling outfit and part Islamist insurgency.

An experienced operative, Abdelmalik Droukdel, became the leader of GSPC in 2004. At the time, Droukdel aimed to transform the group to become 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.³⁴ Droukdel also took advantage of the GSPC's access to smuggling routes in the Sahel to funnel fighters to Iraq, thus appealing to al-Qaeda's leadership.³⁵ In September 2006, bin Laden's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri formally announced GSPC's merger with al-Qaeda.³⁶ 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 fears in the hearts of French traitors and sons of apostates."³⁷ 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.

In solidifying its North Africa network, al-Qaeda was looking for another way to push the *jihad* into Europe. However, AQIM "instead placed increasing emphasis on its Saharan component."³⁸ AQIM's southern zone was not initially viewed as an integral part of the group.³⁹ However, the Sahelian arm gained increasing clout because 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.⁴⁰ Additionally, the continued drive by Algerian security forces has put the group on the defensive, pushing them south.⁴¹ The 2012 coup in Bamako and the Tuareg rebellion have most recently given the group and its affiliates a significant foothold in Mali's north.

Prior to its merger with al-Qaeda, GSPC achieved international notoriety when it kidnapped 32 European tourists in Algeria in early 2003.⁴² Seventeen members of the group were freed by Algerian forces that May.⁴³ The remaining victims were forced by their captors to trek south across the desert into Mali.⁴⁴ In August 2003, the rest of the hostages were released for a reported sum of Euro 5 million, save for one who died from heat stroke in captivity.⁴⁵

The kidnapping was orchestrated by Ammari Saifi, who until his capture in May 2004, was one of the group's core leaders.⁴⁶ The incident illustrated GSPC's abilities to operate freely in northern Mali's desert regions.⁴⁷

In May 2007, AQIM kidnapped its first foreigner since the 2003 kidnapping. Between 2007 and today, 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 dual purposes for AQIM; the activity itself drives foreign investment away from the region, while the ransom payments bring AQIM needed cash for weapons and supplies.⁴⁸ For example, after receiving the ransom payment for the seventeen hostages released in August of 2004, Saifi reportedly used the cash to purchase vehicles and weapons.⁴⁹

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 *jihadi* fighters to Iraq. One of Droukdel's commanders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, nicknamed "untouchable" by French intelligence, has become particularly adept at smuggling.⁵⁰ Belmokhtar was given command of GSPC's southern zone in 2000.⁵¹ To enhance his smuggling activities, Belmokhtar forged relationships with some members of the northern communities. Belmokhtar first married into an Arab family in Timbuktu and subsequently "took additional wives from Tuareg and Barbiche Arab tribes."⁵² These relationships gave Belmokhtar greater 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ Over time, however, the Tuaregs have come to feel that their relationship with the Malian government was suffering as a result of their ties to AQIM.⁵⁵

Prior to the coup in Bamako, AQIM was a low-scale threat, with a composition that limited its reach. While the group's internationalist aims remain, they are not reflected in the group's leadership. "AQIM cannot prove its commitment to 'Africanized' *jihadi* without Africanizing at least some of its leadership."⁵⁶ Illustrating this, the group does not have any non-Algerian *jihadi*s within its top echelon.⁵⁷ This trend appears to have continued even as the group gained ground in Mali's north.

As affiliate groups Ansar Dine and MUJWA swept across northern Mali,

members of AQIM have reportedly accompanied the fighters. In April 2012, there were reports that AQIM fighters Abou Zeid, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Yahya Abou Al-Hammam were in Timbuktu meeting with Ansar Dine leader Iyad Ag Ghaly, who was holding the city at the time with AQIM support.⁵⁸ It is suspected that during this meeting, Al-Hammam was named governor of Timbuktu.⁵⁹ In May of that year, it was reported that AQIM members were being advised by foreign *jihadis* in Timbuktu.⁶⁰

Subsequently, in early March 2013, it was reported that French forces killed AQIM leader Abou Zeid in an operation near the Algerian border.⁶¹ The Algerian is believed to have been behind several incidents of kidnapping and the executions of two European captives in recent years.⁶² There have also been reports that Mokhtar Belmokhtar likewise was killed in a French airstrike. This, however, has not been confirmed.⁶³

Ansar Dine

AQIM-related Ansar Dine was formed by Iyad Ag Ghaly in October 2011. Meaning “Defenders of the Faith,” Ansar Dine expanded its reach and power in northern Mali throughout 2012. As the Tuareg rebels were regrouping in October 2011, Ag Ghaly put himself forward as a leader.⁶⁴ However, he was rejected by other Tuareg leaders in favor of a secularist bent, and Bilal Ag Acherif was appointed the leader of the MNLA.⁶⁵ In the wake of this rejection, Ag Ghaly founded Ansar Dine, which is explicitly dedicated to holy war against opponents of Islam.⁶⁶ In January 2013, the group was estimated to have around 1,500 fighters.⁶⁷

Iyad Ag Ghaly, thought to be in his mid-50s, was once known for his fondness for drinking alcohol, particularly whisky, and music.⁶⁸ As a young man, he had joined Gaddafi’s Islamic Legion.⁶⁹ He returned to Mali after the group was disbanded in 1987 and quickly became a leader among disenfranchised Tuaregs in northern Mali.⁷⁰ He led a rebellion against the Malian government in 1990.⁷¹

It is believed that he first became radicalized in the early 2000s during a visit to Pakistan.⁷² He reportedly spent time there with the Dawa fundamentalist sect, an offshoot of Jamaat al-Tabligh.⁷³ His cousin, Abdel Krim, is a member of AQIM.⁷⁴

Throughout the 2000s, Ag Ghaly held important diplomatic roles, first helping foreign secret-service agencies negotiate the release of hostages that were held by AQIM in 2003, and later negotiating an end to Mali’s Tuareg rebellion of 2006–2009.⁷⁵

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. On June 27, 2012, Ansar Dine pushed the MNLA out of Timbuktu and Kidal.⁷⁶ It also helped its ally, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, push the MNLA out of the north-Malian city of Gao.⁷⁷ Ansar Dine announced the following day that it had control of all three cities.⁷⁸

As Ansar Dine took control of more and more of northern Mali, the group increasingly began push a radical interpretation of Islam on residents. On July 10, 2012, Ansar Dine destroyed two tombs at Timbuktu's ancient Djingareyber mud mosque, a major tourist attraction, angering the city's residents and drawing international condemnation.⁷⁹ The Islamist group banned alcohol, smoking, Friday visits to cemeteries, and watching soccer, and required women to wear veils in public.⁸⁰ It whipped and beat those who have not adhered to its strict interpretation of *sharia* law.⁸¹ The group was also blamed for orchestrating the deadly stoning of a couple it believed had children out of wedlock, although Ag Ghaly denied the accusation.⁸²

Ansar Dine signed an agreement in December 2012 with the MNLA to "reject terrorism and work together towards securing the areas they control."⁸³ Signed in Algiers, the two groups also condemned the UN's approval of an African-led mission into northern Mali.⁸⁴ However, the agreement was short-lived; Ansar Dine suspended the ceasefire in early January 2013, claiming that the government was preparing for war. In response, Ansar Dine seized control of the strategic town of Konna, just 435 miles from Bamako along the narrow-waist of Mali that separates its north and south.⁸⁵ The moves prompted the French to respond with its own forces days later.

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.⁸⁶ However, the Sudanese army has denied that there are Malian *jihadists* in Darfur.⁸⁷ Reacting to the French intervention, Ansar Dine stated that the move would have "consequences for French citizens in the Muslim world."⁸⁸

Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa

The Movement for Oneness in West Africa (MUJWA) is a West Africa-based, militant Islamist organization that is allied with Ansar Dine and has ties to AQIM.⁸⁹ The group's first public statement was on December 12, 2011, when it released a video of three European aid workers it had abducted in Western Algeria on October 23, 2011.⁹⁰ The video also contained footage of six MUJWA men describing in Arabic the sources of their ideological inspi-

ration.⁹¹ Al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden and Taliban founder Mullah Omar were among those named, but notably more emphasis was placed on African Muslims such as “Ousman Dan Fodio, El Hadj Omar Tall, and Amadou Cheikhou, who all fought colonial invaders.”⁹² The three European hostages were freed on July 18, 2012. In return, MUJWA secured the release of two men who had been arrested in connection with the abduction.⁹³ MUJWA also claimed that it received a ransom payment of \$18 million.⁹⁴

Shortly after its inception, MUJWA reportedly made an agreement with both Ansar Dine and AQIM to pursue a common goal of spreading their beliefs across the region.⁹⁵ The group appears to target West Africa more than its compatriots. Hamad al-Khairi, Ahmad al-Tilmesli, and Sultan Ould Badi are believed to hold prominent leadership positions within the group.⁹⁶ 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.”⁹⁷ The group appears to fund itself through kidnapping activities.⁹⁸

Like Ansar Dine, MUJWA initially had a truce with the MNLA as they jointly fought to take control of Mali’s north from Bamako.⁹⁹ But on June 27, 2012, MUJWA and its ally Ansar Dine pushed the MNLA out of the north-Malian city of Gao.¹⁰⁰ Twenty-one bodies were found after the fighting was over.¹⁰¹ While Ansar Dine appears to have taken control of Timbuktu with AQIM, Gao was held by MUJWA.¹⁰² In the advance to Gao, MUJWA reportedly sacked Algeria’s consulate and kidnapped seven Algerian diplomats.¹⁰³

Since gaining power, MUJWA has imposed a draconian interpretation of *sharia* law on Malians.¹⁰⁴ On August 5, 2012, protestors in Gao prevented MUJWA from amputating the hand of a thief.¹⁰⁵ On August 7, a journalist at a Gao-based radio station was attacked by four MUJWA gunmen, beaten unconscious, and left at a nearby hospital.¹⁰⁶ The journalist, Malick Aliou Maïga, was hosting a live show at Radio Adar Khoïma.¹⁰⁷ The attack was reportedly in retaliation for the station’s coverage of protests against MUJWA.¹⁰⁸ On August 8, 2012, MUJWA cut off the hand of a different thief in the north-Malian town of Ansongo, an event that was confirmed by the MUJWA leader Mohamed Ould Abdine the following day.¹⁰⁹ MUJWA has also whipped “illegitimate” couples and people who smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol.¹¹⁰

In October 2012, there were several reports of MUJWA fighters raiding markets and shops confiscating amulets, cigarettes, and dried tobacco leaves sold

by women alongside roads.¹¹¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The current violence in Mali has essentially divided the country into two parts. While the north has experienced a significant uptick in Islamist activity, it is not clear whether the ideology has actually gained a significant foothold across the country. The Islamists, their radical teachings and their imposition of justice have not reportedly been embraced by northerners, many of whom have simply fled. In the south, too, there has not been any significant indication that Malian society has become more Islamist in its direction.

Islam has a long history in Mali, first brought to the country in the eleventh century from the Mediterranean by Saharan nomads.¹¹² First settled in the twelfth century, Timbuktu became an epicenter for Islamic scholarship.¹¹³

In terms of composition, Mali is overwhelmingly Muslim, with some 90 percent of the population adhering to the Islamic faith.¹¹⁴ Malian Islam is not typical of other Islamic states, however. In Mali, scholars have noted, “there is no uniform way of being Muslim.”¹¹⁵ The country’s practice of the religion incorporates animist traditions of the region, including “absorbing mystical elements [and] ancestor veneration.”¹¹⁶ 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.”¹¹⁷ Islam and animism, in other words, have coexisted in Mali for centuries.¹¹⁸

Malian culture also boasts its own conflict resolution mechanisms, which aid the country’s culture of tolerance. One such mechanism is called “*cousinage*,” or so-called joking relationships between pairs of ethnic groups. *Cousinage* forbids conflict between ethnic groups or clans and encourages them to trade humorous insult with impunity.¹¹⁹ These mechanisms serve not only to keep the peace within the population, but also to 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.¹²⁰ According to the *Chicago Tribune*, between 2001 and 2004 ultraconservative Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia “opened 16 mosques in Timbuktu, a develop-

ment termed disturbing by the city's mayor, Aly Ould Sidi."¹²¹ However, the Wahhabi influence upon Malian society and its version of 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."¹²²

Since Islamists took over the north, several French MPs have received reports that Qatar was financing the MNLA, Ansar Dine, and MUJWA.¹²³ Iran has also attempted to peddle influence in Mali, reportedly paying some *imams* \$400 per month to "tout the shia brand" while Saudi Arabia pays \$500 per month.¹²⁴ Yet "[l]ocal observers believe that the Saudis and Iranians control only 3 to 5 percent of mosques in Mali."¹²⁵ 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."¹²⁶

However, there are indications that Bin Laden's ideology has some support amongst the Malian population. One report highlights the "proliferation of Osama bin Laden photos in stalls at the Bamako market and the exponential increase of radio stations preaching radical Islam."¹²⁷ 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.-led war on terror,¹²⁸ there do not appear to be large numbers of Malians willing to take up arms for Bin Laden's cause.

As the Islamists have taken control of the north and inflicted their beliefs on the region, they have sought 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. As of the end of 2012, 16 mausoleums listed as World Heritage Sites had been destroyed.¹²⁹ The fighters in the north have also sought to impose radical Islamic structures on the region's residents. There have been numerous instances of women being beaten or harassed for not properly covering themselves.¹³⁰

While the Islamists were able to take physical control of Mali's north, it does not appear that they won the support of the region's residents. The fact that so many residents have fled illustrates that the beliefs defining radical Islam are neither native to Mali nor wanted in Mali's culture. Reports indicate that

residents of Gao have provided information and assistance to French and Malian troops on the *jihadists* and their weapons caches.¹³¹ Pushed out of power by both Ansar Dine and MUJWA, the MNLA has reportedly been cooperating with the French since their arrival, even though they are still battling the Malian government.¹³²

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.¹³³ Within days, Malian army general Amadou Toumani Touré led a *coup d'état* 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.¹³⁴ 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.¹³⁵ Following the mandates in the constitution, Konaré stepped aside after two five year terms, as Touré became president winning the 2002 election.

In keeping with the French tradition, religion in Mali “is understood as private and confessional.”¹³⁶ 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.¹³⁷ To oversee these groups, the High Islamic Council (*Haut Conseil Islamique*) was formed by the government in 2002.¹³⁸ 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.”¹³⁹

As a Muslim majority state, issues such as marriage and inheritance have traditionally been overseen by *imams* or village elders.¹⁴⁰ However, 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.¹⁴¹ 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.¹⁴² The marriage law was formally presented by President Konare in 2002.¹⁴³ However, it was “withdrawn in the face of considerable criticism.”¹⁴⁴ At the time, leaders of Islamic associations stated that the government’s legislative attempts contradicted Islamic law.¹⁴⁵

In 2009, the government revisited the Family Code. The law was approved by the National Assembly in early August 2009.¹⁴⁶ 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.¹⁴⁷

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.¹⁴⁸ Ultimately, he was relieved of his religious duties.¹⁴⁹

The renewed opposition against 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 2002.¹⁵⁰ The United States subsequently began the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) in October 2002 to strengthen the ability of states in the region to fight terrorism and prevent the region from becoming a safe haven for terrorist organizations.¹⁵¹ The first phase of the U.S. training program concluded in September 2004 involving roughly 1,200 troops from Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania.¹⁵² In June 2005, the program expanded to include more countries from the region becoming the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTP).¹⁵³ The Initiative’s Operation Flintlock provides anti-insurgency training to the armies of the seven participating states, including Mali.¹⁵⁴ Operation Flintlock has been reprised on several occasions between 2007 and 2010.¹⁵⁵

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 to bolster its security structures in the north.¹⁵⁶ Army commanders from Mali, Algeria, Mauritania and Niger met in August 2009 to further coordinate their counter-terrorism activities.¹⁵⁷ 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*.¹⁵⁸ Subsequently, Algeria, Mauritania, Niger and Mali established a joint military base in Tamanrasset, southern Algeria in April 2010.¹⁵⁹ The partners aim to use the base to target AQIM's smuggling routes.¹⁶⁰ 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."¹⁶¹

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.¹⁶² After the attack, Mali allowed Algerian forces to pursue the insurgents into Malian territory.¹⁶³

France also increased its counterterrorism operations in the region in response to its citizens being 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 2010.¹⁶⁴ While the French hostage was not at the camp, security forces killed six AQIM militants in the raid.¹⁶⁵ 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.

In its efforts to combat Islamists, Mali's interim government has sought help from the international community. In July 2012, 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.¹⁶⁶ It welcomed the UN resolution supporting an international military force to aid its army. When the French began their intervention, Mali's interim president, Dioncounda Traore, declared a ten-day state of emergency.¹⁶⁷ "Our choice is peace... but they have forced war on us," he said in a national address. "We will carry out a crushing and massive retaliation against our enemies."¹⁶⁸

Moving forward, 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.”¹⁶⁹ Mali’s current human development ranking is amongst the lowest in the world; the nation ranks 182 trailed by only five other countries on earth on the United Nations Development Programme’s 2013 human development index.¹⁷⁰ An estimated 50.4 percent of the Malian population lives below the poverty line of \$1.25 per day.¹⁷¹ According to the CIA *World Factbook*, approximately 30 percent of Mali’s population is unemployed.¹⁷² In the long term, if left unaddressed, these factors may contribute to an increased risk of radicalism. Recent events illustrate that the Malian government’s repeated inability to properly deal with the Tuareg population in the north also creates a potential avenue of influence for Islamists.

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