Mali

Quick Facts

Population: 20,137,527 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 1,240,192 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Bambara 33.3%, Fulani (Peuhl) 13.3%, Sarakole/Soninke/Marka 9.8%, Senufo/Manianka 9.6%, Malinke 8.8%, Dogon 8.7%, Sonrai 5.9%, Bobo 2.1%, Tuareg/Bella 1.7%, other Malian 6%, from members of Economic Community of West Africa 0.4%, other 0.3% (2018 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): $17.508 billion (2019 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2021)

Introduction

The Malian government and international forces continue to struggle to adequately police the plethora of Islamist and non-Islamist armed groups active in the north and center of the country. Instability can be traced back to the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, itself a product of longstanding cleavages between the government in Bamako and aggrieved northern Tuareg tribes. In January 2012, Tuareg separatists began an offensive that overran Malian forces in the north, destabilizing the country and fomenting a military coup d'état. In the ensuing turmoil, Islamist groups wrested control of the country's north and threatened an invasion of the south, prompting an international intervention.

While intervention forces, led by the French and assisted by Malian and international troops, have regained control of major northern towns, large swathes of northern Mali remain unstable and insurgent groups launch frequent attacks. More recently, jihadist groups have spread to Mali's central Mopti region, exploiting rifts and fueling deadly conflicts between the Fulani (Peul), Bambara, and Dogon ethnic communities, which has led to a precipitous decline in the security situation therein.[1]

Absent a major strategic shift in the country and wider Sahel region, the marked increase of Islamist activity is likely to continue unabated. Deadly attacks on Malian military personnel, United Nations (UN) peacekeepers, and civilians persist in both the northern and central regions of the country.[2] *Key attacks, such as the October 2017 attack that killed four American soldiers stationed in Niger occurred near the Malian border, have demonstrated the presence (and influence) of global Islamist extremist groups like the Islamic State.*[3]

Meanwhile, public trust in the Malian government continues to be undermined by the extrajudicial torture and murder of civilians by its forces and allied militias.[4] *The government of Mali has recognized this problem and has begun to reform the country's security sector to prevent abuses.*[5] *However, the March 2019 massacre of at least 160 Fulani herders—reportedly perpetrated by the government-supported Dan Na Ambassagou militia—and subsequent resignation of the Malian government illustrates the difficult*

road ahead.[6]Similarly, the government has not been able to implement the June 2015 Algiers Accord, which would theoretically begin the process of reconciling moderates and countering extremist groups.[7] In February 2020, the Malian government acknowledged that initial contact had been established with leaders of al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) to explore options for peace, a significant shift in six years of policy.[8]

Elections in the summer of 2018, though deemed credible by observers, were beset by violence, boycotts, and poll closures in the center and north.[9] After disputed parliamentary elections in the spring of 2020, protests against the administration of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta erupted in Bamako that June. Protesters led by the president's former electoral opponents and popular imam Mahmoud Dicko accused the Keïta administration of corruption, economic mismanagement, and a failure to resolve the security crisis in the country.[10] Significant political changes over the past two years – including two coup d'etats have heightened instability within the country, and impacted Mali's role in regional counterterrorism initiatives.[11]

Level of Islamist Activity

Islamist Activity

Since Mali declared itself independent in 1960, Tuaregs (a Berber ethnic group) who live in the north have repeatedly launched secessionist rebellions. One such separatist group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), was formed in October 2011. The MNLA is nominally secular but has allied with Islamist organizations at different points in its history. Armed with weapons and experience gained from the Libyan Civil War, MNLA-led rebellions in the north began early in 2012 and quickly handed the Malian military a string of defeats.[12] A group of disgruntled soldiers called the Green Berets attacked the presidential palace in Bamako and deposed President Amadou Toumani Touré out of frustration and a perceived lack of support from the government.

The National Council for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE), formed by the Green Berets after taking power, suspended Mali's constitution and dissolved its institutions, promising to restore civilian rule.[13] The coup caused enough chaos to benefit the MNLA's cause. On April 2, 2012, the MNLA seized several major cities in the country's north, including Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu.[14] The MNLA announced a ceasefire on April 6th of that year, claiming that they had enough land to form their own state of Azawad.[15] The country was split in two, with Bamako in control of the south and the rebels holding the north.

The MNLA sought the assistance of Islamist groups in its rebellion. These groups included al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Unity & Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). In May 2012, the MNLA and Ansar Dine agreed to merge to form an Islamist state.[16] Within less than a week, however, the two groups clashed over the degree to which *sharia* law would be enforced. 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.[17]

In early December 2012, representatives of *Ansar Dine* and the MNLA agreed to a ceasefire with the government.[18] However, Ansar Dine suspended this arrangement just one month later, accusing the government of using the reprieve to prepare for war.[19] The Islamist militants then began aggressively moving south towards Bamako. By January 10th, Islamist rebels attacked and took control of Konna, a town less than 40 miles from Mopti, where the Malian army maintains a strategic base.[20]

The French government responded by announcing Operation Serval, in which the French military would support Mali in rebuffing Islamist forces. With French support and deployed troops from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Malian army regained control of Konna.[21]

French, Malian, and ECOWAS troops quickly retook northern cities and towns in the weeks that followed. However, after military forces retook Gao, the Islamists regrouped and launched an insurgency.[22] In August 2014, *Operation Serval* was replaced by Operation Barkhane. With a mandate focused more on counterterrorism, the Barkhane force is headquartered in Chad and operates across Western and Central Africa. Operation Barkhane was reinforced in January 2020 and is still active as of this writing.[23]

The Malian government has signed ceasefires with several groups, including the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), which functions as an umbrella group for Tuareg and Arab separatists, among them the MNLA. The most recent, known as the Algiers Accord, was signed in June 2015. The agreement included provisions for former separatist fighters to be integrated into northern Malian security forces, better representation for northern regions in central government institutions, and the right for people in the north to form local institutions.[24] Implementation of the agreement has stagnated however, due to insecurity in the northern regions and lingering distrust between the government and the MNLA.[25]

Islamist groups initially did not participate in the peace process, remaining active in the north and increasingly the south and center of the country. Roughly 1,350 to 3,160 Salafi-*jihadi* fighters were active in Mali as of 2018, and *jihadist* activities have only increased since.[26] While there are several distinct Islamist groups, membership between them tends to be fluid. The March 2017 creation of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) from four disparate Islamist groups into a single al-Qaeda franchise has significantly escalated the threat posed by radical Islamists in the region.[27]

Ansar Dine ("Defenders of the Faith")

Iyad ag Ghaly formed Ansar Dine in 2011, with the group expanding its reach and power in northern Mali throughout 2012. As previously noted, the group initially worked with the MNLA to take over the north, but differing positions on the imposition of *sharia* caused the relationship between the two to deteriorate. *Ansar Dine*, in partnership with other Islamist groups such as MUJAO, expelled the MNLA and took control of Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao in June 2012.[28]

As Ansar Dine took control of more and more of northern Mali, it increasingly pushed a radical interpretation of Islam. On July 10, 2012, its militants destroyed two tombs at Timbuktu's ancient Djingareyber mud mosque, angering the city's residents and drawing international condemnation.[29] The Islamist group banned alcohol, smoking, Friday visits to cemeteries, and watching soccer, and required women to wear veils in public.[30] The group whipped and beat those who did not adhere to its strict interpretation of *sharia* law.[31]

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.[32] On October 31, 2016, Mahmoud Dicko, president of Mali's High Islamic Council, told reporters that he has brokered a truce with Ag Ghaly.[33] Ansar Dine immediately denied the report, calling the claim "completely baseless."[34] In March 2017, Ansar Dine joined JNIM and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, retaining its leader Iyad ag Ghaly atop the new organization.[35] As part of JNIM, Ansar Dine militants remained active through 2019, conducting attacks in Mali with allied Islamist organizations such as the Macina Liberation Front.[36]

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Al-Mourabitoun ("The Sentinels")

MUJAO is a West Africa-based militant Islamist organization that is allied with and has ties to AQIM.[37] Soon after its first public statement in December 2011, 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 other terror groups, 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] While Ansar Dine appeared to have taken control of Timbuktu with AQIM, Gao was held by MUJAO.[42] During its advance on Gao, MUJAO reportedly sacked Algeria's consulate and kidnapped seven Algerian diplomats.[43] Once in control of the city, MUJAO imposed a draconian interpretation of sharia law on Malians.[44] 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, leaving MUJAO largely defunct.[45]

Al-Mourabitoun

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.[46] The group aims to unite Islamic movements and Muslims across Africa against secular influences, with a particular focus on attacking French interests and allies across the region.[47] Belmokhtar's faction, known as the al-Mulathamun Battalion ("the Masked Battalion"), 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] Under Belmokhtar's command, the group claimed responsibility for the January 2013 Tiguentourine gas facility attack, which killed 39 civilians.

Al-Mourabitoun's unified front may belie greater internal turmoil. In May 2015, al-Mourabitoun co-founder Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in an audiotape that was released to the *Al Akhbar* new agency.[49] Several days later, however, Belmokhtar dismissed the pledge, a move that indicated a split between al Sahrawi and al-Mourabitoun's *shura* council.[50] In the weeks that followed, local Malian media reported clashes between factions loyal to Belmokhtar and those loyal to al Sahrawi.[51] 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.[52]

Questions about al-Mourabitoun's leadership persist. Founder Belmokhtar was reportedly killed by U.S. forces in Libya three separate times, the latest in 2016. Since then, it is rumored (though unsubstantiated) that Belmokhtar remains alive and at large. Irrespective of its leader's status, reports indicated that al-Mourabitoun reunited with AQIM following the Radisson Blu attack in November 2015.[53] This reconciliation was formalized by the March 2017 merger of multiple West African al-Qaeda affiliated groups to form JNIM.[54] In January 2017, al-Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for a suicide car bombing at a military camp in Gao that killed 47 people.[55]

Al-Mourabitoun has been involved in several high-profile attacks against foreigners in central and southern Mali, including three attacks in Sévaré and Bamako in 2015 that collectively killed 37 people.[56] The group has also launched attacks outside of Mali, including collaborating with AQIM on an attack on the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in January 2016 as well as on the March 2016 attack on the Grand Bassam beach resort in Côte d'Ivoire.

Macina Liberation Front (FLM)

The FLM emerged in January 2015 and is led by Amadou Koufa, an ethnically Fulani radical Islamic preacher. 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 French intervention in Mali. The term "Macina" refers to the 19th century Fulani-led Islamic Macina Empire that stretched across central Mali, and Koufa has proven adept at capitalizing on the sense of victimization among ethnic Fulani in this region.

FLM ideology blends Islamic extremism with a local ethnic radicalism that is a product of increased insecurity and competition between central Malian ethnic groups.[57] The group targets young Fulanis for recruitment through local radio stations. Koufa's Fulani-language sermons draw on a narrative of a

mythical time when Fulani were the masters of a prosperous Islamic faith in West Africa.[58] However, far from heralding prosperity, Fulani–FLM collaboration has prompted significant reprisals against Fulani communities by ethnic neighbors and government forces in central Mali.[59]

FLM membership is estimated to be a few hundred fighters, often recruiting from the Fulani pastoral community; the small numbers have thus far prevented the group from independently conducting anything more than small-scale attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs).[60] However, the FLM often collaborates 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 Bamako and in the July 2016 attack on the Malian military base in the central Segou Region.[61] The FLM also exploits the government's continual human rights abuses, such as extrajudicial executions and arrests, to curry favor with the Malian population.[62] Rumors of the death of FLM leader Amadou Koufa in a November 2018 raid by French forces proved to be premature after Koufa reappeared in a video that circulated in March 2019.[63] Koufa was subsequently designated a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the U.S. Department of State in November 2019.[64]

Along with assisting the establishment of Ansarul Islam in December 2016, the FLM joined with other al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel to form JNIM in March 2017.[65]

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 *jihad*. 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, poorly governed northern regions to conduct operations. 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.[66] As noted by analysts, the group has periodically turned to smuggling and criminality to raise funds. At its core, it has remained a highly resilient and pragmatic Islamist insurgency.[67]

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, receiving a reported sum of 5 million Euro.[68] Between 2007 and 2017, there were a number of additional, high-profile kidnappings that illustrated the group's continued ability to operate in northern Mali. The kidnappings serve a dual purpose for AQIM; the activity itself drove foreign investment away from the region, while the ransom payments brought AQIM cash needed for weapons and supplies.[69] In addition to kidnapping, AQIM also engages in profitable smuggling operations with routes going through northern Mali.

According to the *Long War Journal*, AQIM affiliates launched 276 attacks in West Africa in 2017.[70] This marked a slight increase from 2016, and a nearly 150 percent increase from 2015.[71] After the merger of AQIM into JNIM, attacks claimed exclusively by AQIM have become more difficult to separate and define. However, the pace of attacks continues to increase: in April 2018, AQIM claimed an attack that killed a United Nations peacekeeper and wounded seven French soldiers, and indicated that the strike was a retaliation against French operations that had killed AQIM members.[72] In 2019, AQIM and its affiliates conducted two-thirds of the 800 attacks carried out by Salafi-*jihadist* groups in the Sahel, inflicting hundreds of casualties.[73] AQIM itself claimed responsibility for an attack that killed 10 UN peacekeepers in January of that year.[74]

These attacks seem to underscore the group's ability to recalibrate its strategy and tactics in the face of ongoing counterterrorism efforts. Nevertheless, its influence has waned as a result of competition from other Islamist groups.[75] While AQIM remains loyal to al-Qaeda, the group's roots in the Maghreb and leadership have proven a hurdle in the Sahel, when compared to its locally-affiliated rivals.[76] Indeed, since

2015, the group has faced increasing competition from the Islamic State, which was a potential impetus for AQIM's Sahara branch to merge with Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and the FLM to form JNIM in March 2017.[77] AQIM faced a devastating setback when French forces killed its leader Abdelmalek Droukdel and several close associates in a gunfight on June 3, 2020.[78] This setback will certainly not erase AQIM as an acute threat to peace in Mali, but will likely hasten the group's decline in favor of locally-led groups such as Ansar Dine, Ansarul Islam, FLM, and Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM, "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims")

In March 2017, JNIM was founded through the merger of four al-Qaeda affiliated Salafi-*jihadist* groups in Mali and the greater Sahel region—Ansar Dine, AQIM, al-Mourabitoun, and the FLM. The group aims to impose *sharia* law in West Africa and expel Western forces (particularly the French). Ansar Dine leader ag Ghaly pledged *bayat* to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on behalf of JNIM, cementing JNIM as the central al-Qaeda affiliate in the region.[79] JNIM was designated a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State on September 5, 2018.[80]

JNIM is estimated to number 2,000 fighters.[81] The merger has increased available resources and coordination, thereby improving the group's operational capacity despite increased pressure from security forces, which have inflicted significant losses among JNIM's leadership, including Abdelmalek Droukdel himself.[82] In Mali, JNIM was responsible for the April 2018 attack on a French and UN base in Timbuktu that wounded seven French soldiers. The group has also claimed a number of attacks against Malian, French, and UN forces as well as opposing militias and civilians, using tactics ranging from conventional assaults with light and heavy weapons, to IEDs and SVBIEDs (Suicide Vehicle-borne IEDs).[83] JNIM also conducts assassinations and kidnappings, and extorts resources from local people.[84] In the first half of 2020, JNIM claimed responsibility for multiple attacks, killing 69 Malian soldiers in just three particularly large assaults on military bases and convoys across central and northern Mali.[85] JNIM is also suspected of carrying out the June 2020 ambush that killed 24 Malian soldiers.[86]

In February 2020, the Malian government admitted to contacting senior JNIM leadership, including Amadou Koufa and Iyad ag Galy. While no concrete dialogue has yet been established, JNIM nonetheless acknowledged talks with the government and issued demands for the withdrawal of French forces as a prerequisite to more serious peace discussions.[87] JNIM's present demands may not seem politically viable, but opposition leader and *imam* Mahmoud Dicko firmly believes in dialogue with Islamist groups, and Mali may yet adopt a policy of reconciliation with the al-Qaeda affiliate.

A potential consequence of talks with the Malian government was the breakdown of the *de facto* peace that had existed between al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates in the Sahel since 2015. In the spring of 2020, remote clashes devolved into open warfare among the two Islamist factions.[88] While neither group has gained supremacy, fierce attacks from ISGS can only decrease JNIM's capabilities to act against security forces, but threatens to inflict even more civilian casualties.

Ansarul Islam

Ansarul Islam is an Islamist group founded in Burkina Faso, but which reportedly maintains bases and has conducted attacks in northern Mali.[89] The first such group native to Burkina Faso, Ansarul Islam announced its presence shortly after it conducted its first attack in December 2016.

Ansarul Islam was founded by Malam Ibrahim Dicko, allegedly with the backing of FLM leader Amadou Koufa, and reportedly numbers 150-200 fighters.[90] Dicko allegedly passed due to natural causes in mid-2017 and Ansarul Islam is reportedly led by his brother Jafar as of early 2019.[91] Ansarul Islam appears closely linked to Malian al-Qaeda affiliated *jihadist* groups and has received training from JNIM operatives.[92] It also reportedly participates in JNIM operations in Mali: the two groups claimed involvement in the March 2017 attack on a Malian military base in Boulikessi that killed eleven Malian soldiers.[93]

Ansarul Islam has also been ascribed responsibility for a number of IED and conventional attacks in Mali, such as one that killed a French soldier in April 2017.[94] The group has demonstrated its ability to grow as Sahelian states have been increasingly destabilized by Islamist violence. While many of its attacks occur in Burkina Faso, in October 2019 suspected Ansarul Islam fighters carried out a sophisticated attack on two Malian military outposts, killing at least 25 soldiers.[95]

The Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS)

After the loss of core territory and power in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has broadened its territorial scope and interests to the Sahel region of North Africa.[96] The creation of an IS affiliate in the Sahel has been attributed to *jihadi* leader Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi, who was formerly affiliated with MUJAO and al-Mourabitoun.[97] While Sahrawi left al-Qaeda and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2015, the depth of the connection remains obscure. Nevertheless, the Islamic State's official media channels acknowledged the group's *bayat* in 2016. In mid-2019, Islamic State incorporated its Sahelian affiliate into Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).[98]

ISGS has demonstrated a high operational tempo since its founding in 2015, conducting a number of sophisticated attacks in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.[99] In October 2017, ISGS killed four U.S. Special Forces soldiers, as well as four Nigerien soldiers. The attack occurred in Tongo Tongo, near Niger's border with Mali.[100] As a result of this attack, ISGS and al-Sahrawi received a terrorist designation from the U.S. State Department in May 2018.[101] ISGS has come under increasing pressure by security forces, particularly through the French Operation Barkhane. This pressure possibly facilitated the surrender of veteran *jihadist* Sultan Ould Bady to Algerian authorities in August 2018 and led to the capture of senior ISGS commander Mohamed Mrabat by French forces in May 2020.[102]

ISGS' core strength has been estimated at around 200 to 300 fighters, but it is believed that it can call upon or hire upward of 1,000.[103] The group has risen to become the primary enemy of French forces and its Sahelian allies operating in the region. In a period of less than two months in late 2019, for instance, ISGS attacks killed over 300 people across the Sahel.[104]

Despite controversy between Belmokhtar and al Sahrawi after ISGS' split from Al-Mourabitoun, the Islamic State and al Qaeda-affiliated groups refrained from open hostilities from 2015 until 2020.[105] While there are likely many facets to the conflict, *Al Naba*, Islamic State's central news agency, has accused JNIM of initiating hostilities and betraying the Islamist cause by speaking to the Malian government.[106] The fighting remains inconclusive as of mid-2020, but JNIM maintains a larger force, which may blunt the rising power of ISGS in Mali and the Sahel, but the latter will likely remain a major threat.

Islamism and Society

Mali has a significant Muslim majority, with nearly 94 percent of the population adhering to the Islamic faith as of 2018.[107] While the northern and central regions have experienced a significant uptick in radical Islamist activity, it is not clear that this reflects the broader sentiments of the Malian people. Islamists, their radical teachings, and their harsh imposition of justice have reportedly not been embraced by northerners, many of whom have fled into refugee camps in neighboring Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Niger.[108] One reason may lie in the practice of Malian Islam, which is not typical of other Islamic nations. Malian religious practices incorporate animist traditions from the region, including "absorbing mystical elements [and] ancestor veneration."[109] 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."[110] Islam and animism, in other words, have coexisted in Mali for centuries, which is counter to many Islamist's strict interpretation of the religion.[111]

Since Islamists took over the north, several French MPs have received reports that Qatar was financing the MNLA, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO.[112] Iran has also attempted to peddle influence in Mali.[113] Malian officials, however, have disparaged such efforts. Before his ouster, President Touré commented that: "Mali is a very old Islamic country where tolerance is part of our tradition."[114]

When Islamists were in control of the north, they sought to impose their beliefs on the region and purge any dissonant practices. There have been several instances of Islamist militants destroying shrines and mausoleums in the north, particularly in Timbuktu, claiming that the veneration of Sufi saints and scholars was sacrilegious. Sixteen of the mausoleums destroyed as part of this effort were listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.[115] 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.[116]

While people in the north initially welcomed French intervention, frustrations have grown as the French and UN peacekeepers struggle to effectively provide security. There has also been discontent regarding certain provisions of the 2015 Algiers Accord. In July 2016, three people were killed and dozens wounded when the Malian military opened fire on protestors demonstrating against the nomination of former militants to government positions, as specified by the Algiers Accord.[117]

Young people between the ages of 18 and 35 form the largest number of recruits for armed non-state actors in Mali.[118] Over 19 million people live in Mali, and nearly 70 percent of the population is under the age of 24.[119] A potential draw to militant groups for young people is a "governance vacuum," in which most rural communities feel ignored or abandoned by their government while militant groups are seen as potentially better sources of protection.[120] Islamist recruitment, in turn, is bolstered by increasing insecurity in the northern and central regions of the country, as well as abuses by security forces. As of mid-2020, the UNHCR estimated that 141,000 Malian refugees have been forced to flee the country, while an additional 250,998 were classified as Internally Displaced Persons.[121]

Islamism and the State

Religion in Mali "is understood as private and confessional."[122] The Malian constitution, adopted in 1992, mandates 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.[123] The government formed the High Islamic Council (Haut Conseil Islamique) in 2002.[124] 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."[125]

The Bush administration began the Pan Sahel Initiative in October 2002 to train African security forces in counterterrorism.[126] In June 2005, the program expanded to include more countries from the region, becoming the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP).[127] The Partnership's Operation Flintlock provides anti-insurgency training to the armies of the seven participating states, which includes Mali.[128] Operation Flintlock has been reprised on several occasions, most recently in February 2020.[129] However, a shift in U.S. military priorities and increasing concerns over abuses by security forces active in the region may jeopardize future aid.[130] In 2020, the U.S. appointed a new special envoy for the Sahel to address the aggressive expansion of extremist Islamist groups in the region.[131]

Mali and its neighbors have made efforts to coordinate their counterterrorism activities. Algeria held a conference in March 2010 inviting leaders from some West African countries to build a joint counter-*jihad* security plan.[132] Subsequently, Algeria, Mauritania, Niger, and Mali established a joint military base in Tamanrasset, southern Algeria.[133] In 2014, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger founded the Group of Five (G5) Sahel, a regional institution aimed at coordinating development and security policies. The joint force for the G5 Sahel (FC-G5S) was formed in 2017, with the objective of countering regional

Islamist militant activities. However, while the FC-G5S has secured a modicum of international financial support in the interim, it is relatively new and unproven in the fight against Islamists in the Sahel region.[134]

From March 27 to April 2, 2017, Mali held a Conference of National Understanding, as part of the requirements of the 2015 peace agreement. The conference participants recommended that the Malian government should open negotiations with *jihadists*. The Malian government initially indicated interest, but its French allies were not as enthusiastic.[135] Nothing conclusive has emerged from initial contact with *jihadist* groups but the desire of Malians to negotiate have been expressed by Mahmoud Dicko, who represents the large body protestors who have called for the government's removal.[136]

Under Operation Barkhane, France has continued its regional counterterrorism operations and support. The over 5,000-member force has had successes in the killing of AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel and the capture of senior ISGS commander Mohamed Mrabat. As of July 2021, MINUSMA, the UN mission to Mali, had over 18,000 military and police personnel in Mali.[137]

Overall, the government response to Islamist groups has focused heavily on security solutions and building policing capacity. This has catalyzed two problems. The heavy-handed practices of Malian security forces have exacerbated local grievances, risking increasing support for Islamist groups. This has already happened with Mali's Fulani populations, and groups like the FLM have found success recruiting among young Fulani people aggrieved by abuses.[138] Nevertheless, these abuses continue.[139]

Second, Mali's focus on security solutions has come at the expense of addressing local social and economic issues in the north. Unfortunately, despite a close relationship between the Malian government and its international partners, President Keïta's tenure has been hampered by allegations of corruption and his administration's inability to solve the security crisis, which has boiled over into popular protest.[140] As increasing unrest wracks Mali's capital and southern regions, Islamist groups expand their reach and carry out attacks in the country's north and south. Without improving trust in state institutions, service delivery mechanisms, and accountability, it will be difficult for the Malian government to effectively protect against the allure of Islamist groups, which will continue to capitalize on local crises and insecurity.[141]

The past two years have seen significant political upheaval in Mali. In August 2020, a *coup d'etat* forced President Keita from power, while a subsequent May 2021 government turnover saw the arrest of the country's transitional president and prime minister.[142] Col. Assima Goïta has served as the country's interim leader since June 2021, with national elections currently scheduled for February 2022. These internal changes have come amid (and added to) mounting instability in the Sahel, where the European security presence is now undergoing a significant reconfiguration. In July 2021, French president Emmanuel Macron announced that his plans to "reshape" its security presence in the region, repositioning its military forces and drawing down its overall presence in coming months.[143]

Endnotes

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