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Mali

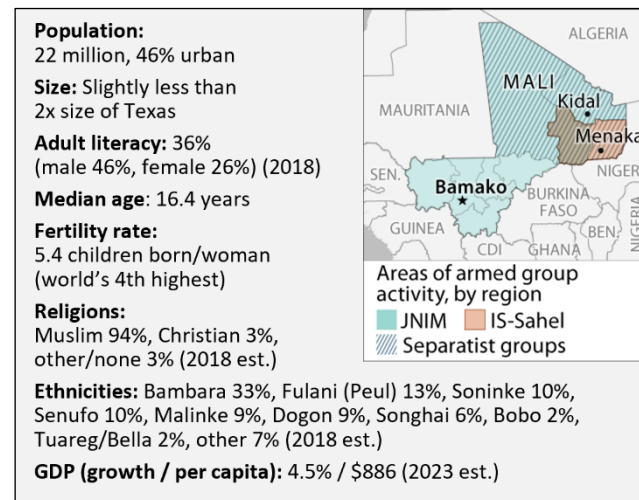
Once seen as a rising democracy in Africa, Mali has become an epicenter of conflicts and instability since 2011. A military junta seized power in 2020, Mali's second coup in nine years. Coups in Burkina Faso and Niger followed. Insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have expanded their reach, and a northern separatist conflict is resurgent. The military regime has curtailed ties with former colonial power France, forced out UN peacekeepers, and drawn closer to Russia. A top African gold producer, Mali has detained Western mining officials in an apparent bid to assert more state control over the mining sector and revenues. Reflecting broader shifts in the Sahel, events in Mali have challenged U.S. efforts to encourage stability, contain terrorist threats, address development and humanitarian needs, and deter Russian influence.

Assimi Goïta has served as Transition President since 2021, when the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) junta ousted civilian transitional leaders. A new constitution, adopted by referendum in 2023, concentrates power in the presidency and could pave the way for Goïta to run for election. Authorities postponed elections indefinitely in early 2024, however. In late 2024, the CNSP replaced the civilian prime minister with a military officer after the former criticized election delays. Goïta and other CNSP figures were also promoted from the rank of colonel to general. Critics and opposition actors have faced arrest, intimidation, and media restrictions. Authorities temporarily "suspended" all political party activities in mid-2024 and have banned several local and France-based broadcasters.

The CNSP has reshaped Mali's foreign and defense relations. Russian security personnel first entered the country in 2021 in support of Malian counterinsurgency operations. In 2022, France withdrew its 2,400 troops from Mali amid rising bilateral tensions, ending a U.S.-backed counterterrorism mission. In 2023, at the junta's request, the UN Security Council ended a decade-long UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, which had about 15,000 troops and police. The CNSP and its counterparts in Niger and Burkina Faso later formed a new alliance and moved to leave the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which had pressured coup leaders to cede power. The rift has disrupted regional security initiatives that once garnered donor backing.

The exit of French and UN troops left a security vacuum that state forces and insurgents have jockeyed to fill. The Mali-based Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM), an Al Qaeda-affiliated coalition, has moved closer to the capital, Bamako, where it carried out a multipronged attack in September 2024 that temporarily shuttered the international airport. Northern separatist factions have sought to regroup in the face of a Malian-Russian offensive. Armed groups, state security forces, and Russian personnel have allegedly committed atrocities, including massacres.

Figure 1. Mali at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic, based on Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED); figures from CIA *World Factbook* and IMF.

Historical Background

Mali has been mired in crises for over a decade. In 2012, soldiers ousted Mali's elected president as members of the minority ethnic Tuareg community renewed a separatist rebellion in the north. The rebels, bolstered by Libyan arms and by fighters with ties to Algerian-origin Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), then declared an independent state of "Azawad" in the north. By mid-2012, AQIM and two allied Islamist groups had outmaneuvered the separatists to assert control over much of the area.

France deployed its military in early 2013, at Bamako's request, and rapidly ousted Islamist groups from northern towns. The UN Security Council then established a peacekeeping operation, MINUSMA, to help stabilize the country. Veteran politician Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta was elected president later that year, and donors normalized ties with Bamako. French forces transitioned in 2014 into a regional counterterrorism mission backed by U.S. support.

Under international pressure to reach a peace deal with Tuareg-led groups, the government signed an accord in 2015 with two northern armed group coalitions. Mediated by Algeria with international backing, the accord aimed to demobilize rebel fighters, address Tuareg grievances, reestablish state authority in the north, and isolate designated terrorist groups, which were not party to the talks. Implementation lagged as Bamako slow-walked reforms, while signatory groups maintained parallel governance structures. Armed groups proliferated and Islamist insurgents expanded into central Mali.

President Kéïta was reelected in 2018, but opposition mounted over corruption, allegedly fraudulent legislative

elections, insecurity, and economic hardships. Protests erupted in mid-2020. The CNSP coup d'état followed.

Islamist Insurgencies

Mali faces two main Islamist armed groups: JNIM and an Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) Sahel affiliate. JNIM appears to be the most potent insurgent force in Mali, expanding from strongholds in north and central Mali into parts of the south, including areas around Bamako. JNIM is also active in neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger, and in northern Togo and Benin. The group is reportedly internally disciplined and offers security and judicial services to local communities that may view state actors and rival armed groups as ineffective or abusive. With an estimated several thousand combatants, JNIM is reportedly Africa's second-largest Al Qaeda affiliate, after Al Shabaab in Somalia.

JNIM and IS-Sahel appear to compete for recruits and have fought one another at times. IS-Sahel has historically carried out large civilian massacres, whereas JNIM has taken a more targeted and governance-centric approach. Both groups have proven resilient, outlasting France's military operations and multilateral stabilization efforts. Abuses by state security forces, and by their local militia and Russian allies, may have aided insurgent recruitment.

Russian Partnership

The CNSP has expanded security, economic, and diplomatic relations with Russia, contrasting Moscow's "sincere" partnership with "neocolonial" Western ties. Mali hosts one of the largest deployments of Russian security personnel in Africa, estimated at over 1,500 in 2024. The two countries have pledged increased mining and nuclear energy cooperation; Russia agreed in 2023 to build a gold refinery in Mali. Mali was one of six countries to join Russia in opposing a 2023 General Assembly Resolution urging a "just and lasting" peace in Ukraine in line with UN Charter principles. Later that year, Russia vetoed renewal of the UN sanctions program for Mali, which had focused on the 2015 peace accord. The CNSP later ended the accord.

Russian security personnel first arrived in Mali in 2021 under an agreement between the CNSP and the Wagner Group, a nominally private military company tied to the Kremlin. The deal, for which Mali reportedly agreed to pay Wagner \$10 million per month, coincided with a surge in Russian arms sales to Mali, including combat aircraft. U.S. officials accused Wagner of using gold from Mali to fund operations in Ukraine, of seeking to move arms via Mali for use in Ukraine, and of spurring MINUSMA's 2023 exit.

Russia has maintained forces and military logistical facilities in Mali since Wagner's formal dissolution in 2023, rebranding them under its new "Africa Corps." Russia has supported operations against both Islamist and separatist groups, unlike France and the United States, which urged peace talks with separatists. With Russian support, Malian troops seized the separatist stronghold of Kidal in late 2023. In July 2024, separatist and Islamist groups killed dozens of Russian forces in an ambush. A Ukrainian official claimed Ukraine had aided the rebels, sparking diplomatic blowback in Mali and beyond.

Economy and Humanitarian Conditions

Gold and cotton exports are the backbone of the formal economy; key livelihoods include farming, livestock, and

fishing. The CNSP has asserted more control over the mining sector and related revenues. Under a new 2023 mining code, the state has increased its stake in gold and lithium projects. Authorities also detained several officials with Western gold mining firms in 2024 in an apparent effort to extract payments or, possibly, seize firms' assets.

Landlocked and arid, with high population growth, Mali is one of the poorest and least-developed countries. Malaria and malnutrition are top health concerns. The spread of conflicts has worsened conditions. As of mid-2024, over 7 million Malians (one in three) were in need of humanitarian aid, per UN agencies, which also warned of possible famine in Menaka, an area under IS-Sahel siege. The World Bank assesses that climate change further threatens food security.

U.S. Policy and Aid

Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to foster stability, contain terrorist threats, address humanitarian needs, and maintain some longstanding development aid. Policymakers face stark constraints, however. Mali, along with Burkina Faso and Niger, has turned away from Western donors, while events have triggered U.S. legal and policy concerns. Military rule and Russian cooperation have constrained U.S. security assistance, while the exit of French and UN troops reduced options to work with partners. The 2015 peace accord, which U.S. officials supported, is moribund.

In 2022, Congress enacted legislation authorizing certain U.S. security and governance aid for the Sahel and requiring U.S. strategies for Mali and the region (Division AA of P.L. 117-103). Congress may assess implementation, as well as changes in policy conditions and tools since then. Members may consider the pros and cons of engaging with state authorities, and options to continue people-to-people ties. The safety of U.S. personnel is another potential focus.

Aid. The United States allocated \$128 million in bilateral aid for Mali in FY2023 (latest public data), led by health funds, in addition to \$84 million in humanitarian aid. The Biden Administration proposed to reduce bilateral aid to \$87 million in FY2025, including by eliminating funds for HIV/AIDS, basic education, and most democracy programs. Due to the 2020 coup, certain aid to Mali's government (primarily military aid) is restricted under Section 7008 of annual State and Foreign Operations appropriations acts. Security aid is also restricted under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (Title IV of P.L. 110-457). Some aid to internal security forces continued post-coup, using funds that Congress has authorized "notwithstanding" restrictions.

Sanctions. The Biden Administration designated Defense Minister Sadio Camara and two other military officials under a Russia-related sanctions program in 2023, citing their role in Wagner's "entrenchment in Mali." In 2022, the Administration designated the son of deposed former President Kéita and a linked firm for "Global Magnitsky" sanctions, citing corruption and human rights abuses. The State Department imposed visa restrictions on two officers linked to a 2022 massacre. Other Malian and Mali-based persons are subject to U.S. and UN terrorism sanctions.

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