

The Situation in Mali

History

The lead-up to the current situation occurring in Mali is, at best, complicated. Ever since Mali first gained independence in 1960, the country and the entire region have been plagued by immense turmoil. Before independence, the region was dominated by French colonial rule. The French pushed the Ségou Tukulor Empire out of modern-day Mali in the mid-1850s, giving them control over French West Africa. This region of the French Empire, though, was never seen as incredibly important, neither politically or economically, and was thus awarded a moderate level of autonomy. Finally, in the mid-1900s, the first semblances of true Malian independence arose with the foundation of the Sudanese Republic, and eventually the modern day, independent country known as the Republic of Mali.



The now independent Mali was not free from conflict, though, as its early years were full of turmoil and disagreement. The first president of Mali was Modibo Keita, an outspoken Marxist leader who claimed nonalignment in the Cold War. Despite the self-reported nonalignment, Keita built close ties between the newly created Mali and the Communist Bloc countries of Eastern Europe while distancing the nation from France. A failing economy, though, forced Keita's regime to build monetary ties with the French government, until the administration was deposed in a November 1968 coup, led by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré. Traoré's Military Committee controlled the government until the new Constitution was approved in 1974 and civilian rule returned in 1979. Traoré was then elected as president and he and his party, the Malian People's Democratic Union (UDPM), saw overwhelming popularity, though perhaps this was only because the UDPM was the only legal political party. Nonetheless, Traoré's rule saw the modernization of Mali, along with many rights returning to the people of Mali, including the right to participate in both local and national elections. Traoré's regime was not perfect, though, as he was opposed to the movements for greater democracy, and was deposed by the military in 1991, led by Amadou Touré, who was eventually elected president in 2002. Touré's rule was hindered by economic instability and attacks from a northern rebel group, known as the Tuaregs, and border conflicts between Mali and the neighboring country of Guinea. Though the government made temporary peace with the Tuareg rebel groups, it did not last long, and the conflict continued. The rise of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM) in the region fueled further conflict and unrest. Due, in part, to the underfunding of Mali's military, the Tuareg rebel groups finally won a significant victory in northern Mali in 2012.

The dissatisfaction in the government's response to the rebels in 2012 led to the military coup that brought Mali into its current situation. A military group, incredibly upset by the government's inaction, overthrew the democratically elected government, and replaced it with the National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and Restoration of the State, headed by Captain Amadou Sanogo. This coup was met with backlash by both the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and sanctions placed by these groups caused both regimes to collapse. This gave an opportunity for the Tuareg rebels, now under the banner of the National Movement for the Liberation of

Azawad (MNLA), to take control of the northern half of Mali, and then declare their controlled territory as the independent state of Azawad.

In 2013, the United Nations Security Council approved the creation of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). Though the United Nations had approved AFISMA, attacks from Islamist groups forced the organizations deployment before it was fully operational. While AFISMA's forces were able to push the extremists out of southern Mali, this did not eliminate the presence of terrorist organizations, as terrorist attacks saw a sharp increase in the years after 2012. Nonetheless, a peace settlement was reached between the Malian government and MNLA, allowing for elections to occur as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) took over international operations in the region. In 2013, former prime minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was elected to the presidency, and though there were some signs of economic growth in Mali, there has been no signs of violence stopping, keeping the region incredibly unstable.¹

Current Situation

Though the situation in Mali can currently be described as fraught—at best—there have been some improvements. International efforts and some United Nations interventions have helped bring some areas of Mali a semblance of peace, along with allowing the government of Mali to try and rebuild. Nonetheless, there is still much work to be done, as terrorist attacks and violations of human rights run rampant in northern Mali, and a lack of political stability in the rest of the nation has created an incredibly tense atmosphere.

Recent Updates to the Situation

Although the 2015 Algiers Agreement helped northern Mali, the area has periodically relived political and ethnic tensions since 2012. This agreement, brokered by the Algerian government, was intended to bring a semblance of peace to a region plagued by violence and instability.² While the deal has seen some limited success, it only focuses on northern Mali, ignoring explosions of violence in central Mali. As reported by the United Nations, there were at least 101 security incidents in Mali between August 2017 and September 2019, with the majority in central Mali. Also, cases of sexual violence have seen a sharp increase in central Mali, with nearly one thousand cases being reported between January and October of 2019—with armed groups carrying out 45% of those cases.³

Much of the violence in central Mali can be attributed to the lack of political stability in the region, caused by a lack of trust in the Malian political system. As recently as the August 12th, 2020 runoff election for president, many who wanted to vote either had their polling station closed or were intimidated out of voting all together. This echoes the 2018 election, in which security issues forced the closure of over 600 polling locations and critics of the incumbent Keita argued that the ballot boxes had been tampered with. In the runoff election, while international observers could not pinpoint any specific evidence of fraud, they admitted that there were irregularities observed in the process of the election.⁴ Though this very obviously points to fraud in the election, observers have been hesitant to make any official claims of election tampering occurring. As recently as the legislative elections that were held at the end of March and beginning of April 2020, election monitors reported cases of candidates being

¹ "Mali." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mali>.

² "Situation in central Mali 'deteriorating' as violence, impunity rise, UN rights expert warns." *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057911>.

³ "Mali security situation has reached critical threshold, warns UN human rights expert after visit." *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25377&LangID=E>.

⁴ "Mali." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mali>.

kidnapped and election materials being destroyed.⁵ This corruption angers many Malians, feelings which have been exacerbated by the continuation of violence perpetrated both by outside groups and by government security forces against dissenters.

Increase in Terrorist Activities

Along with a lack of trust in the government, terrorist attacks have been a scourge on all of Mali, but in recent years much of the damage has been isolated to central Mali, rather than northern Mali. As stated by Alioune Tine, the UN Independent Expert on the human rights situation in Mali, “I am gravely concerned at the continuing deterioration of the overall security situation, which has now reached a critical threshold.” In other words, the destruction in Mali



has shed light on how blatantly inadequate the current security measures are in protecting the people of Mali.⁶ As reported by MINUSMA’s Executive Summary published in February of 2018, in just the period between January 1, 2016 and June 30, 2017, there were nearly 300 documented cases of human rights abuses carried out by non-state actors in Mali.⁷ This amount of destruction is unprecedented in the region, and creates an atmosphere of extreme fear and raises tensions. As reported by Human Rights Watch, in 2019 alone, at least 150 civilians were killed by the attacks carried about by AQIM, a number that does not include the increase in the region’s communal violence due to the presence of Islamic extremists.⁸

One cannot adequately discuss terrorism in Mali, though, without discussing the amount of damage caused by Mali’s own security forces. The Malian government has been linked to many extrajudicial kills and interments against those who have spoken out against the government, with almost no consequences being dealt to any of the perpetrators.⁹ Nearly 300 cases of human rights abuses have been attributed to state actors. Many of these violations come from the Mali Defense and Security Forces labeling extrajudicial punishments and acts of intimidation against opponents as “counter-terrorism efforts.” These state actors are not foreign terrorists attempting to destabilize the region, but rather government and military officials carrying out attacks on its own civilians.¹⁰ Truly, no semblance of peace can be brought back to Mali until there is a sharp downturn in the amount of terrorist activity in the region, along with those terroristic acts carried out by the Malian government itself.

⁵ “Reports.” *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali*. <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/reports>.

⁶ “Mali security situation has reached critical threshold, warns UN human rights expert after visit.” *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25377&LangID=E>.

⁷ “Reports.” *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali*. <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/reports>.

⁸ “Mali: Events of 2019.” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/mali>.

⁹ “Mali: Events of 2019.” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/mali>.

¹⁰ “Reports.” *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali*. <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/reports>.

Human Rights Abuses in Mali

It is incredibly important for an international body to look beyond the statistics and political issues involved in any conflict and to look at the damage that is being done to individual civilians. In 2019 alone, over 150 children have been killed in the conflict. UNICEF reports that they had received nearly 100 cases of children being recruited and used by armed groups in just the first half of 2019. These egregious acts, though, do not even tell the full story of what children in Mali have experienced. Over 900 schools have been forced to remain closed due to the conflict, leaving 270,000 children without any education.¹¹

It is not just Malian children that have suffered in these human rights atrocities. Reports by the Association of African Women for Research and Development show that sexual slavery, gang rapes, and forced marriage are incredibly common in Mali. The overall level of violence in Mali has seen a sharp increase, along with the number of reports of rapes, kidnappings, and robberies in the country.¹² The humanitarian crisis is in no way under control, and it can be argued that the situation has gotten worse in many communities. It is not a problem that can be pushed aside or down the road any longer, the humanitarian crisis must be dealt with.

Foreign Influence in the Current Conflict

The situation in Mali is not one that has developed in isolation from the rest of the world, very few conflicts ever do. Being a former French colony, Mali has spent its entire history under the influence of foreign countries and organizations. Though there was a period where the Malian government pushed away the West, relations have been strong since the 1980s. This has given some western nations, especially France, a vested interest into the state of Mali, though the involvement of France in the situation in Mali will be addressed in its own case study at the end of the Background Guide.

Foreign involvement in the conflict has not only been pushed by nations thousands of miles away, but by the very nations geographically closest to Mali. Algeria played a large role in the negotiation of the Algiers Agreement in 2015, which helped bring some peace to the northern region of Mali.¹³ Regional bodies, too, have taken a role in attempting to quell the Malian situation, including both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the G5 Sahel. ECOWAS, as an association of countries in West Africa, including Mali, holds a vested interest in maintaining peace, as the ability of Western Africa to maintain economic power is directly linked to peace in the region. This is partially why ECOWAS has pledged One Billion USD to help G5 Sahel, a multinational counterterrorism military force comprised of forces from Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, become fully operational.

Other international bodies have also pushed their influence into the conflict, with the European Union (EU) contributing significant resources towards helping train counter terrorism forces in Mali, with these European Union efforts led, unsurprisingly, by France.¹⁴ The EU has taken such a vested interest in Mali as instability in the region has pushed many North African refugees out of their homes to seek asylum in another part of the world, which in most cases tends to be Europe. Many Europeans, though, have not taken kindly to the influx of refugees, and have pushed government officials to find a solution to end the wave of refugees.

¹¹ "Mali: Events of 2019." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/mali>.

¹² "January 2020 Monthly Forecast." *Security Council Report*. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2020-01/mali-7.php>.

¹³ "Situation in central Mali 'deteriorating' as violence, impunity rise, UN rights expert warns." *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057911>

¹⁴ "Mali: Events of 2019." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/mali>

One cannot discuss foreign involvement in any part of the world without discussing the United Nations. As of June 29, 2020, the United Nations Security Council has passed 15 resolutions dealing with the current crisis in Mali. Though multiple United Nations bodies have been involved in attempting to solve the crisis, much has been done by the Mali Sanctions Committee. This group has been focused on handling when and against whom to place sanctions against, including placing on assets freeze on 5 members of the Malian government who had formally had a travel ban levied against them.¹⁵ Any discussion of United Nations involvement in Mali, though, must be centered around the United Nations main functional body currently involved in the Malian crisis: The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali MINUSMA.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

By the end of 2012, the African Union, ECOWAS, and the UN Security Council had determined that it was necessary to have some form of coordinated, international intervention into the situation that was arising in Mali. This led to the passage of Security Council Resolution 2085, which established the ECOWAS and AU-organized African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), with an operational mandate of one year, at which point its future would be decided. Though AFISMA could have helped lead to substantial progress in the region, any chances of AFISMA's success were whipped away when the group was forced to deploy much too early, due to attacks by rebel groups. This lack of



adequate training prevented the territory under AFISMA's protection to be properly taken care of, prompting the United Nations to reconsider the effectiveness of allowing the African Union, a much smaller and less funded body than the United Nations, to handle the peacekeeping operations. Thusly, through Security Council Resolution 2100, the United Nations established The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

(MINUSMA).

MINUSMA differed in many ways from AFISMA, with quite possibly the biggest being the scope of each group's authority. Where AFISMA was only a peacekeeping body, MINUSMA was given a much broader mandate, allowing it to take part in the establishment of a new government while also providing security services and humanitarian relief.¹⁶ MINUSMA's mandate has been reaffirmed multiple times and will not need to be reaffirmed again until mid-2021, so it clearly has had some successes, though by no means has the Malian situation been solved. This raises the question: Is MINUSMA doing

¹⁵ "January 2020 Monthly Forecast." *Security Council Report*. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2020-01/mali-7.php>

¹⁶ "Mali Mission Brief." *World Peace Foundation*. <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2017/07/Mali-brief.pdf>

enough in the region to justify its over one billion dollar yearly operating cost and the loss of the lives over 350 UN personnel so far, or do its failures undercut its successes?

Successes of MINUSMA

At least from its creation through 2016, MINUSMA's presence in Mali has done quite well in improving the security situation in the region. Overall rates of violence were decreasing, and many displaced individuals have been able to return to their home. MINUSMA's presence also played a large role in the drafting and signing of the 2015 Algiers Agreement.¹⁷ While it is hard to put numbers to it, without question, MINUSMA's presence in Mali has improved the situation and helped many individuals who have been hurt by the human rights abuses that have occurred. Most experts agree, without MINUSMA, the years following 2013 would have seen a quickly deteriorating situation in Mali.

Issues with MINUSMA

Without question, though, MINUSMA's presence in Mali has not completely solved the situation. One of the biggest factors contributing to MINUSMA's limited success is the very same fact that makes MINUSMA so different from AFISMA: MINUSMA is not a strictly peacekeeping operation, nor is it a counterterrorism operation. This has prevented the organization from attempting to further push terrorist and rebel groups out of contested areas.¹⁸ MINUSMA's presence helped decrease rates of violence in Mali through 2016. After 2016, though, rates of violence have seen increases, especially in the form of jihadist attacks against MINUSMA itself.¹⁹ Many in Mali—along with some international observers—feel that the mission, at least with its current mandate, can no longer improve the current situation. While there are many ideas floating around on how MINUSMA could be improved, some big ideas have come to the forefront. Specifically, many in the international security sector wish to see missions like MINUSMA take steps to improve their Strategic Planning Unit, which oversees how the mission will carry out its operations, along with increasing the number of peacekeepers present to help counter-terrorism operations.²⁰ Others believe that MINUSMA should move away from counter-terrorism efforts entirely and focus solely on humanitarian efforts in Mali.

Case Study: French Intervention

As referenced earlier, one of the most involved nations in the Malian situation has been France. Being a former French colony, Mali has always had somewhat close relationships with France, and the recent crisis has brought the two much closer together against a common enemy: Islamic terrorists. France does suffer due to Mali's instability as terror groups flourish in the country and typically direct their attacks outside of Mali towards France and French citizens. This is partially why as soon as January of 2013, the French government began launching air strikes against the terrorist cells and rebel groups in the region.²¹ These strikes are in addition to the training and ground troops that France has offered to support the Malian counter-terrorism forces

¹⁷ "The UN Peace Operation in Mali: A Troubled Yet Needed Mission." *reliefweb*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/un-peace-operation-mali-troubled-yet-needed-mission#:~:text=Until%202016%2C%20the%20United%20Nations,displaced%20persons%20to%20return%20home>.

¹⁸ "Mali Mission Brief." *World Peace Foundation*. <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2017/07/Mali-brief.pdf>

¹⁹ "The UN Peace Operation in Mali: A Troubled Yet Needed Mission." *reliefweb*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/un-peace-operation-mali-troubled-yet-needed-mission#:~:text=Until%202016%2C%20the%20United%20Nations,displaced%20persons%20to%20return%20home>.

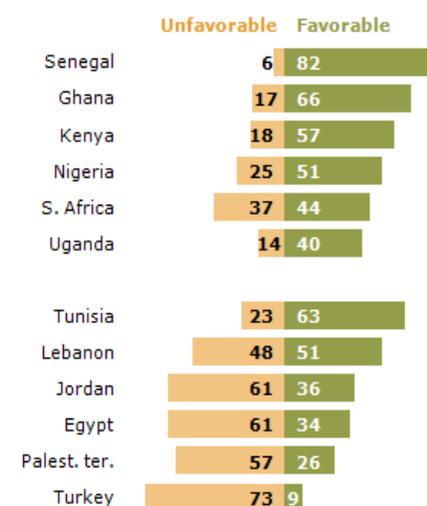
²⁰ "How Can Peacekeeping Operations Strengthen Strategic Planning? The UN Mission in Mali May Have Answers." *Center for Civilians in Conflict*. <https://civiliansinconflict.org/blog/how-can-peacekeeping-operations-strengthen-strategic-planning/>

²¹ "Mali: a guide to the conflict." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/16/mali-guide-to-the-conflict>

present in the region. Even as recently as June of 2020, France's continued military support in Mali has helped push out terrorist cells and bring some semblance of stability to parts of the region. This, though, is not just a tale of perfect assistance from an old friend. Many, even some high-ranking officers within the French military, argue that France has only had very limited success in the long term of bringing peace to West Africa and fighting terrorism on a global scale.²² As much of the work France has done in Mali has been focused on countering anti-government rebels, the Malian government has been very supportive of French efforts in the region. Other countries, especially those in the Middle East, though, have been less pleased with French involvement in affairs they are not directly involved in. A survey on French Military Action in Mali showed that over two thirds of Tunisian, Egyptian, Jordanian, and Turkish citizens disapproved of the French involvement.²³ Much of this disapproval can be tied to an overall degradation of the image of France in the Middle East, much of can be tied to French involvement in the Libyan War.

French involvement in Mali also brings up an important point when discussing any foreign involvement in a domestic conflict: motivations. It is important to ask: why is a given nation getting involved in each conflict? With France, for example, while some may argue that their involvement in Mali is just an example of a nation honoring their duty to help preserve human rights, the real explanation seems to have other interests at heart. While it is impossible to pinpoint the specific reason that any given nation may be joining a conflict, it is quite clear that France has personal interests in attempting to quell any terrorism that may become a threat to them. But beyond this, it isn't hard to see that issues between ethnic groups in Mali and Africa as a whole steam back to before the days of African nations becoming independent, and these issues worsened as global powers drew maps on the content without much regard for what ethnic communities were being roped together or split apart.

Views of France



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Questions to Consider

- Is MINUSMA doing its job, or does it need to be fundamentally modified?
- Does MINUSMA need to be outright eliminated?
- What is the role of foreign actors in the conflict?
- What steps need to be taken to bring peace back to Mali?
- What repercussions would United Nations actions in Mali have on the surrounding region?
- What steps can be taken to bring an end to the humanitarian crisis occurring in Mali?

²² "France's gains in Sahel mask need for lasting victory." *France 24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200627-france-s-gains-in-sahel-mask-need-for-lasting-victory>.

²³ "As Mali Votes, Mixed Reception to French Intervention from Publics in Africa and Middle East." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/07/25/as-mali-votes-mixed-reception-to-french-intervention-from-publics-in-africa-and-middle-east/>.