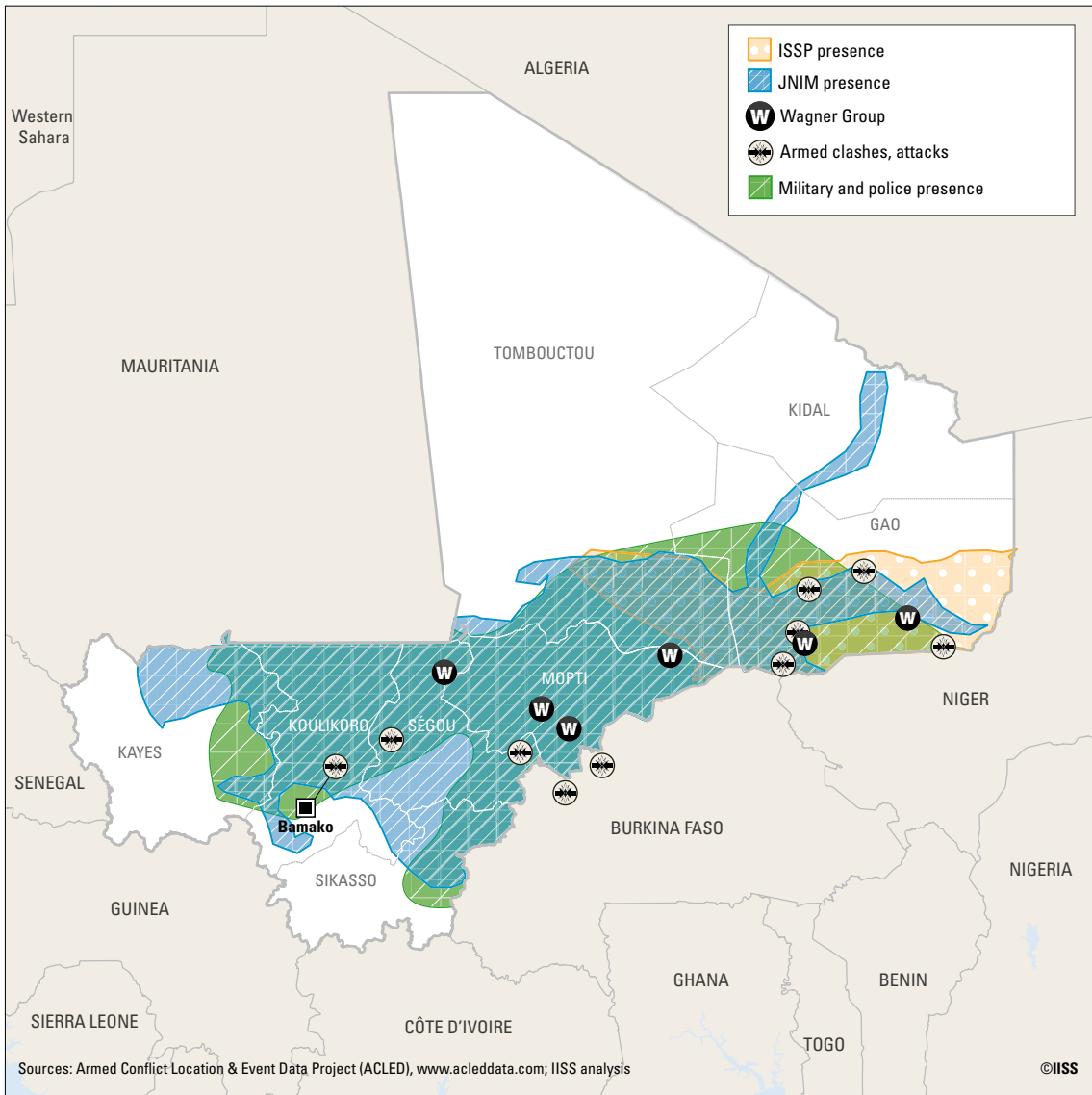


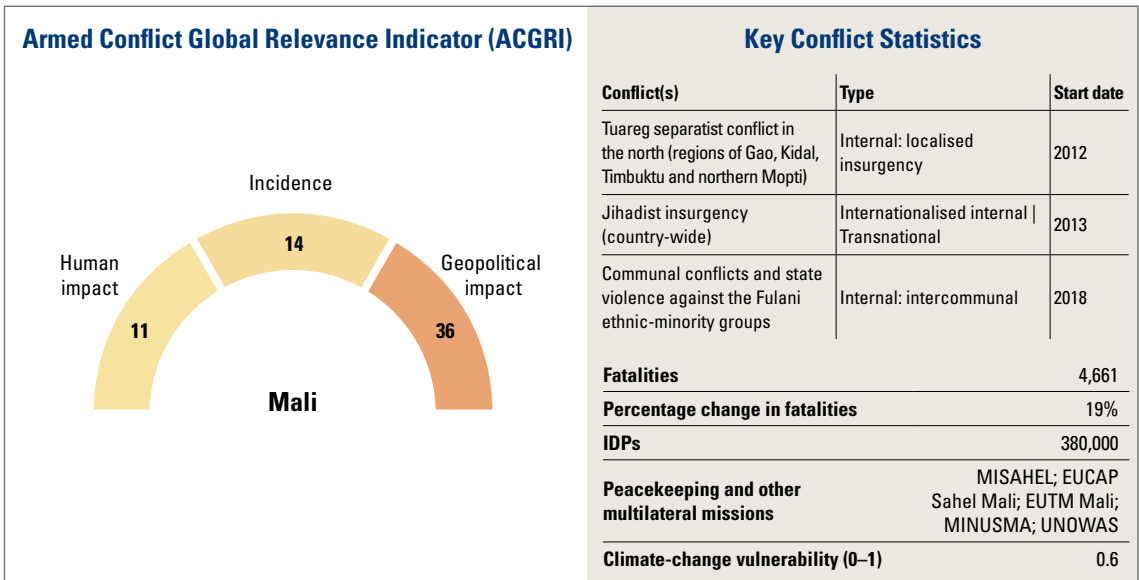
MALI



Conflict Overview

The start of Mali's conflict is largely attributed to the 2011 fall of the Muammar Gadhafi regime in Libya, which resulted in regional instability, the proliferation of weapons in the Liptako-Gourma region (at the intersection of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and the revival of a transnational Tuareg irredentism that led to rebellion in 2012. By 2013, the collapse of state authority in

northern Mali prompted French military intervention through *Operation Serval*, which in 2014 became the trans-Saharan *Operation Barkhane*. It also resulted in the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), which was later taken over by the ongoing United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).



ACGRI pillars: IISS calculation based on multiple sources for 2022 and 2023 (scale: 0–100), except for some cases according to data availability. See Notes on Methodology and Data Appendix for all variables and further details on Key Conflict Statistics.

These interventions paved the way for a negotiated peace agreement in 2015 – the Algiers accord – between the pro-independence umbrella group the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), pro-Bamako groups (the Platform and associated groups) and the state.

Despite important mediation efforts, the country has faced extreme instability since 2011. Protracted conflict has expanded towards the central and southern regions of Mali. Two competing violent extremist organisations (VEOs) are predominant: the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), which emerged from a split within al-Mourabitoun in 2015, and the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM), created in 2017 as a coalition between al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. Violence is also perpetrated by several other actors, including local

militias, self-defence forces and security forces, which all vie for greater power and control over resources.

The relentless spread of insecurity has resulted in unprecedented displacement rates, increased human-rights violations (including sexual violence) and a widened gap between those in power and their populations. The Malian crisis is not contained within its borders, as it poses significant challenges to peace and stability in the wider Sahel region. Insufficient or abusive state presence in Mali's border areas has facilitated the spread of VEOs to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger and further south to the coastal states of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, where an increasing number of attacks have been recorded.

Conflict Update

Over the last year, the international dimension of Mali's cutting ties with France and developing a relationship with Russia has overshadowed more nuanced considerations of the country's intersecting conflict dynamics. The reporting period was marked by a rupture in the multilateral security architecture which had come to dominate Mali's landscape over the past ten years. The official termination of the Defense Cooperation Treaty between Mali and France in May 2022 was perceived as one of the most consequential geopolitical shifts in the region since

2012. The decade-long French military intervention had grown increasingly unpopular due to its inability to effectively curtail violent extremism and its spread across the Sahel. Furthermore, the two successive military takeovers in Mali in August 2020 and May 2021 marked a reversing of the country's democratic practices.

Since the most recent coup, attempts by the military junta of Colonel Assimi Goita to do away with former regional and international partnerships highlight an ambition to revamp its counter-terrorism approach.

In June 2022, for instance, Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel, the coalition of Sahelian states created in February 2014. Simultaneously, a number of nations – including Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Germany and the United Kingdom – announced their intention to withdraw earlier than planned from MINUSMA. Then, the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) reportedly established a partnership with the Russian private security organisation Wagner Group to address security challenges. Finally, the junta's request on 16 June 2023 for the full withdrawal of MINUSMA and the subsequent termination of its mandate was a key impetus for the further deterioration of relations between Mali and its partners. The vacuum left by the withdrawal of foreign forces and profound divisions within the African bloc have added a layer of unpredictability to the situation.

Another significant development during the reporting period was the worsening of relations between Malian authorities and the CMA. These tensions peaked in December 2022 when the three main armed movements constituting the CMA – the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA) and the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA) – suspended their participation in the monitoring and implementation of the Algiers accord due to the government's purported disengagement from the peace agreement. In February 2023, the three groups merged their command structures in an attempt to increase their military capacity. While the implications of this are unclear, these events speak to the fragility of the peace deal. The reinvigoration of the Azawad independence cause is likely to harm Mali's attempt at mending national divisions.

By openly contesting and delegitimising symbols of the state – whether it be through active battles against the FAMA, targeting government officials or attacking state structures such as schools – jihadist armed groups operating in central Mali seek to present their alternative order as a viable option. Their approach is brutal, and growing competition between armed groups is deadly and protracted. Within the last year, ISSP pursued attacks in the Liptako-Gourma region to gain back control from JNIM and to return to areas that had traditionally been the group's stronghold. Notably, the increase in violence against civilians within the reporting period is attributed to both state and non-state actors. Hundreds of ethnic Fulanis are stigmatised for their alleged over-representation in armed groups and have been killed in counter-terrorism operations by the Malian army, self-defence groups and Wagner mercenaries. This prompted the UN to launch an investigation into potential human-rights violations following the murder of over 500 civilians allegedly by FAMA and Russian mercenaries in the village of Moura in 2022, while many similar but smaller-scale incidents have also occurred during counter-terrorism operations.¹

Escalating violence has exacerbated the country's humanitarian crisis. An estimated 380,000 Malians remained internally displaced and faced food, shelter and healthcare shortages as of 30 April 2023, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. An additional 64,000 people crossed borders – mostly from Burkina Faso – to seek refuge in Mali due to the intensification of conflicts in neighbouring states.²

Conflict Parties

Malian Armed Forces (FAMA)

Strength: Approximately 21,000 active military personnel (air force: 2,000; army: 19,000), as well as 6,000 national gendarmerie, 1,000 national police and 10,000 national-guard personnel.

Areas of operation: Northern, central and southern Mali, particularly in the tri-border Liptako-Gourma area near Burkina Faso and Niger.

Leadership: Col. Assimi Goita.

Structure: Consists of the air force, army, national gendarmerie, national police and the national guard.

History: Created at independence in 1960. Following years of underinvestment, FAMA has been significantly strengthened

over the past decade, including through the European Union's military training mission from 2013–22.

Objectives: Counter-terrorism and territorial security.

Opponents: JNIM, CMA and ISSP.

Affiliates/allies: Burkina Faso, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), EU, France (until May 2022), Niger, MINUSMA, United States, Russian private military contractors and Russia.

Resources/capabilities: The defence budget for 2022 was US\$827 million, and it is projected to be US\$1.1 billion for 2023.

Permanent Strategic Framework (CSP) (a coalition of Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and Platform)

Strength: Unclear, but the number of CMA fighters was estimated to be 800–4,000 prior to the 2015 Algiers accord.³ The number of Platform fighters is unknown.

Areas of operation: CMA and Platform are primarily active in northern Mali, including the regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu.

Leadership:

CSP: Bilal Ag Acherif (president) and Fahad Ag Almahmoud (vice president).

CMA: Leadership of the coalition rotates among its members on a regular basis.

Platform: A loose alliance of autonomous non-state armed groups and self-defence militias.

Structure:

CSP: Born out of a merger between the CMA and Platform – the main armed movements in northern Mali and signatories of the Algiers accord.

CMA: A coalition including the MNLA, the HCUA and a CMA-affiliated faction of the MAA.

Platform: An umbrella organisation that includes the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies, the MAA–Platform faction, the Coordination for the Movements and Fronts of Patriotic Resistance, and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad-Daoussak.

History: Following the collapse of the Gadhafi regime and the 2012 Tuareg insurrection, in 2014 the MNLA came together with other rebellious factions in the region, including HCUA and MAA, to create the CMA. In 2021, CMA merged with

Platform – a coalition comprised of several groups in favour of Malian state authority – to form the CSP in an attempt to coordinate their actions and reconcile their interests. In the time since, the CSP has managed this to some extent, but challenges remain which prevent full unity in its actions.

Objectives:

CSP: Coordinate CMA and Platform efforts to implement the 2015 Algiers accord for peace and reconciliation, combat insecurity and take into account the aspirations of local populations.

CMA: A coalition of Azawad rebel groups originally fighting for self-determination. Independence is no longer an objective but may become so again due to friction in implementing the Algiers accord.

Platform: Formed in support of Mali's territorial integrity. However, its members have widely differing agendas and interests, with some engaging in local disputes while others support the security forces.

Opponents: ISSP and JNIM.

Affiliates/allies:

CMA: Formally cooperates with FAMa, MINUSMA and Platform but has previously cooperated with jihadist groups.

Platform: FAMa, MINUSMA and formerly *Operation Barkhane*.

Resources/capabilities: Small arms and light weaponry. For the CMA, remnants of the Libyan military arsenal left behind after the ousting of Gadhafi.

Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM)

Strength: Unknown.

Areas of operation: Mostly active in northern and central Mali (with an expansion southward towards Bamako).

Leadership: Iyad Ag Ghaly, a long-time Tuareg militant who is also the leader of Ansar Dine, one of the main groups constituting JNIM.

Structure: Created as an alliance of equals.

History: JNIM was created in 2017 as a coalition between al-Qaeda-affiliated groups such as Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb–Sahel, Katibat Macina and other smaller factions.

Objectives: Establish an Islamic state in the Sahel, replacing existing state structures and expelling foreign forces.

Opponents: FAMa, foreign forces, Russian private military contractors and ISSP.

Affiliates/allies: Al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb–North Africa, Katibat Macina and Katibat Serma. Cooperates with Ansarul Islam, though their relationship is ambiguous.

Resources/capabilities: Heavy weaponry and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including vehicle-borne IEDs and suicide-vehicle-borne IEDs.

Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)

Strength: Unknown.

Areas of operation: Gao, Menaka, Mopti and Timbuktu.

Leadership: Abdul Bara al-Sahrawi (also known as al-Ansari) and a cadre of local commanders.

Structure: Unclear.

History: ISSP emerged from a split within al-Mourabitoun in 2015 and was originally known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). ISGS pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015, and in 2019 it became part of the Islamic

State West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISIS recognised the group as an independent *wilayat* (province) in March 2022 under the name ISSP.

Objectives: Establish an Islamic caliphate based on strict interpretation of the Koran and adherence to ISIS ideology.

Opponents: JNIM, FAMa, G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) and MINUSMA.

Affiliates/allies: Katibat Salaheddine, ISIS, ISWAP and other smaller militias.

Resources/capabilities: IEDs and light weaponry.

Wagner Group

Strength: Around 1,000 troops.⁴

Areas of operation: Central Mali (Mopti and Ségou), and Timbuktu area.

Leadership: Unclear after the group's chief Yevgeny Prigozhin and commander Dmitry Utkin were killed in an aeroplane crash on 23 August 2023.

Structure: The company was established by businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin. Its structure is not well documented.

History: The Wagner Group is a Russian security organisation closely linked to the Kremlin, Russian military intelligence and Russia's Ministry of Defence. It is used by Russia to carry out a range of officially deniable military and intelligence operations and commercial activities. Since November 2020, the group has established ties with the military junta whilst increasing their power and access to resources. The group has since been involved in FAMA's counter-insurgency and civilian-protection efforts. The group was established in 2014, and it and other private military companies proliferated following Russia's involvement in the 2015 war in Syria, where they played an active role. The Wagner Group also operates extensively in Africa, where it is contracted to provide security

for governments and is involved in profitable resource extraction. It took a leading role in the siege of Bakhmut in Donetsk region from August 2022–May 2023, which raised its public profile significantly in Russia. However, its status is currently in limbo. Following an abortive mutiny led by Prigozhin on 23–24 June 2023, a major part of the Wagner Group's forces was deployed in Belarus. The death of Prigozhin and other senior Wagner Group figures in August 2023 has deepened uncertainty about the group's future. After the mutiny, Putin acknowledged that the group was directly funded by the Russian state and noted the lack of any Russian legislation allowing such private military groups. At the end of July, Russia advanced legislation enabling regional governors to create military companies, and this could lead to further significant changes in their form and function.

Objectives: Support FAMA's security operations against jihadist groups.

Opponents: JNIM, CMA and ISSP.

Affiliates/allies: FAMA.

Resources/capabilities: The Malian government is paying Wagner US\$10m a month for its services.⁵

G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S)

Strength: Between 5,000 and 10,000 troops provided by the four remaining member countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger).⁶ Although Mali decided to withdraw from the task force on 15 May 2022, Malian FC-G5S forces were still active domestically throughout the reporting period.

Areas of operation: Border regions between Mali and Mauritania, between Niger and Chad and in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area.

Leadership: Eric Yemdaogo Tiare (executive secretary).

Structure: In January 2023, the defence ministers of the four member countries announced the operationalisation of 14 new battalions, including five in Burkina Faso, two in Chad, two in Mauritania and five in Niger.⁷ However, as of 30 April 2023, the task force was still in the process of developing a new concept of operations.

History: While the G5 Sahel as an organisation was established in 2014 (comprising members Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), the joint force was created in February 2017 with the support of France and the UN to address threats across the Sahel, such as terrorism and transnational organised crime, including the smuggling of goods and human trafficking.

Objectives: Strengthen security along the borders of member states through intelligence sharing and the deployment of joint patrols.

Opponents: JNIM and ISSP.

Affiliates/allies: Foreign and regional armed forces and MINUSMA.

Resources/capabilities: Suffers from underfunding and unpredictable financing. Troop deployment is slow due to a lack of logistical capacity and equipment.

United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)

Strength: 13,289 military, 1,920 police and 1,792 civilian personnel (859 national, 754 international and 179 UN volunteers).⁸

Areas of operation: Countrywide, with a concentration of forces in the central and northern regions.

Leadership: El-Ghassim Wane (special representative of the secretary-general and head of MINUSMA).

Structure: Within the reporting period, 55 countries contributed to the military force and 26 countries to the police force.⁹ However, during this same period, Côte d'Ivoire, Germany and the UK each announced their withdrawal from the operation.

History: Established in April 2013 by UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2100 following the 2012 Tuareg rebellion. In the same year, ECOWAS's AFISMA was incorporated under

MINUSMA's command. MINUSMA has seen the largest number of casualties among UN peacekeeping operations.¹⁰ The 2022 early withdrawal of several key participating nations has damaged the capacity and legitimacy of the mission. On 30 June 2023, at the request of Mali's junta, the UNSC unanimously approved the complete withdrawal of MINUSMA forces within the last six months of the year.

Objectives: Support the implementation of the 2015 Algiers accord, including the protection of civilians in central and northern Mali.

Opponents: JNIM, CMA and ISSP.

Affiliates/allies: FAMA and FC-G5S.

Resources/capabilities: Budget of US\$1.2bn for July 2022–June 2023.¹¹

Notes

- ¹ UN, 'Moura: Over 500 Killed by Malian Troops, Foreign Military Personnel in 2022 Operation', 12 May 2023.
- ² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Mali: Humanitarian Dashboard', 30 April 2023.
- ³ Baba Ahmed, 'Mali: le business du cantonnement?' [Mali: The Cantonment Business?], *Jeune Afrique*, 29 April 2016 (updated 5 September 2016); and Baba Ahmed and Christophe Boisbouvier, 'Nord-Mali: guerre à huis clos' [North Mali: War Behind Closed Doors], *Jeune Afrique*, 21 February 2012.
- ⁴ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 'The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa', 16 February 2023.
- ⁵ US Department of State, 'Potential Deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali', 15 December 2021.
- ⁶ UNSC, 'Peace and Security in Africa', S/2022/838, 16 November 2022.
- ⁷ A. Y. Barma, 'G5 Sahel: l'Etat-major de la Force conjointe ramené à Niamey, 14 bataillons bientôt opérationnels (Ministres de la Défense)' [G5 Sahel: Joint Force Headquarters Brought Back to Niamey, 14 Battalions Soon to Be Operational (Ministers of Defence)], *ActuNiger*, 12 January 2023.
- ⁸ MINUSMA, 'Personnel', June 2023.
- ⁹ MINUSMA, 'Personnel', December 2022.
- ¹⁰ MINUSMA, 'History'.
- ¹¹ UNSC, 'Situation in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General', S/2023/402, 1 June 2023.