

World Watch Research

Mali:

Background Information

September 2024



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Mali: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
24,016,000	542,000	2.3

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Before modern-day Mali came into existence, there were several kingdoms and empires that flourished in the territory that covers part of Mali today. After the short-lived Wassoulou Empire, France established a colony called French Sudan in 1892. French colonial administration came to an end in 1960 and Mali became independent. After experimenting with one-party rule and military rule for decades, Mali adopted a new constitution in 1992 and made a successful transition to democratic rule. Before the coup that overthrew the democratically elected Malian government in March 2012, the country was considered exemplary among African countries for protecting civil liberties and political rights. The media, in particular, was vibrant and open and not subject to governmental

pressure or restrictions. For instance, during the presidential election of 2007, the results were considered valid and there was little or no electoral violence. 70 parties ran in the election and the right to vote was extended to all citizens of Mali.

However, in 2012 Tuareg rebels (who had been active in northern Mali for a number of years) formed an alliance with radical Islamic groups, including some foreign fighters mainly coming from Algeria. They overran government forces and took control of several cities and a sizable portion of northern Mali. Consequently, a military coup ousted the civilian administration, but civilian administration was restored after the presidential election in 2013 was won by Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, a veteran politician and a former prime minister. The Malian government was able to push back the advance of the rebels and reclaim most of the occupied territory with the help of French troops. Despite the persistence of occasional clashes between rebels and government forces, a [ceasefire](#) was concluded in 2013 between the rebels and the government (The Guardian, 19 June 2013).

Despite the UN sending in a 12,000 strong peacekeeping force (called the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), the central government has still not managed to regain control and assert its authority over a significant portion of Malian territory. In addition to this political problem, the country faces several economic challenges related to the high poverty level. Most people live in remote parts of the country which face various environmental problems like rapid desertification and lack of access to water.

In July/August 2018, the country conducted a successful presidential election in which President Keïta managed to win a second term. Despite [allegations of fraud](#) from the opposition, this was seen as a positive development (Al-Jazeera, 5 August 2018). However, in June and July 2020, the president faced opposition from protesters who demanded his resignation. [On 18 August 2020](#), President Keïta was ousted by a group of soldiers calling itself the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (BBC News, 19 August 2020). The UN, African Union and regional leaders all condemned the coup, but the coup leaders claimed to have saved the country from sliding into chaos and confirmed they would prepare elections within a reasonable time-frame. In May 2021, the 2020 coup leader, Colonel Assimi Goïta, [seized power](#), thus upending any transition progress achieved (The Guardian, 25 May 2021). In May 2022, [the Mali junta claimed](#) that Western-backed military officers had attempted a military coup to oust it from power (Reuters, 17 May 2022). See details below in: *Political and legal landscape*.

In June 2023 a [constitutional referendum](#) took place in which citizens agreed to give the head of state increased power over parliament and the country (Al-Jazeera, 23 June 2023). See further details below in: *Political and legal landscape*.

In January 2024, Mali's military leaders announced the end of the UN-brokered 2015 Peace Agreement with a coalition of mainly ethnic Tuareg, armed separatists. The deal had begun to fray in August 2023 when hostilities renewed between the rebels and the Malian armed forces, who were assisted by the Russian Wagner Group ([Human Rights Watch, 26 January 2024](#)).

In June 2024, Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed, has been convicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during his reign of terror in Timbuktu from 2012 to 2013. Al Hassan, who served as the de facto police chief for the Ansar al-Din group that controlled Timbuktu, was found guilty of charges including torture, rape, sexual slavery, and the destruction of religious and historic buildings in the city. He faces up to life imprisonment when a

sentence is handed down at a later date. Al Hassan was a key member of Ansar al-Din, an al-Qaeda-linked group that held power in northern Mali in 2012 ([Al Jazeera, 26 June 2024](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Despite Mali's positive record on civil liberties and political rights, prior to 2012 there were notable inconsistencies on how these rights were applied in the northern two-thirds of the country, a reality which was often overlooked by foreign observers. Political power in Mali was concentrated in the southern one-third of the country, dominated by Muslim Sub-Saharan African tribes such as the Songhai and Zarma, while the more conservative Muslim northern tribes, such as the Tuareg and the Arabs, were often left out of power. While discrimination against the Tuareg and Arabs was not official policy, in practice they received a smaller proportion of government revenue and services, which had led the Tuareg into intermittent open rebellion over several decades.

The insecurity and instability that resulted from the 2012 civil war and the continued attacks by Islamic militants are major challenges in the current political landscape. The [2015 peace-deal](#) between the rebels and the government was not fully implemented and the grievances of the Tuareg were not fully addressed, making an improvement in the political situation unlikely (BBC News, 20 June 2015), which meant continued insecurity and anxiety for Christians in the country. As noted above in *Recent history*, the peace-deal was officially ended in January 2024.

French government involvement in the country's political affairs had been a major problem for the country. Although the country claimed its independence half a century ago, France continued to influence its political decisions. France was, for instance, the first country to send troops in order to contain the 2012 Tuareg uprising.

The highly contested elections in the summer of 2018 concluded with the re-election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita for a second term as president. Given that his election required a second round of voting and that his main challenger alleged that the election had been rigged, Keita's mandate and legitimacy was weak, hampering his ability to tackle the political and security challenges his government faced effectively.

In 2020, despite the unfolding [COVID-19 crisis](#) and the kidnapping of opposition leader Soumailia Cisse, the country held the long-awaited parliamentary elections on 29 March 2020 (Deutsche Welle, 30 March 2020). These elections should have taken place after President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's 2018 re-election but were postponed several times due to security concerns. The voter turnout for the elections was extremely low (just 36%). It was not long before demonstrations took place with demands for the resignation of the president. The president's attempt to negotiate with the opposition failed. Neighboring countries and foreign powers became [uneasy](#) (US News, 10 July 2020): "Mali's neighbors and outside powers worry the impasse could further destabilize the country and jeopardize a joint military campaign against Islamist insurgents in the West African Sahel region."

The August 2020 coup

On 18 August 2020, elements of the army conducted a coup and the president and some of his cabinet were placed under arrest. The African Union (AU) [suspended](#) Mali's membership (France24, 19 August 2020) and the West African regional bloc (ECOWAS) also urged the coup leaders to transfer power to

a civilian government. The back and forth between the regional leaders and the coup leaders ended in a mixed result that is summarized by the International Crisis Group (ICG) as follows:

- "Following the military junta's seizure of power in August, Malian Prime Minister Moctar Ouane on Monday announced a new government. Crisis Group expert Jean-Hervé Jezequel says that while the formation of the new administration is ostensibly a positive step in accordance with the government's pledge to oversee an eighteen-month transition to civilian rule, the junta still maintains considerable influence. It holds four key government positions, including the defense and security portfolios, in addition to the head of the Junta serving as vice president. In a positive signal, however, the new cabinet marks the demise of an older generation of politicians who have dominated the government since the 1990s and whose failure to implement governance reforms contributed to the current crisis" ([ICG Weekly update, 9 October 2020](#)).

The May 2021 coup

While the Mali politicians and the regional bloc were busy negotiating a possible way forward, Islamic militants in the region were gaining in strength. However, another turn of events put the negotiations and the fighting against the jihadists at risk – a new coup. On 24 May 2021, the Malian army led by Vice President Assimi Goïta detained President Bah N'daw, Prime Minister Moctar Ouane and Minister of Defense Souleymane Doucouré and assumed power. On 30 May 2021, ECOWAS [suspended](#) Mali (France24, 30 May 2021). That was followed by suspension from the African Union on 2 June 2021. Not bothered by the suspensions, on 7 June 2021, Goïta [was sworn](#) in as interim president (Reuters, 7 June 2021).

Although there are no specific regulations or laws designed to restrict Christians compared to other religious groups, in practice, it is difficult for Christians to be able to get a license when applying for registration. This is especially the case outside Bamako. Furthermore, the [withdrawal of French forces](#) in August 2022 (France24, 15 August 2022) and [UN forces in December 2023](#) (BBC News, 31 December 2023) and the consequent expansion of Islamic extremist insurgency could expose both Christian men and women to new levels of persecution. The withdrawals took place due to [escalating tensions](#) between the Malian government and multiple external actors in the region (UN OCHA, April 2022).

The 2023 constitutional referendum and postponed 2024 elections

Mali hoped to go back to civilian rule by adopting a new constitution. In June 2023, the military government held a referendum on the adoption of the new draft constitution, a move it claimed would pave the way for a return to constitutional and civilian rule by March 2024, a deadline set by the regional bloc ECOWAS. According to Al-Jazeera reporting on 23 June 2023, "under the [constitutional changes](#), the president will 'determine the policies of the nation', a role allotted to the government under the country's current constitution, which dates to 1992. The head of state will have the right to hire and fire the prime minister and cabinet members, and the government will be answerable to him and not to parliament, as is the case currently." However, the military leaders' promise to restore civilian rule following elections in February 2024, has not materialized ([Reuters, 1 April 2024](#)).

Gender perspective

Mali scores poorly on Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index ranking #158 out of 177 countries, reflecting in part discriminatory laws ([GIWPS Mali](#), accessed 2 August 2024). Men are

allowed to take up to four wives (Family code, Article 366) and an obligatory dowry is set for brides (Article 288). The minimum legal age to marry is set at 16 for girls and 18 for boys but permits marriages to take place at an earlier age by judge and parental consent (Articles 281 and 284). According to [Girls not Brides Mali](#) (accessed 2 August 2024), child marriage is particularly high in Mali, with 54% of girls marrying before 18 (compared to 2% of boys), and 16% by the age of 15. The Girls Not Brides report highlights several contributing factors behind these statistics, observing that harmful practices such as bride kidnapping and FGM remain prevalent. Wives are legally mandated to obey their husbands (Family code, Article 319) and domestic violence is not directly criminalized. Despite having equal divorce rights, many women remain in abusive situations as they lack the education or financial means to initiate the divorce proceedings.

Religious landscape

Mali: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	542,000	2.3
Muslim	21,219,000	88.4
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	2,223,000	9.3
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	1,600	0.0
Atheist	560	0.0
Agnostic	28,900	0.1
Other	1,100	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

As is typical for other West African states, Mali has been dominated by Islam for centuries (in a mostly moderate form) and by a constitutionally secular political system which prohibits religious political parties. Apart from the northern part of the country where the Christian minority had always faced discrimination at the hands of the Muslim majority, Christians used to enjoy a fair amount of freedom in Malian society, which also allowed the presence of foreign Christian missionaries. Malian Muslims had a reputation for being moderate and tolerant of other religious beliefs. There was also a high tolerance level towards converts to Christianity during the colonial period. This tolerance, however, faded as time went by and it is now highly dangerous to be known as a Christian of Muslim origin. Both Malian Christians (the majority being Roman Catholic) and Muslims tend to combine their faith with

indigenous animist beliefs, since there is a significant presence of Ethno-religionists or Animists in the country. Even though most Malian Christians live in the south of the country, they have come under increasing pressure as a result of the threat from radical Islamic activities in the north.

An estimated 88.4% of the population are Muslim according to WCD 2024 data and most are adherents of Malikite Sunni Islam which is a version of Islam influenced by Sufism. This brand of Islam is moderate and tolerant of other faiths. In northern Mali, especially among the Arab and Tuareg tribes, the influence of more radical versions of Islam has grown over the past few years. These more radical versions have little respect for Sufi-influenced religious practices, as evidenced by the destruction of 13th century Sufi shrines in Timbuktu when radical Islamic groups controlled the city in 2012.

The situation in Mali changed abruptly in April 2012 when the creation of the independent state of Azawad in northern Mali was proclaimed. The radical Islamic rebels, most of whom can be identified as Wahhabis, soon established an Islamic state system with a strict Sharia regime in the north. Most Christians fled before the radical Islamic take-over. In the meantime, Islamic militants destroyed churches and other public Christian properties.

The Church in southern Mali has also been negatively affected by the increasing visibility of various Wahhabi groups. Although the rebels and the government reached a peace agreement in 2015 and international peacekeepers were brought in, Islamic radicalization in Malian society has continued and this has affected the whole region. The peace agreement was officially ended by the country's military leaders in January 2024 (see above: *Recent history*).

Economic landscape

According to the World Bank's [April 2024 Macro Poverty Outlook Mali](#):

- **Economic growth:** "GDP growth stabilized at 3.5 percent in 2023 (0.6 percent per capita) in 2023, below expectations, due to lower agricultural output and an electricity crisis, resulting in limited poverty reduction with an extreme poverty rate of 20.2 percent in 2023. Growth is projected to weaken slightly to 3.1 percent in 2024, subject to downside risks from rising insecurity, increasing financing costs, impacts of the announced ECOWAS withdrawal, and climate-related shocks."
- **Inflation:** "After surging to a record high of 9.7 percent in 2022, inflation declined to 2.1 percent in 2023, due to strong 2022 agricultural production and the easing of international commodity prices. As a result, the extreme poverty rate has decreased by 0.8 percentage point to 20.2 percent in 2023".
- **Import/Export:** "The terms of trade improved in 2023 as commodity prices of energy and food imports eased. This was offset by lower exports as cotton exports declined 13.5 percent on the back of lower production in 2022, and the recovery of import demand after the lifting of the 2022 ECOWAS sanctions. As a result, the current account deficit (CAD) remained high at 6.8 percent of GDP."
- **Fiscal deficit:** "The fiscal deficit stabilized at 4.8 percent of GDP in 2023, while public debt slightly increased to 52.1 percent of GDP. Though the risk of debt distress remains moderate, there are increasing fiscal risks from the electricity sector with contingent liabilities (arrears) of 4.6 percent of GDP. The fiscal deficit is expected to decline to 4.1 percent of GDP in 2024, before gradually converging towards the WAEMU ceiling of 3 percent by 2026, as the government consolidates in the face of high financing costs."

- **Poverty:** "[T]he extreme poverty rate has decreased by 0.8 percentage point to 20.2 percent in 2023. However, the humanitarian situation remains serious, with over 350,000 internally displaced persons due to insecurity, in addition to an estimated 715,000 people facing severe food insecurity as of December 2023. Due to the weak growth in GDP per capita, particularly in agriculture and service sectors, the extreme poverty rate is expected to decline only slightly - by 0.9 ppt over 2023-2026 - and will result in nearly 76,500 additional extreme poor per year."

According to [Theodora.com](https://www.theodora.com) (27 January 2020):

- About 65% of Malian territory is arid or semi-arid making a significant portion of the country ill-suited for farming. Thus, Economic activity is largely confined to the riverine area irrigated by the Niger River. About 10% of the population is nomadic and about 80% of the labor force is engaged in farming and fishing. Industrial activity is concentrated on processing farm commodities. Mali is also rich in gold and other minerals, which are exploited by South African and European companies. The country's fiscal status fluctuates with gold and agricultural commodity prices and the harvest; cotton and gold exports make up around 80% of export earnings. Despite all this, Mali's economy heavily relies on foreign aid, including the World Bank and other international donors, and bilateral donations from the European Union, European countries and the USA.
- France is a main commercial partner and other countries (e.g. China and Middle Eastern states) also trade and invest in Mali. Mali used to have strong ties with Russia and a number of its elite were trained in Russia (including Dioncounda Traoré who served as president from April 2012 to September 2013 after the military coup). However, Russia no longer has a strong economic presence.

According to [Heritage World's 2023 Index of Economic Freedom](#):

- Mali's economic freedom score is 52.5, making its economy the 127th freest in the 2024 Index of Economic Freedom, 2 points decrease from last year. Mali is ranked 24th out of 47 countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, and its economic freedom score is lower than the world average and higher than the regional average. Mali's economy is considered "mostly unfree". A lack of dynamism leaves the domestic economy highly vulnerable to external economic conditions. Institutional weaknesses broadly restrict economic freedom and prevent the dynamic growth of economic activity. The regulatory framework for business does not efficiently encourage economic diversification or private-sector development. Most of the private-sector activity takes place outside of the formal economy. Labor regulations are relatively rigid but not fully enforced.

Gender perspective

Against this backdrop of economic fragility, women and girls are particularly vulnerable due to [lower education and employment rates](#) (UN Women, Mali Country Factsheet, accessed 2 August 2024) as well as discriminatory inheritance practices. While education and employment rates have improved for women and girls in the last decade, more boys continue to attend secondary education and have greater employment opportunities ([GIWPS Mali](#), accessed 2 August 2024). This economic vulnerability can be exploited for the purpose of religious persecution of female converts to Christianity.

Social and cultural landscape

Mali is one of Africa's richest countries in terms of history and culture. It is the home of Timbuktu, one of the oldest trade and intellectual centers in the world and was added to the World Heritage List by UNESCO in 1988. According to [UNESCO/World Heritage Center/Timbuktu](#) (accessed 26 July 2023): "Founded in the 5th century, the economic and cultural apogee of Timbuktu came about during the 15th and 16th centuries. It was an important center for the diffusion of Islamic culture with the University of Sankore, with 180 Koranic schools and 25,000 students. It was also a crossroads and an important market place where the trading of manuscripts was negotiated, and salt from Teghaza in the north, gold was sold, and cattle and grain from the south."

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Mali](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024) and [World Factbook Mali](#) (accessed 2 August 2024):

- **Main 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% (2018 est.)
- **Main languages:** French (official), Bambara 46.3%, Peuhl/Foulfoulbe 9.4%, Dogon 7.2%, Maraka/Soninke 6.4%, Malinke 5.6%, Sonrhai/Djerma 5.6%
- **Population growth rate:** 2.95% (2022 est.)
- **Median age:** 16 years
- **Urban population:** 46.2% of the total population
- **Rate of urbanization:** 4.57% annual rate of change (2020-2025 est.)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 7 years (For girls the number of expected years is 7, compared to 8 for boys)
- **Literacy rate, adult (15 years and older):** 35.5%
- **Employment to population ratio (15 years and older):** 65.7%
- **Unemployment:** 7.2% of total labor force
- **Youth unemployment (15-24 years):** 7.5% of total labor force

According to [UNHCR's Operational Data Portal](#) (accessed 26 June 2024):

- **Refugees:** 93,994 (last updated 31 May 2024)
- **IDPs:** 354,739 (last updated 31 May 2024)

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Mali](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Human Development Index:** Mali is ranked 188th out of 193 countries and territories with a human development value of 0.410
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 59.4 years
- **Gender Development Index (GDI) score:** 0.830
- **Gender Inequality Index (GII) score:** 0.607 (This score is a composite measure reflecting inequality in relation to reproductive health, empowerment and the labor market).

Gender perspective

Mali's low GDI and GII scores reflect the challenges that face women and girls in Mali. There is broad [societal acceptance](#) for domestic violence (Iamaneh Schweiz, accessed 2 August 2024); a gender study

by [CARE](#) (published in May 2013) reported that 63% of men and 41.3% of women interviewed agreed with the statement "There are times when a woman deserves to be beaten". Within Mali's patriarchal context, women's access to economic life opportunities is limited, making it hard for them to escape abusive situations. Further endangering women and girls is the widespread social acceptance for - and practice of – [Female Genital Mutilation](#) (UNICEF, Division of Data Analytics, February 2022).

Technological landscape

According to [Datareportal Digital 2024: Mali](#) (23 February 2024) - survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 33.1% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 9.1% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 96.4% of the total population

Whilst more men use cell-phones than women, Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index notes that women's cell-phone use has risen by 22.8% since 2017 in Mali ([GIWPS Mali](#), accessed 2 August 2024).

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (publication date: June 2024):

- "Mali's topography includes large tracks of sparsely populated desert, with many settlements being hard to reach and thus rendering it difficult and expensive to provide effective fixed or mobile networks. Security issues have also been a concern, leading to delays in building the national backbone network."
- "Compounding these difficulties is the fact that underinvestment in fixed-line networks has meant that telecom infrastructure is barely adequate to serve consumer needs in most towns and is largely absent in most areas of the country. In addition, a combination of poverty, high illiteracy, and low PC use has led to a very low take-up of fixed-line internet services. In common with many other countries in the region, Mali has taken to mobile networks for voice and data services. Mobile networks account for about 98% of all telecom connections. Despite these challenges, there has been progress in fixed-line connectivity, particularly during 2020 and 2021."
- "Mali's landlocked location makes it dependent on neighboring countries for international bandwidth, which has kept internet prices high. Improvements in this sector can be expected from the recent arrival of several new international submarine cables in the region, while Orange Group has also been engaged in building a terrestrial network linking the capital cities of eight countries in the region, including Bamako."

To summarize: Mali is not well advanced in technology, although a university specializing in [science and technology](#) was established in Bamako in 2011 (UniRank, accessed 2 August 2024).

Security situation

An overview of the security situation in Mali (both historical and current) can be found in a detailed report by [Counter Extremism Project](#) (accessed 2 August 2024). One recent event mentioned for 2024:

- "In a move to further distance the three countries from Western-aligned regional decision-making blocs, on February 15, 2024, the junta governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) confederation, which was first announced as a pact in September 2023. A month earlier in January, the three Sahelian states withdrew from the Economic Community of West African states (ECOWAS), further compromising broader west African cooperation. Further details on how the confederation will cooperate along political, economic, and military lines to combat the Islamist insurgency that has plagued the region for more than a decade were not revealed. The three countries have all succumbed to military juntas since 2020 and have shifted counterterrorism strategies toward civilian self-defense militias and private contractors, such as the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group."

Violence from radical Islamic groups is rife. According to [Human Rights Watch 2024, Mali country chapter](#):

- "During 2023, Islamist armed groups aligned with the ISGS [Islamic State Greater Sahara] and Al-Qaeda carried out numerous unlawful attacks that killed hundreds of civilians as well as attacks killing scores of government security force personnel. In areas under their control, Islamist armed groups raped women and girls, imposed *zakat* (religious tax), and implemented Sharia (Islamic law) and punishments via courts that did not adhere to fair trial standards. These groups also contributed to food insecurity by attacking those who did not conform to their vision of Islamic law, including by looting livestock and besieging cities and villages."

Other recent events

Mali requested [France to withdraw](#) its forces, which it did in August 2022 (VOA, 15 August 2022). Mali also asked the United Nations to withdraw its peacekeepers. [In June 2023](#), the interim military leadership stated that there was a "crisis of confidence" and that the UN forces should withdraw "without delay" (Reuters, 16 June 2023). Before this, the UN Security Council had increased the number of peacekeeping troops in the country and also expanded its mandate to allow a more robust military action against militant groups. However, [UN forces did completely withdraw in December 2023](#) (BBC News, 31 December 2023).

[Human Rights Watch 2024 Mali country chapter](#) states:

- "Islamist armed groups have carried out widespread killings, rapes, and lootings of villages in northeast Mali since January 2023 forcing thousands of people to flee."
- "Security in Ménaka and Gao regions has deteriorated sharply amid clashes between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the rival Al-Qaeda-linked Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen, JNIM), as both Islamist armed groups seek to control supply routes and increase their areas of influence. The UN reports that fighting across Mali has forced 375,539 people from their homes, 40 percent of whom are located in the Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, and Timbuktu regions, resulting in one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent years. The two groups use a strategy of displacement to demonstrate their power and impose their authority in Mali and neighboring Burkina Faso."

- "JNIM and ISGS fighters have also killed civilians in other parts of Mali during 2023, as well as Malian soldiers, government officials, and MINUSMA peacekeepers. Human Rights Watch investigated a 22 April [2023] attack in Sévaré, Mopti region, claimed by JNIM, that left at least 10 civilians dead and 60 injured, as well as more than 20 buildings destroyed. On 21 April [2023], JNIM also claimed responsibility for an attack on April 18 which killed the chief of staff of Mali's interim president, Oumar Traoré, and three others in Nara in Koulikoro region."
- On 6 August 2023, JNIM fighters attacked Bodio, killing 15 people, including 4 men, including an 18-year-old. They also looted livestock and civilian property and burned at least 10 homes.
- On 7 September 2023, Islamist fighters attacked a boat traveling on the Niger River from Gao to Mopti. Human Rights Watch found that over 120 died in the boat attack.
- Malian and allied foreign fighters apparently associated with the Russia-linked Wagner Group were implicated in hundreds of unlawful killings of civilians between February and August 2023, mostly during large counterterrorism operations in central Mali.

According to [Crisis 24 Mali report](#) (accessed 2 August 2024):

- "The interim military-led government is radically charting its own way, having essentially cut ties with traditional ally France and looking to Russia for military, diplomatic, and financial support."
- "In addition to ongoing political instability, Mali continues to face high levels of violence linked to the presence of numerous armed groups and Islamist extremists, particularly in the northern, central, and increasingly southern regions of the country. Terrorist attacks remain commonplace in northern and central Mali, with intermittent high-profile attacks even being directed against the capital, Bamako. Foreign interests in Mali, including in Bamako, have been targeted by terrorist groups seeking to cause maximum casualties. The lack of well-developed communications, transportation, and utilities infrastructure across large areas of the country makes it extremely difficult for the Malian state to effectively govern and secure these regions. The medical infrastructure in Mali is also extremely limited, including in parts of the capital Bamako, further exacerbating the challenges faced by the population amidst the security crisis"
- Mali's inability to contain the jihadist situation has caused demonstrations by the general public to be held. The protestors are critical of the government's continued failure to stem Mali's extremist insurgency and inter-community bloodshed. As a result of the lack of security, Christians face the risk of being targeted, kidnapped and killed. Church-run schools have also been forced to close down.

History

Due to its better democratic and civil liberties record compared to other Muslim majority countries in the region - as well as the influence of Sufism - Mali had once been considered a relatively tolerant country for Christians. However, the 2012 civil war and the opportunity that it gave Islamic militant groups changed this situation and since then there has been a serious risk and challenge to Christians. Militant Islamic groups - such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) - are still active, especially in the northern region, and had targeted UN peacekeepers in particular.

Instability and violence have created fear and chaos in the country. Impunity is rampant and the government has not been in a position to stop or bring the perpetrators to justice. Over the past years, many attacks have been conducted by [Islamic militants](#) (International Crisis Group, 28 May 2019);

armed Fulani groups have also committed atrocities. From 2021 onwards, attacks by militant groups in the Sahel intensified: With the proliferation of jihadist groups like Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, the vast territory of Mali that is not under effective government control has become a sanctuary for Islamic militants who are a threat to the security of the entire region. As Mali is located in the Sahel, one of the hotbed regions for jihadists, the situation in the country cannot be seen in isolation; it is part of the overall rise of Islamic militancy and Wahhabism in the entire [Sahel region](#) (WWR, The Sahel - Rising Islamic militancy and persecution of Christians, August 2016). Therefore, the trajectory of the political and security situation in the whole region is crucial for the future of Mali. Furthermore, even if the government of Mali and other regional states manage to crush the armed Islamic groups like AQIM, the radicalization of the youth and society at large by this group is a more intractable problem and is creating a hostile environment for Christians for years to come.

As reported by the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Mali](#)):

- "Throughout the year [2022], mostly in the central and northern regions, domestic and transnational terrorist groups (including al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates Ansar al-Din, Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoune), united under the umbrella group JNIM, and the Islamic State in the Sahel (ISIS Sahel), both U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations, continued attacks on domestic and international security forces, UN peacekeepers, civilians, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. Both JNIM and ISIS-Sahel controlled significant territory in the northern and central regions. According to nongovernmental organizations and security experts, armed groups in some instances coopted preexisting intercommunal and ethnic tensions to further sow instability and violence".

Gender perspective

There is a gendered component to this context of insecurity and fragility; militant groups are more likely to kidnap girls for forced marriage, whereas men and boys are especially vulnerable to violent physical attacks. They may also be forcibly recruited into the ranks of armed groups and, if Christian, forced to convert to Islam. Violent groups reportedly [exploited](#) the diversion of military resources during the COVID-19 pandemic to [upscale](#) attacks and [child trafficking](#) (Council on Foreign Relations, 3 April 2020; CSIS, May 2020; UN News, 1 December 2020). Christian foreign missionaries, especially women, are prime targets of jihadi rebels and have been typically used to negotiate prisoner swaps or, for ransom ([BBC News](#), 31 March 2021).

Christian origins

The present area called Mali was dominated by various Muslim empires and kingdoms before the French colonization. Especially the northern part of the country was predominantly Muslim and there were some followers of traditional African religion in parts of the southern areas. It was the White Fathers, a Roman Catholic missionary order, who brought Christianity to Mali in 1895. However, the growth of Christianity in Mali was very slow. Most of today's Christians are descendants of former Muslims and Animists who converted to Christianity during the colonial period. It was only in 1936 that the first African Roman Catholic priest was ordained, and it was only in 1962 that the first Malian bishop was consecrated. Protestants came to the country in 1919 via the Gospel Missionary Union (GMU) from the USA. That was followed by the arrival of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in 1923.

Church spectrum today

Mali: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	309,000	57.0
Protestant	197,000	36.3
Independent	33,300	6.1
Unaffiliated	1,800	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	541,100	99.8
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	189,000	34.9
Pentecostal-Charismatic	57,000	10.5

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The main Christian denomination in Mali is the Roman Catholic Church but there are many Protestant church communities too. Christians are mainly located in major cities, especially around the Bamako area. Those Christians who live outside the major cities face extreme danger even as civil servants (e.g. as teachers).

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Mali>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.
- [Africa - Recent upsurge in military coups - September 2023](#)

External Links

- Recent history: ceasefire - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/19/mali-peace-deal-tuareg-insurgents-aid>
- Recent history: allegations of fraud - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/mali-candidate-soumaila-cisse-court-alleging-vote-fraud-180805154952537.html>
- Recent history: On 18 August 2020 - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53833925>
- Recent history: seized power - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/24/mali-president-prime-minister-and-defence-minister-arrested-sources-say>
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- Recent history: constitutional referendum - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/23/mali-approves-constitutional-amendments-in-a-referendum>
- Recent history: Human Rights Watch, 26 January 2024 - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/26/malis-peace-deal-ends>
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- Political and legal landscape: 2015 peace-deal - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-33213931>
- Political and legal landscape: COVID-19 crisis - <https://www.dw.com/en/mali-legislative-elections-hampered-by-low-voter-turnout/a-52958735>
- Political and legal landscape: uneasy - <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-07-10/protesters-rally-in-mali-after-rejecting-presidents-concessions>
- Political and legal landscape: suspended - <https://www.france24.com/en/20200819-mali-coup-leaders-face-international-condemnation-au-suspends-membership>
- Political and legal landscape: ICG Weekly update, 9 October 2020 - <https://mailchi.mp/crisisgroup.org/this-week-in-conflict-crisis-x7ndmp7lm0-2389408?e=b87d31638c>
- Political and legal landscape: suspended - <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210530-west-african-bloc-ecowas-suspends-mali-from-its-institutions-after-coup>
- Political and legal landscape: was sworn - <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-coup-leader-assimi-goita-sworn-transitional-president-2021-06-07/>
- Political and legal landscape: withdrawal of French forces - <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220815-%F0%9F%94%B4-french-army-leaves-gao-base-ending-nine-year-military-mission-in-mali>
- Political and legal landscape: UN forces in December 2023 - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67851525>
- Political and legal landscape: escalating tensions - <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/what-are-international-military-options-sahel>
- Political and legal landscape: constitutional changes - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/23/mali-approves-constitutional-amendments-in-a-referendum>
- Political and legal landscape: Reuters, 1 April 2024 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-political-parties-request-elections-after-junta-shuns-transition-promise-2024-04-01/>
- Political and legal landscape: GIWPS Mali - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/mali/>
- Political and legal landscape: Girls not Brides Mali - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/mali/>
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- Economic landscape: lower education and employment rates - <https://data.unwomen.org/country/mali>
- Economic landscape: GIWPS Mali - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/mali/>
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- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Mali - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/MLI>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Mali - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mali/>

- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR's Operational Data Portal - <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/mli>
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- Social and cultural landscape: societal acceptance - <https://www.iameh.ch/en/projects/mali/>
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- Technological landscape: BuddeComm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Mali-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: science and technology - <https://www.4icu.org/reviews/universities-english/15618.html>
- Security situation: Counter Extremism Project - <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/mali-extremism-and-terrorism>
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- Security situation: Islamic militants - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/276-speaking-bad-guys-toward-dialogue-central-malis-jihadists>
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- Security situation: exploited - <https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-jihadi-groups-africa-will-exploit-covid-19>
- Security situation: upscale - <https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa>
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- Security situation: BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56589924>
- Further useful reports: Africa - Recent upsurge in military coups - September 2023 - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/reports/africa-recent-upsurge-in-military-coups>