

...that France's military intervention follows almost a year in which three religious extremist groups controlled northern Mali.

A March 2012 coup d'état in Mali's capital Bamako left northern Mali vulnerable to militias already rebelling against the central government and religious extremist groups operating in the region. After taking over the north, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Din, and the Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) forcibly imposed their strict interpretation of Islamic law and have committed numerous religious freedom violations, including applying hudood punishments, and enforcing what they deem appropriate dress and behavior. In late 2012, the UN Security Council passed resolution 2085 on December 20 authorizing an African Union peacekeeping mission and political negotiations between the Malian central government and rebel groups. As the international community trained the peacekeeping force, the religious extremist groups increased their military action and expanded territory under their control leading France to military intervene in the country on January 10, 2013.

Ansar al-Din and AQIM also desecrated almost a dozen Sufi shrines in Timbuktu in 2012. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Timbuktu was known as the "City of 333 Saints" and served as the intellectual and spiritual capital of the region and a center for the propagation of Islam throughout Africa. Today, the city is home to Islamic manuscripts dating back hundreds of years. Using bulldozers, pick-axes, hoes and guns, Ansar al-Din and AQIM fighters desecrated or destroyed such historic sites as the entrance to a 15th-century mosque, as well as the mausoleums of Sidi Mahmoud, Sidi Mokhtar, Alpha Moya, and the Al Hassan and Al Houseyni twins. Contrary to local Sufi traditions, Ansar al-Din and AQIM consider the veneration of shrines to be idolatrous.

The international community, including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, condemned the attacks and the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor called the destructions of the shrines a war crime. UNESCO, which has designated Timbuktu as a World Heritage site, created a special fund to help restore the shrines.

For more information, see the September 2012 USCIRF [Factsheet: Religious Freedom Violations by Violent Religious Extremist Groups in Northern Mali](#)