

U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET: Religious Freedom Violations by Violent Religious Extremist Groups in Northern Mali

USCIRF factsheets provide background information on a religious freedom issue impacting a country to help analysts and experts better understand the problem and develop policies and recommendations to advance freedom of religion or belief.



Mali², once a model for democracy and freedom of religion and belief in Africa, is experiencing a dramatic rise in severe religious freedom violations due to the activities of several religious extremist groups in the ungoverned northern part of the country. The March 2012 coup d'état led to a breakdown of government in northern Mali, a region roughly the size of France, leaving it vulnerable to militias already rebelling against the central government and religious extremist groups operating in the region. After taking over the north, the religious extremist groups forcibly imposed their strict interpretation of Islam and committed numerous religious freedom violations, including application of hudood punishments, desecration of historic Sufi religious sites, and pronouncement and enforcement of what they deem appropriate dress and behavior. Continued political confusion in the capital, and failure by regional governments and the international community to develop a plan to address the presence of such extremist groups in northern Mali, underscores the likelihood that gross violations of freedom of religion or belief will continue for the foreseeable future.

¹ Map from Lonely Planet, <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/africa/mali/>

² The West African country of Mali is an ethnically diverse and majority Muslim country. Of its more than 15.8 million people, more than 90 percent are Muslim, with the vast majority being Sufis. The southern part of Mali is dominated by the Mandé ethnic group, which also dominates the political system. Northern Mali includes the following ethnic groups, in order of population size: Songhi, Taureg, Berabiche, and Kunta. The Fulani, Dogon, Bobo, and Senufo ethnic groups are located in the east and southeast.

Background

- In January 2012, two ethnically Tuareg militias, dissatisfied by the government's failure to develop the north, launched the third Tuareg rebellion since Mali's independence in 1960. The two militias are the Movement National Pour La Liberation de l'Azawad (MNLA) which was fighting for an independent, secular state encompassing northern Mali to be called Azawad, and Ansar al-Din, which was fighting for Shari'ah to be implemented nationwide. The militias were strengthened by arms flowing from Libya and Tuareg fighters who had been released from duty in the Libyan army during that nation's civil war.
- On March 22, a group of junior Malian army officers, angry that the government was inadequately supporting their efforts to stop the Tuareg militias, successfully staged a coup d'état. The resulting confusion and military defections left the north open to conquest by the MNLA and Ansar al-Din, as well as other militias and religious extremist groups already operating in Mali's vast Sahelian region. By early April, these militias claimed control of the major northern cities of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu.
- During the fighting between the militias and the army, both committed serious human rights abuses, including summary executions. The militias, especially the MNLA, raped and beat people, and stole and destroyed property as they captured towns. Efforts by Ansar al-Din and the religious extremist group Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) to provide law and order helped those groups gain some short-lived trust with local populations.
- Despite the MNLA and Ansar al-Din's divergent agendas, they united to rebel against the Malian government. This coalition, however, collapsed on June 16 when both announced that they could not come to agreement on whether northern Mali should be secular or ruled by Islamic law, or if it should remain within Mali or become an independent nation. Since their break, the MNLA has fought against and lost territory to al-Dine and MUJWA. The MNLA has also reversed its position on northern independence in favor of northern autonomy.
- In cities and towns under Ansar al-Din and MUJWA control, the two militias have violently imposed their extremist interpretation of Islam on the populations, despite local protests and international condemnation. Ansar al-Din and MUJWA continue to advocate for the nationwide implementation of Shari'ah law.
- More than 300,000 people from northern Mali have been displaced due to the chaos caused by the rebellion, and the militias' human rights violations and their forceful imposition of extremist Shari'ah. About 145,000 are internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 180,000 are refugees in Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Niger. The Christian population of northern Mali is among the displaced: they fled in early April after an attack on a church in Gao.

Religious Extremist Groups Operating in Northern Mali

The following is a brief background on the three religious extremist groups currently operating in northern Mali -- Ansar al-Din, MUJWA, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb -- and a list of their violations of religious freedom.

Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith)

- Ansar al-Din sets itself apart as a Taureg militia that also espouses a violent religious ideology. It was formed in November 2011 after its leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly, was rejected by the MNLA to serve as a leader of that militia. Its fighters have the dominating presence in Kidal and Timbuktu and also are present in several smaller towns throughout the north. Leaders of Ansar al-Din have connections with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).
- Iyad Ag Ghaly comes from the town of Kidal and is a Taureg of the Ifoghas tribe. He has been a leader of previous Taureg rebellions and held different positions in the Malian government. From 2007 to 2010, Ghaly served as Mali's consul general in Jeddeh, Saudi Arabia before he was expelled from that country for connections with extremists linked to al-Qaeda. There are differing opinions among Mali experts about the effectiveness of negotiating with Ghaly and Ansar al-Din to bring peace and unity to Mali.
- Ansar al-Din has opened several madrassas in Kidal and Timbuktu and is accused of forcibly recruiting children.
- Ansar al-Din continues to commit gross religious freedom and human rights abuses in territories it controls by imposing its interpretation of Shari'ah. Religious freedom violations include, but are not limited to:
 - Stoning to death a young couple on July 29 in the town of Aguelhoc for allegedly having an adulterous relationship;
 - Desecrating more than a dozen historic Sufi religious sites in Timbuktu, including the mausoleum of Sidi Mahmoud, the door of the Sidi Yahia mosque, and two tombs at Djingareyber mosque;
 - Floggings for rape, having children out of wedlock, dress violations, and consuming alcohol;
 - Amputations for theft; and
 - Imposing behavioral norms, including wearing veils and conservative dress for women, banning western music and alcohol, and separating sexes in schools and transportation.

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA)

- MUJWA is a splinter group of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) that seeks to implement an extremist interpretation of Shari'ah across West Africa. While MUJWA operated in northern Mali and southern Algeria prior to the rebellion and coup, it has since gained control over the city of Gao.

- Although little is known about MUJWA's leadership, it is suspected to include black Africans who previously were members of AQIM.
- MUJWA is recruiting members from the local, non-Taureg populations in Gao. New recruits join for reasons such as religious commitment, ethnic animosity toward Tauregs, and practical or economic interests.
- In addition to kidnapping for ransom, MUJWA, despite public protests, commits gross religious freedom and human rights violations in territories it controls. MUJWA's "Islamic Police" are responsible for security in Gao. Religious freedom violations include, but are not limited to:
 - Floggings for selling drugs;
 - Amputations for selling weapons and theft; and
 - Imposing behavioral norms, including wearing veils and conservative dress for women; banning western music, watching television, and alcohol; separating sexes in schools and hospitals; and banning the playing of soccer.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

- Designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the United States, AQIM originally aimed to overthrow Algeria's secular military government and establish an Islamic caliphate. After the Algerian military expelled AQIM from its bases along the Mediterranean coast of Algeria, the terrorist organization moved to the Sahara in southern Algeria and northern Mali.
- AQIM has sworn its allegiance to Al Qaeda and declared that it shares its goals, although most of its operations include kidnapping for ransom and smuggling.
- Since March 2012, AQIM has been visibly present in Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu.
- In addition to kidnapping for ransom, in Timbuktu AQIM is reported to have assisted Ansar al-Din members in desecrating historic Sufi religious sites and enforcing dress codes for women.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

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