

The November 2015 Terrorist Siege in Mali

November 23, 2015 (IN10401)

—|

Related Authors

- [Lauren Ploch Blanchard](#)
 - [Emily Renard](#)
-

[View More...](#)

—|

Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Specialist in African Affairs (lploch@crs.loc.gov, 7-7640)

Emily Renard, Analyst in African Affairs (erenard@crs.loc.gov, 7-2775)

Alexis Arieff, Specialist in African Affairs (aarieff@crs.loc.gov, 7-2459)

On November 20, 2015, gunmen laid siege to the Radisson Blu, a hotel popular with foreigners in Mali's capital, Bamako. At least [22 people are reportedly dead](#), including one American. Other Americans were among more than 100 hostages safely recovered. Malian and French forces conducted rescue operations; U.S. Special Operations forces supported those efforts. Al Murabitoun, a Sahel-based terrorist group affiliated with Al Qaeda, and Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) [jointly claimed responsibility](#) for the assault, [possibly in coordination with other Mali-based groups](#).

The Bamako attack came one week after the terrorist attacks in Paris, amid heightened international concern about threats to soft targets. It was the latest in a series against domestic and international targets in Mali and Northwest Africa. After several high-impact attacks by the self-declared [Islamic State](#), the assault is also an indication of the [growing fragmentation within the "larger terrorism landscape,"](#) with an array of groups emerging in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East and growing threats against U.S. partners. Some groups have aligned themselves with Al Qaeda and others with the Islamic State, creating competition for recruits, resources, and public attention. Despite rhetorical affiliation with transnational groups, many Africa-based groups operate with relative autonomy.

Terrorist Groups in the Sahel

Al Murabitoun was formed in 2013 as a merger between two splinter factions of AQIM: Al Mulathamun Battalion and the Mali-based Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA or MUJAO). Other attacks attributed to them include:

- January 2013 (Algeria): Hostage siege at the In Amenas natural gas plant; killing at least 39, including three U.S. citizens;
- May 2013 (Niger): Suicide bombings against a local military base and French uranium mine;
- March 2015 (Mali): Attack on a Bamako bar, killing five;
- August 2015 (Mali): siege of a hotel in Sevare, central Mali, killing 13.

Al Murabitoun has targeted the U.N. Mission in Mali (MINUSMA); [40 peacekeepers have died in attacks](#) since its

establishment in 2013. In 2014, the State Department described Al Murabitoun as "the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and international interests in the Sahel," citing its "stated intent to attack Westerners and proven ability to organize complex attacks." (See CRS In Focus IF10172, [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\) and Al Murabitoun](#).)

In August 2015, Al Murabitoun declared itself to be Al Qaeda's branch in the region. Earlier in the year, a splinter faction that had pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State was disavowed by Al Murabitoun's leader, Mokhtar bel Mokhtar. Bel Mokhtar, an Algerian national and former AQIM commander who reportedly trained in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, is one of the region's most wanted terrorists. He has been targeted repeatedly by counterterrorism operations, and reportedly survived a June 2015 U.S. air strike in Libya, where he was reportedly attending a [meeting with leaders of Ansar al Sharia](#), a group linked to the 2012 attack on the U.S. compounds in Benghazi.

Context in the Sahel

AQIM has long used Mali as a hub for fundraising activities. They and other violent extremists have leveraged recent instability in Mali, Libya, and northern Nigeria to expand their scope of operations. AQIM and MUJWA took control of parts of northern Mali in 2012, in coordination with a Malian-led extremist group known as Ansar Dine. In January 2013, former colonial power France intervened militarily and ousted AQIM and its allies from northern towns, citing fears of a jihadist takeover of the country after extremists pushed southward. The intervention, Operation Serval, restored nominal state control and weakened—but did not eliminate—these groups' hold. A fragile peace deal has sought to isolate terrorist groups and bring Malian actors with secular political claims into a formal peace process, with mixed success. (See CRS In Focus IF10116, [Mali: Transition from Conflict?](#))

In 2014, France transitioned Serval into a regional counterterrorism mission, Operation Barkhane, with about [3,500 troops](#), as well as reconnaissance aircraft and other assets. Barkhane has appeared to focus on combating terrorist groups in northern Mali; and, increasingly, on preventing the flow of terrorists and weapons from southern Libya, including by striking convoys traveling into Niger. French officials have [expressed growing concern](#) about threats posed by the Nigeria-based Boko Haram, which threatens to destabilize partner states in the region. However, French resources [appear to be strained](#) by commitments in Mali, the Central African Republic, and elsewhere.

The rhetoric of AQIM and other Islamist extremists broadly focuses on achieving an Islamic caliphate in the region, and on countering Western influence and military interventions, especially those of France.

Issues for U.S. Policy

U.S. officials assess the Islamist extremist groups operating in the Sahel—AQIM, Al Murabitoun, Ansar Dine, and Boko Haram among them—to be [focused on both local and Western targets](#) in the region. The State Department designated Al Murabitoun as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in December 2013 (AQIM was designated in 2002, and Ansar Dine in 2013).

The United States maintains intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets in the region. U.S. programs provide training, advice, assistance and logistical support to regional partners under the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and the Department of Defense's Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans-Sahara (OEF-TS), among other initiatives, including stabilization efforts by the U.S. Agency for International Development. The Administration has additionally proposed \$113 million and \$262 million in FY2015 and FY2016, respectively, to support partners' efforts in the Sahel and Maghreb under the new Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF). [Regional experts suggest](#) that Mali's fragile stability highlights the need to bolster civilian efforts that address the drivers of extremism, such as state fragility, corruption, and marginalization.

Since 2014, President Obama has notified Congress of up to \$45 million for logistical support to French counterterrorism operations in the Sahel. If enacted, Section 1207 of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA; [S. 1356](#)) would authorize up to \$100,000,000 on a non-reimbursable basis for allies' counterterrorism operations in Africa (of which French efforts are the most prominent). To date, U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel have focused primarily on [enabling allies and partners to disrupt terrorist networks](#); as the threat evolves, policy deliberations about the extent of the U.S. role may focus on funding, U.S. presence, the reliability of regional partners, and, potentially, direct intervention.