

# POLICY BRIEF



## Mali

### Escalating Violence and the Erosion of Religious Freedom

Mali is experiencing a protracted armed conflict that began with the armed seizure of northern territory in 2012, which severely destabilized the civilian governance structures established after the democratic transition of 1991–1992. The seizure was carried out jointly by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, a Tuareg-led separatist movement, and the Salafist Ansar Dine group.<sup>1</sup> Since 2012, successive Malian governments have fought at least two Islamist armed groups, the Al-Qaeda-linked Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The ensuing conflict has

resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and the forcible displacement of more than half a million.<sup>2</sup>

Mali's 1992 Constitution provides a secular framework that guarantees freedom of religion or belief (Article 4) and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds (Article 2).<sup>3</sup> The conflict has weakened constitutional human rights protections and strained relations between Mali's predominantly Sunni Muslim population, whose religious life has been shaped by centuries of Sufi traditions and Christian and traditional religious communities.<sup>4</sup> Chronic poverty and lack of employment opportunities

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/1910\\_sipri\\_report\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_armed\\_groups\\_on\\_the\\_populations\\_of\\_central\\_and\\_northern\\_mali\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/1910_sipri_report_the_impact_of_armed_groups_on_the_populations_of_central_and_northern_mali_en_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/mali>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mali\\_1992](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mali_1992)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/usdos/2010/en/76834>

have weakened the local economy, creating conditions that jihadist groups exploit for recruitment and the consolidation of territorial control.<sup>5</sup> These conditions have created an environment of acute vulnerability for religious minorities, including Christians, who face targeted violence and displacement. Churches are attacked, torched, and looted; Christians face kidnapping, and clergy operate under constant threat.<sup>6</sup>

In August 2020, a military coup overthrew Mali's civilian government, establishing a transitional military administration that further consolidated in May 2021.<sup>7</sup> The government suspended Mali's democratic institutions and postponed elections indefinitely. In January 2024, the government withdrew Mali from the Economic Community of West African States and joined the Alliance of Sahel States, a military alliance with Burkina Faso and Niger focused on regional security cooperation.<sup>8</sup> The Malian Armed Forces, operating alongside the Wagner Group (rebranded as Africa Corps) remain limited in their counterterrorism capacity due to gaps in training, equipment, and intelligence needed to combat the expanding militant threat. The withdrawal of international peacekeeping missions, particularly the end of the UN's MINUSMA mission in 2023, has further weakened the state's ability to protect civilians, respond promptly to attacks on religious minorities, and enforce the rule of law nationwide.<sup>9</sup>

## Widespread Insecurity and Violence - Impact on Religious Minorities

The resulting security vacuum has enabled multiple Islamist militant and armed groups to intensify operations across northern, central, and increasingly southern Mali. These include JNIM and its affiliates and subsidiaries (among them Katiba Macina, Ansaroul Islam, and al-Mourabitoun), the ISGS, and ethnically organized separatist movements including the Azawad Liberation Front and the Coordination of Azawad Movements. They target not only Christian communities but also moderate Muslims and traditional religious practitioners who resist their strict interpretation of Sharia law.<sup>10</sup> Ethnic and separatist armed groups have at times coordinated

with jihadists, complicating the conflict and blurring separatist and religious motivations.<sup>11</sup> Widespread arms proliferation, driven by weapons looted from overrun military bases and smuggled through cross-border networks, has deepened the security crisis and expanded the capacity of these groups to sustain and escalate violence, including killing civilians.<sup>12</sup> Populations under their control face coercive taxation, forced school closures, prohibition of local ceremonies, and strict dress codes. The Malian Armed Forces also carry out extrajudicial killings of civilians during counterinsurgency operations, with perpetrators acting with impunity.<sup>13</sup>

Christian communities experience escalating violence, displacement, and religious coercion. Churches are attacked, looted, and destroyed, and Christian properties desecrated across northern, central, and southern regions.<sup>14</sup> Clergy are subjected to abduction and demand for ransom. Pastors under Islamist militants' control are given an ultimatum, provide fighters, pay for mercenaries, or convert to Islam or close their churches. These groups impose "jizya", a poll tax on non-Muslims, on adult Christians as a condition for the free practice of religion. Those unable or unwilling to pay face severe penalties such as church closure and direct threats to their lives.<sup>15</sup> Islamist militant groups such as JNIM levy "zakat" (an Islamic charitable tax obligatory only on Muslims) on Muslim and non-Muslim populations alike under their control, using coercive taxation as an instrument of territorial governance. Non-compliance results in threats to life and property.<sup>16</sup> Christian converts from Islam face compounded vulnerability, targeted by jihadist groups, their families, and their wider communities.<sup>17</sup>

## A Deepening Humanitarian Crisis

Mali is experiencing a severe and worsening humanitarian crisis. Millions of people require urgent assistance, while a rapidly growing population of internally displaced persons and refugees is overwhelming already stretched resources. Displacement camps and informal settlements are severely overcrowded, with little access to clean water,

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist\\_groups/jnim.html](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/jnim.html)

<sup>6</sup> "Mali: Country Dossier", World Watch Research, January 2026, pp. 6. Available at <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/27/timeline-how-mali-went-from-democracy-beacon-to-instability>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/qla/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-mali-niger/splinter-sahel-can-divorce-ecowas-be-averted>

<sup>9</sup> <https://ti-defence.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Malis-defence-sector-Systemic-corruption-risk-amidst-escalating-violence.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> "Mali: Country Dossier", *Ibid.*, pp. 2

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/fall-of-northern-mali-jnim-fla-offensive-russia-issp-cama>

<sup>12</sup> <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-013/01-arms-trafficking-routes-in-mali-disrupted.ht>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/mali>

<sup>14</sup> "Mali: Country Dossier", *Ibid.*, pp. 3

<sup>15</sup> <https://acnuk.org/news/2024/10/31/mali-jihadists-demand-crippling-religious-tax-christians>

<sup>16</sup> <https://newsletter.insightthreatintel.com/p/gold-guns-and-cattle-jnims-30-billion>

<sup>17</sup> "Mali: Country Dossier", *Ibid.*, pp. 3

adequate shelter, or basic sanitation.<sup>18</sup> Food insecurity is critical and deteriorating, with acute malnutrition among children projected to worsen significantly in the absence of sustained humanitarian intervention.<sup>19</sup> Women and girls are disproportionately affected, facing rising rates of sexual violence, exploitation, and forced marriage in conflict-affected areas. Humanitarian access has declined sharply, and a serious shortfall in international funding has forced cuts to food aid, nutrition programs, and medical services at a time of escalating need.<sup>20</sup>

Local Christian and Muslim faith-based organizations continue to provide essential humanitarian assistance, including emergency relief, food security, healthcare, and community development, though insecurity and funding shortfalls severely limit their reach.<sup>21</sup> They are often among the first to respond in a crisis and remain engaged for a long time. Rooted in the communities they serve, they carry a level of trust and cultural familiarity that enables them to reach populations in areas that may be difficult for formal humanitarian systems to access. Beyond material assistance, they provide spiritual and psychosocial support that is increasingly recognized as essential to community resilience in prolonged conflict.<sup>22</sup>

### Rising Inciting Speech and Restrictions on Freedom of Expression

Religious minorities in Mali face a compounding pattern of incitement to discrimination and violence. Firstly,

Islamist militants and extremist religious actors promote narratives that justify hostility and violence against those who do not conform to their interpretation of Islam.<sup>23</sup> Beyond direct attacks, the spread of inflammatory rhetoric and harmful narratives contributes to a wider environment of intolerance and fear among religious communities. In response to rising hostile rhetoric directed at religious minorities, in 2025 the Malian government created a dialogue framework with religious leaders. The initiative recognized that the rapid spread of harmful content, especially online, was damaging relations between religious communities.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, the government's restrictions on civic participation and civil liberties have weakened civic space with Christians and other religious minorities facing increasing concerns about their ability to speak openly and seek protection.<sup>25</sup> Christian leaders and activists who speak out face monitoring, threats, and arbitrary detention.<sup>26</sup> This is compounded by legislation that criminalizes broad categories of speech. Article 242-1 of the 2024 Penal Code criminalizes a range of speech, including any statement deemed to undermine national unity or the credit of the state, while Article 512-18 of the 2024 Penal Code criminalizes online insults. The lack of clear definition for these terms gives authorities wide discretion to prosecute dissent and silence minority voices.<sup>27</sup>



*Forcibly Displaced: The Church in Exile*

<sup>18</sup> Over 414,500 internally displaced persons and 270,000 as of late 2025. <https://www.wfp.org/countries/mali>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/unfpa-mali-situation-report-january-2025>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/20939/sahel-peace-initiative-forum-opens-in-mali-with-calls-on-religious-and-traditional-leaders-to-foster-peace-in-the-region>. Also see: <https://academic.oup.com/jhrp/article/17/2/huae040/7896402>

<sup>22</sup> <https://jilifc.com/2025/03/when-aid-falls-short/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://apanews.net/malis-cybercrime-busters-summon-two-imams>

<sup>24</sup> <https://apanews.net/mali-creates-dialogue-framework-after-threats-to-religious-figures>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.christiantoday.com/news/triple-threat-mali-christians-caught-between-government-repression-censorship-and-extremist-attacks>

<sup>26</sup> "Mali: Country Dossier", *Ibid.*, pp. 1

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/FINALBriefing-note-on-Mali9Dec2025-1.pdf>

# Recommendations:

To address the ongoing conflict, civilian harm, and protection risks in Mali, Open Doors recommends the following:

1

- The Malian Government should:
  - i. Prioritize civilian protection by establishing effective early warning systems in high-risk areas strengthening community-based protection mechanisms, and ensuring the meaningful participation of religious minorities in local security planning;
  - ii. Establish a dedicated unit within the Armed Forces or Gendarmerie to respond to attacks on religious minorities within 24 hours of a reported incident, with monthly reporting to the Ministry of Religious Affairs
  - iii. Establish an independent investigative mechanism, supported by international technical assistance from bodies such as the OHCHR, to document, investigate, and pursue accountability for and prosecute Armed Forces personnel responsible for extrajudicial killings and abuses committed by security forces of civilians, with findings made publicly available;
  - iv. Work with neighboring states through bilateral security agreements to establish coordinated border monitoring mechanisms targeting weapons smuggling routes;
  - v. Deepen participation in UNODC's Operation KAFO (a cross-border firearms seizure operation)
  - vi. Implement Mali's commitments under the African Union's small arms control framework to support arms tracking and interception across the Sahel corridor.
- The International Community should:
  - i. Recognize coercive taxation practices (including so called "jizya" and "zakat") by armed groups as violations of freedom of religion or belief and unlawful extortion under international law, and ensure this recognition is reflected consistently across all bilateral and multilateral human rights assessments, diplomatic engagements, and accountability mechanisms concerning assessments of Mali;
  - ii. Fund independent monitoring bodies to document attacks on churches, clergy abductions, forced conversions, and civilian killings, and urge the Malian government through the UN Security Council to grant them unimpeded access across Mali.

2

## To alleviate the humanitarian emergency in Mali:

- The International Community should:
  - i. Provide flexible funding for humanitarian responses with dedicated allocations for local faith-based actors, in line with Grand Bargain localization commitments to strengthen support for local actors, simplify compliance and reduce administrative burdens to enable frontline actors access to funding and promote equitable partnerships, and extend security protocols and risk-sharing arrangements to partners whose community visibility and religious identity place them at heightened risk of targeting by Islamist militants and armed groups. The International Community should intensify diplomatic engagement with Malian authorities and local power holders to ensure sustained and unhindered humanitarian access, recognizing that funding alone cannot address needs where access is denied.
  - ii. Expand programs addressing malnutrition in children and sexual violence against women and girls in displacement camps and conflict-affected areas including medical care, psychosocial support, and safe reporting mechanisms.
  - iii. Integrate protection programming into all humanitarian responses, monitoring forced displacement, coercion, and restrictions on religious practice.
- The Malian Government, with technical support from UNHCR and UNDP, should establish a mobile documentation program to issue emergency identity documents in displacement settings, removing documentation as a barrier to humanitarian assistance.

3

## To counter inciting speech and restrictions on freedom of expression, the Malian Government

should amend Articles 242-1 and 512-18 of the Penal Code to ensure compliance with Article 19 and 20 of the ICCPR, limiting restrictions on expression to cases meeting the Rabat Plan of Action threshold for incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Judicial oversight safeguards should be introduced to prevent the use of incitement laws to suppress legitimate religious expressions. Additionally, a legally independent national monitoring body, with guaranteed civil society and multi-faith representation, should be established and mandated to monitor and document violations, publicly report findings, and refer cases to prosecutor and international mechanisms.