

Senegal: Extremism and Terrorism

On March 3, 2023, the U.N. Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and Senegal's Center for Advanced Studies in Defense and Security, hold a conference in Dakar. The conference was launched to discuss the rising levels of violent extremism in Africa and to determine how individual regions could implement better strategies to counter militant violence. Since 2022, terrorism related deaths have increased by almost 50 percent. Of the 19,000 casualties, the majority of the deaths have reportedly occurred in the western Sahel region. According to Giovanie Biha, the head of UNOWAS, "terrorist groups continue to exploit the multifaceted challenges facing the region, notably its environmental, political and socioeconomic weaknesses and inequalities...a regional challenge demands a regional response." (Source: [North Africa Post](#))

Given ongoing terrorist activities in Senegal and the West African coast, on February 17, 2022, France announced that its military and its European, African, and Canadian partners in the Sahel will remove their military operations from Mali and instead extend their support to "neighboring countries in the Gulf of Guinea and west Africa." In particular, French bases in Senegal would remain in operation. According to and Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo and Senegal's President Macky Sall, West Africa is "vulnerable to the penetration of terrorist outrages...we are therefore re-examining with our friends and partners the manner in which we can respond." Although France will focus its operations on the Gulf of Guinea, France will further invest in government services such as schools and instead of large fixed bases. France will also provide additional mobile support for national armies. (Sources: [Financial Times](#), [BBC News](#))

In November 2015, a Senegalese national named Mahktar Diokhané was arrested in Niger. Upon his arrest, Diokhané was found to be in possession of \$20,000 that he had received from Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, to set up a Boko Haram cell in Senegal. Diokhané previously spent time in a Boko Haram camp in Nigeria and sought to recruit new fighters to train in the Kedougou forest of southeastern Senegal. A total of 29 individuals—including three women—were ultimately arrested throughout 2015 and 2016 in Senegal for their alleged involvement in the Boko Haram cell. Several were tried in 2018, and according to testimony given in their trial, many had spent time in Nigeria training with Boko Haram, and others reportedly had links to Islamic militant groups in Mali and Libya. In July 2018, Senegal's criminal court convicted and sentenced 13 of the individuals to prison, but acquitted 14 others. Diokhané received a 20-year prison term. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Jeune Afrique](#), [Washington Post](#), [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#))

Overview

Despite Senegal's majority Muslim population and close proximity to extremist activity in West Africa, the country has been largely resistant to the spread of Islamic extremism. Senegalese President Macky Sall has warned that radical Muslims have "no place" in Senegal. The country's population is approximately 95 percent Muslim, though most Senegalese Muslims subscribe to Sufism—a mystical form of Islam that promotes tolerance and nonviolence—and belong to Sufi brotherhoods, which provide strong networks of support and encourage moderate views. Senegal also enjoys political stability and strong democratic traditions, which analysts also speculate serve as bulwarks against the spread of extremism. Although several nearby countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria, have been subject to terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda- and ISIS-associated groups, Senegal has thus far avoided such attacks within its borders. Nonetheless, dozens of Senegalese nationals have been reported to have joined al-Qaeda- and ISIS-affiliated groups abroad, and Senegal has arrested and prosecuted several individuals that have attempted to propagate extremist views within the country. (Sources: [National Interest](#), [New York Times](#), [World Politics Review](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [Telegraph](#))

Senegal has arrested several individuals—mainly recruiters and former foreign fighters—linked to Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, and ISIS. In one of its largest terrorism cases, Senegal arrested a total of 29 individuals in 2015 and 2016 in connection to a plot to establish a Boko Haram cell in Senegal sanctioned and financed by Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau. Though some of them were absolved, Senegal's criminal court convicted 13 of the individuals to prison in July 2018, including the group's leader, Mahktar Diokhané, who received a 20-year prison term. Senegalese troops have also fought against al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates as part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which has raised concerns that those groups could seek to target Senegal in response. There have been reports of Senegalese nationals joining Boko Haram in Nigeria, AQIM in Mali, and ISIS in Syria, Libya, and Iraq. (Sources: [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Washington Post](#), [News24](#))

Although Islamic extremist groups have not yet carried out any violent attacks in Senegal, a separatist group called the Movement of Democratic Forces in the Casamance (MFDC) has waged a low-intensity violent separatist campaign in Senegal's southern Casamance province that has claimed thousands of lives since 1982. Both the MFDC and Senegalese military forces fighting the group have been accused of serious human rights

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abuses. Though violence peaked in the 1990s, none of the peace agreements that the MFDC has signed with the Senegalese government have served to resolve the conflict, which has remained in a suspended state of neither “war nor peace” in recent years. (Sources: [American Federation of Scientists](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [U.S. Department of Justice](#), [BBC News](#))

Senegal worked to improve its internal security and implement new domestic counter-extremism initiatives following terrorist attacks in nearby Mali, Cote d’Ivoire, and Burkino Faso in late 2015 and early 2016. For example, Senegal created new terrorism-related offenses, increased penalties for existing offenses, and improved counterterrorism coordination among governmental agencies. Senegal also has legislation criminalizing terrorist financing, though only when it is directly linked to a terrorist attack. President Macky Sall has also made appeals to the leaders of Senegal’s Sufi brotherhoods for their support in countering extremist ideology and promoting non-violence. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [National Interest](#), [New York Times](#))

Senegal is involved in several international counter-extremism initiatives as a member of the United Nations, African Union, Economic Community of West African States, Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative, and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Senegal has worked with the United States and France to strengthen its counterterrorism and military capabilities, and has supported those two countries’ own counterterrorism missions in West Africa. Senegal has contributed its own troops to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, the United Nations mission to stabilize Mali, and a U.N.-backed military intervention to force the former president of The Gambia to cede power after losing an election in late 2016. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#), [BBC News](#), [Guardian](#))

Public opinion polls show little support for Islamic extremism and Islamic extremist groups in Senegal. According to Pew Research Center polls, a majority of Senegalese citizens and Muslims hold unfavorable views of ISIS and al-Qaeda. A 2017 Pew Research Center poll suggested that 46 percent of Senegalese citizens viewed ISIS as a “major threat” to Senegal. According to media reports, the MFDC also has little popular support from residents in the Casamance region. (Sources: [International Centre for Counter-Terrorism](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [Al Jazeera](#))

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Boko Haram

Though Boko Haram has not yet carried out an attack in Senegal, several Senegalese nationals have joined the group’s ranks in Nigeria, and others have been arrested and prosecuted in Senegal for their links to the group. The first Boko Haram-linked individual active in Senegal was Khalid al-Barnawi, who conducted business activities in the country in 2011 that he used to fund major attacks in Nigeria, including the bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Abuja that August. (Sources: [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#))

In one of the largest terrorism cases in Senegal, authorities discovered a plot to create a Boko Haram cell in the country in 2015. That November, a Senegalese national named Mahktar Diokhané was arrested in Niger. Upon his arrest, he was found to be in possession of \$20,000 that he had received from Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, to set up a cell in Senegal. Diokhané, who had previously spent time in a Boko Haram camp in Nigeria, reportedly intended to recruit new fighters to train in the Kedougou forest of southeastern Senegal. A total of 29 individuals—including three women—were ultimately arrested for their alleged involvement in the cell on charges of conspiracy related to financing an armed group, money-laundering, and acts of terrorism. Several were tried in 2018, and according to testimony given in their trial, many had also spent time in Nigeria training with Boko Haram, and others reportedly had links to militant groups in Mali and Libya. In July 2018, Senegal’s criminal court convicted and sentenced 13 of the individuals to prison, but acquitted 14 others. Diokhané received a 20-year prison term. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Jeune Afrique](#), [Washington Post](#), [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#))

Boko Haram has been repeatedly been accused of attempting to recruit in Senegal, and of specifically targeting Senegalese youth for recruitment. The first such claim came in 2012, when the Grand Imam of the town of Bignona claimed that Boko Haram was attempting to recruit in the town. In 2016, four imams suspected of recruiting for the group were arrested in Kaolack. One of them, Imam Alioune Badara Ndao, was accused of radicalizing Mahktar Diokhané, though he was ultimately acquitted of terrorism-related charges in July 2018. (Sources: [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#), [Voice of America](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Jeune Afrique](#), [BBC News](#))

Senegal has continued to arrest Boko Haram-linked individuals in recent years, including former foreign fighters. In 2016, Senegalese authorities arrested a total of 11 individuals linked to the group, including one individual named Momodou Ndiaye (a.k.a. Abu Yusuf), who was tracked

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through his Facebook activity. Ndiaye had reportedly fought for Boko Haram in Nigeria from 2014 to 2015 alongside another Senegalese foreign fighter who was killed there. In April 2017, Senegalese authorities arrested a Nigerian individual exiting the Nigerian embassy in Dakar who was suspected of having links to Boko Haram. He had reportedly just arrived in Senegal after spending two months in Mauritania. In June 2017, three individuals arrested in Dakar confessed to authorities that they were three of 23 Senegalese nationals in Boko Haram. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Reuters](#), [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#))

Al-Qaeda and Affiliates

Although Senegal is located next to Mali, where al-Qaeda affiliates including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Mourabitoun have waged an insurgency over the last decade, Senegal has so far remained free from al-Qaeda-linked violence. However, Senegal has significantly stepped up its internal security measures out of concern that it could be a potential target for AQIM, given that Senegalese troops participate in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), a peacekeeping mission that works to counter AQIM and its affiliates there. As of 2012, there were reports of Senegalese nationals fighting for AQIM in Mali, and some Senegalese imams have also expressed support for jihadists there. (Sources: [News24](#), [Washington Post](#), [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#))

Senegal has arrested numerous individuals in the country for their alleged ties to al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda-linked groups. In 2013, the Senegalese imam Babacar Dianko was arrested in Kédougou. He was an alleged associate of the then-leader of the al-Qaeda-aligned Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), and was suspected of being a recruiter for the group. In 2015, Senegalese authorities raided the homes of several imams who were found to be in possession of literature indicating their support of al-Qaeda. Ibrahima Sèye, an imam and high school teacher, was arrested for his alleged links to AQIM and sentenced to two years in prison in October 2016. In February 2017, Senegalese authorities arrested two suspected jihadists in Dakar. The jihadists were from Mali and Mauritania and were en route to The Gambia. They were linked to Mohamed Ould Nouini, the mastermind of a deadly March 2016 attack on a hotel in Cote d'Ivoire that killed 19 people, and was perpetrated by AQIM and the affiliated group al-Mourabitoun. (Sources: [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#), [Le Journal de Dakar](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#), [BBC News](#), [eNCA](#), [Reuters](#), [SMBC Gambia](#), [SMBC Gambia](#))

Given the threat of AQIM, Senegal began building a military camp near its border with Mali on July 16, 2020. The defense ministry did not provide further details of troop numbers or the kind of equipment the base would have. (Source: [News 24](#))

ISIS

Senegalese individuals have both traveled abroad to fight for ISIS and been arrested in Senegal for their links to the group. Senegalese authorities have arrested some ISIS-linked individuals after tracking their Facebook activity. One such individual, Momodou Ndiaye (a.k.a Abu Yusuf), reportedly fought for ISIS in Libya sometime in 2015 or 2016 after spending time in Nigeria fighting for Boko Haram. He was one of an estimated 10 to 30 Senegalese nationals who reportedly traveled to Syria, Libya, or Iraq to fight on behalf of ISIS. In 2016, Senegalese authorities also arrested Moustapha Diatta, who ran a Facebook page called “Proselytize Senegal.” Diatta reportedly helped Senegalese individuals—including three of his children—travel to Libya to fight for ISIS, though he denied those allegations. In March 2017, Senegalese authorities also arrested two Moroccans in Dakar suspected of having links to ISIS. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#), [National Interest](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#))

Casamance Conflict

The Movement of Democratic Forces in the Casamance (MFDC) is a separatist group that has waged a low-intensity violent separatist campaign against Senegal’s government that has claimed thousands of lives since 1982. The MFDC seeks independence for Senegal’s southern Casamance province, which is geographically separated from the rest of the country by The Gambia and is home to the Diola ethnic group. The Diola tribe is ethnically and religiously distinct from the Wolof, Senegal’s dominant ethnic group. Although the MFDC has since signed several peace agreements with the Senegalese government, none has served to resolve the conflict. For example, after a major peace agreement was signed in 2004, opposing factions simply split off from the group and continued to fight. (Sources: [American Federation of Scientists](#), [Reuters](#), [U.S. Department of Justice](#), [BBC News](#))

Violence peaked in the 1990s, when the MFDC received support from João Bernardo Vieira, the former president of Guinea-Bissau. The MFDC was accused by human rights groups of serious human rights abuses, including killings, disappearances, and torture of civilians. The militant group reportedly targeted civilians from other ethnic groups outside of the Diola, and was known for its widespread and indiscriminate use of landmines. At the same time, Senegalese military forces fighting the MFDC were also accused of similar human rights violations. Amnesty International claims

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that several mass graves for victims of extrajudicial killings in the 1990s exist in the Casamance province. (Source: [American Federation of Scientists](#))

In recent years, the conflict in Casamance has remained in a suspended state, described as neither “war nor peace.” According to analysts, an illegal trade economy in the conflict zone has provided an incentive for both sides to prolong the conflict. Though one of the principal leaders of a major MFDC faction declared a ceasefire in August 2014, low-level violence has continued. For example, in January 2018, 14 civilians were shot and seven were wounded in a gun assault attributed to the MFDC. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [BBC News](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#))

On August 4, 2022, Senegal signed a peace agreement with the MFDC in Guinea-Bissau. The conditions of the document remain confidential. Despite the peace agreement, on January 16, 2023, Senegalese soldiers and separatist rebels belonging to the MFDC clashed in Casamance, southern Senegal. The clash killed one and injured four others. MFDC attempted to establish a new base near the border of Gambia. (Sources: [Defense Post](#), [Defense Post](#))

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Senegal implemented several new domestic counter-extremism initiatives following attacks in Mali, Cote d’Ivoire, and Burkina Faso in late 2015 and early 2016. For example, Senegal created new terrorism-related offenses and increased penalties for existing offenses in its Penal Code. Senegal also created an Inter-Ministerial Framework for Intervention and Coordination of Counterterrorism Operations (CICO) aimed at improving inter-agency coordination in its domestic terrorism response, and passed new legislation allowing increased collaboration between its intelligence services and judiciary in terrorism cases. In 2019 alone, the Superior Court of Dakar adjudicated and published decisions on three terrorism cases with the assistance of France and Mali. Furthermore, Senegal’s security agencies are reportedly well-equipped to deal with terrorist activity. Senegal’s gendarmerie and national police have specialized counterterrorism units, and security analysts claim that its army is of a “higher quality” than those of its West African neighbors. Nonetheless, Senegalese authorities have recognized that border security is overall weak, and that a more coherent approach to border security needs to be developed with the cooperation of border communities, security officials, and regional neighbors. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [National Interest](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Senegalese President Macky Sall has warned that radical Muslims have “no place” in Senegal, and has appealed to the leaders of Senegal’s Sufi brotherhoods for their support in countering violent extremism and promoting a non-radical Islamic education. In 2015, Sall suggested that he would consider restricting personal freedoms—such as the right to wear burqas—and standardizing the curriculums in Islamic schools nationwide, though neither measure has yet been implemented. (Sources: [Telegraph](#), [New York Times](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

On June 25, 2021, Senegalese lawmakers approved new anti-terror laws that define “terrorist acts” to include, “seriously disturbing public order,” “criminal association,” and “offenses linked to information and communication technologies.” Protests quickly erupted following the passage of the law, as media sources report the new law was reportedly designed to suppress demonstrations against a possible third term for Sall. Legislators who criticized the bill also argued that the new bill does not “fully cover certain issues” such as terror financing which they believe should be strengthened in Senegal. Senegal has faced increased scrutiny regarding their actions towards monitoring terrorism funding and was even placed on a watch list in February 2021 by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for only partially fulfilling international rules for fighting terrorism financing and money laundering. Although Senegal has a National Financial Intelligence Processing Unit and previously adopted legislation criminalizing terrorist financing in 2009, the country lacks legislation criminalizing the provision of support to terrorist organizations or individual terrorists in the absence of a link to a terrorist attack. (Sources: [Barrons](#), [ABC News](#), [U.S. State Department](#), [Human Rights Watch](#))

International Counter-Extremism

Senegal is involved in several international counter-extremism initiatives as a member of the African Union (AU), the U.S.-sponsored Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCI), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the United Nations (UN) and its Security Council (UNSC). Senegal has participated in the Global Counterterrorism Forum’s (GCTF) Border Security Initiative and worked with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to improve its border security. It has also worked with the U.S. military and U.S. law enforcement to strengthen its domestic counterterrorism capabilities. Senegal has served as a host

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country for the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)'s counterterrorism exercises, and for the International Forum on Peace and Security in Africa in 2016. Senegal is a member of the Inter-Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa, a Financial Action Task Force (FATF)-style regional body, and its National Financial Intelligence Processing Unit is a member of the Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units. Senegal is also compliant with the United Nations sanctions regime against ISIS- and al-Qaeda-linked individuals and groups. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#))

On March 3, 2023, the U.N. Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and Senegal's Center for Advanced Studies in Defense and Security, held a conference in Dakar. The conference was launched to discuss the rising levels of violent extremism in Africa and to determine how individual regions could implement better strategies to counter militant violence. Since 2022, terrorism related deaths have increased by almost 50 percent. Of the 19,000 casualties, the majority of the deaths have reportedly occurred in the western Sahel region. According to Giovanie Biha, the head of UNOWAS, "terrorist groups continue to exploit the multifaceted challenges facing the region, notably its environmental, political and socioeconomic weaknesses and inequalities... a regional challenge demands a regional response." (Source: [North Africa Post](#))

The Senegalese military has contributed troops to several international missions. Senegalese troops have participated in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which has sparked concerns that Senegal could be a potential target for AQIM and associated groups that it helps to combat in Mali. In 2016, Senegal also sent over 2,000 troops to join the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthi rebels in Yemen. In January 2017, Senegalese troops invaded The Gambia as part of a U.N.-backed military intervention to force its then-president [Yahya Jammeh](#)—who is sanctioned by the United States for his record of human rights abuses—to cede power after losing Gambian democratic elections. Jammeh fled the country after the initial intervention. Senegal, which had previously disapproved of Jammeh's human rights record, rekindled diplomatic relations with The Gambia, and the two countries signed a joint security agreement in March 2017. Senegal's military has received training from the U.S. Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance Program as well as from the French government. It also assists both France and the United States in their own counterterrorism operations in West Africa, such as France's Operation Barkhane mission, which aims to combat AQIM and associated groups in Africa's Sahel region. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#), [Telegraph](#), [National Interest](#), [BBC News](#), [Guardian](#), [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#))

Senegal continues to receive military support from France, as French bases remain in operation in the country due to terrorist activities on the West African coast. On February 17, 2022, President Emmanuel Macron announced that France and its European, African, and Canadian partners in the Sahel would remove their military operations from Mali and instead extend their support to "neighboring countries in the Gulf of Guinea and west Africa." According to Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo and Senegal's President Macky Sall, West Africa is "vulnerable to the penetration of terrorist outrages... we are therefore re-examining with our friends and partners the manner in which we can respond." Although France will focus its operations on the Gulf of Guinea, France will further invest in government services such as schools and instead of large fixed bases. France will also provide additional mobile support for national armies. (Sources: [Financial Times](#), [BBC News](#))

Operation Mansio

On March 1, 2020, the United Kingdom launched Operation Mansio—a Senegal-based British contribution to counter the growing extremist threat in West Africa. Around 30 U.K. forces, including the Royal Scots Borderers and the Royal Marines, will provide training to Senegalese forces who will eventually be deployed to Mali to better combat the growing number of al-Qaeda and ISIS-affiliated groups in the region. Along with Senegalese soldiers, British soldiers will train Nigerian, Cameroonian, and Moroccan special forces. (Sources: [Daily Mirror](#), [BBC News](#))

Public Opinion

Though Senegal's population is 95 percent Muslim, few Senegalese Muslims subscribe to Islamic extremism. Most subscribe to Sufism—a mystical brand of Islam that promotes tolerance and nonviolence—and belong to Sufi brotherhoods, which provide strong networks of support and promote moderate views. Public opinion surveys also suggest that Senegalese citizens are strong supporters of democratic norms, which scholars suggest also help to curb the spread of extremism. Nonetheless, a 2013 Pew Research Center poll suggested that 75 percent of Senegalese Muslims were concerned about Islamic extremism. However, a year later, that number dropped to 46 percent. (Sources: [National Interest](#), [New York Times](#), [World Politics Review](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [United States Agency for International Development](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [Pew Research Center](#))

Public opinion polls show little support for Islamic extremism and Islamic extremist groups. According to a Pew Research Center poll, in 2014, 61 percent of Senegalese Muslims held unfavorable views of al-Qaeda, while only 10 percent held favorable views of the group. A 2015 Pew Research

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Center poll suggested that a majority—60 percent—of Senegalese citizens held an unfavorable view of ISIS, while only 11 percent held a favorable view of the group. A 2017 Pew Research Center poll suggested that 46 percent of Senegalese citizens viewed ISIS as a “major threat” to Senegal. (Source: [International Centre for Counter-Terrorism](#))

According to media reports, the Movement of Democratic Forces in the Casamance (MFDC) has had little public support from residents in the Casamance region in recent years. One scholarly analysis suggested that 90 percent of Casamance residents would vote “no” in a referendum for the region’s independence. (Source: [Al Jazeera](#))