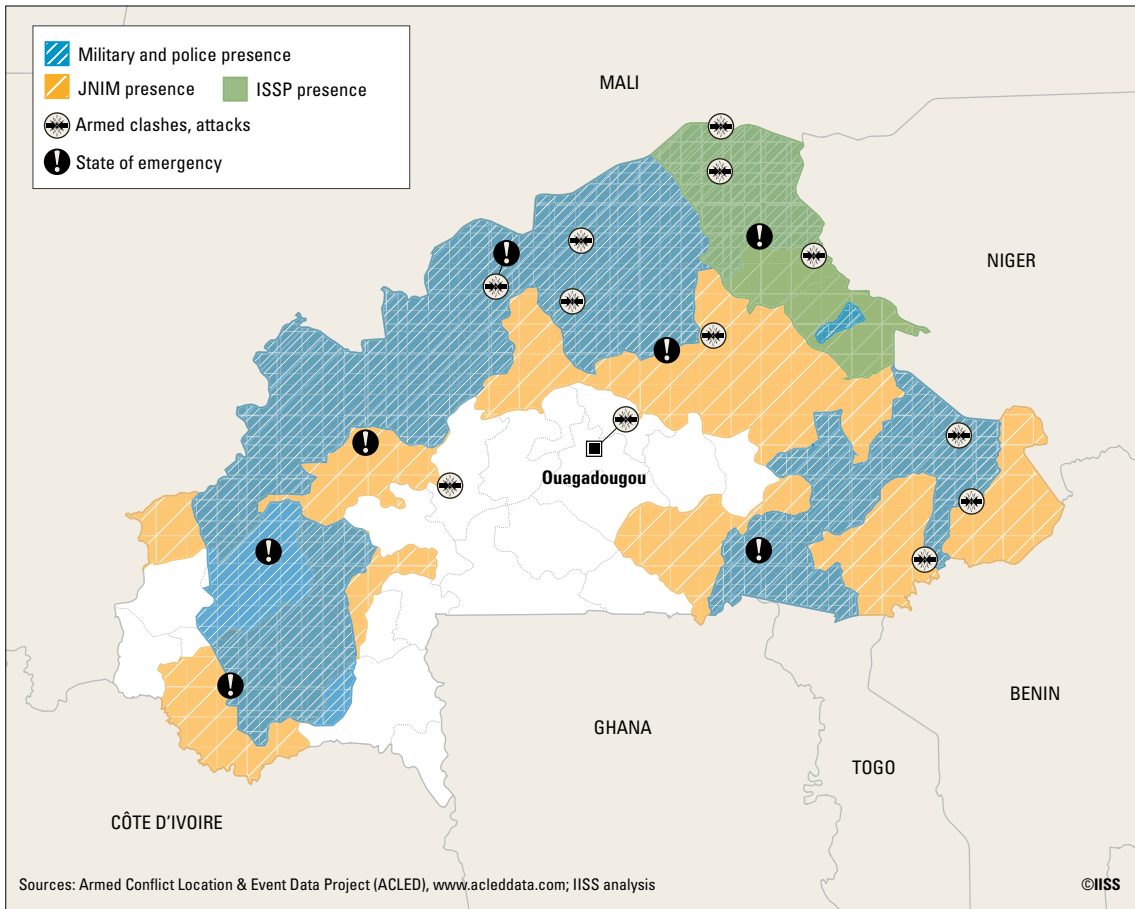


BURKINA FASO

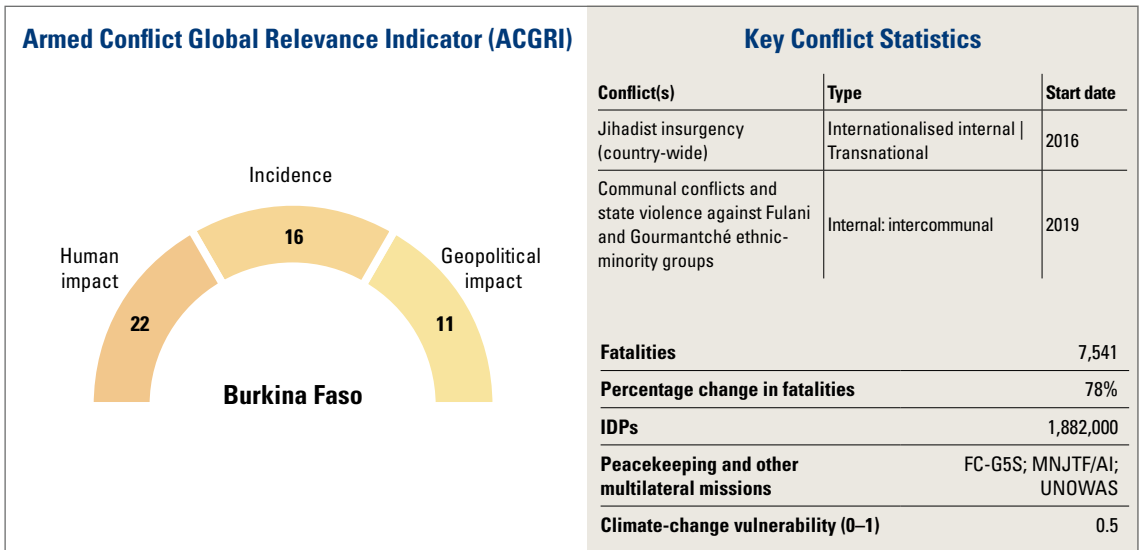


Conflict Overview

Burkina Faso is currently regarded as the epicentre of a regional and transnational conflict that began over ten years ago in Mali and has involved various local and foreign parties. Armed groups pursuing transnational politico-religious agendas have proliferated in recent years, benefitting from the lack of state presence along the border between Mali and Burkina Faso. A deadly January 2016 attack in the heart of Ouagadougou, claimed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), marked the start of Burkina Faso's confrontation with violent extremist organisations (VEOs). A growing sentiment of social injustice, primarily among Fulani herders, then led to an uptick in violence by the Ansarul Islam militant group. From 2019 onwards, the activities of other VEOs

intensified, chiefly in northern and eastern provinces. These organisations included the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and its rival Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP). By 2022, Burkina Faso faced its deadliest year on record, with terror-related deaths totalling 1,135.¹

Conflict drivers in Burkina Faso are multi-faceted and violence is a symptom of much deeper, long-standing issues. Competing power structures keep the country fragmented and various centralised governments have done little to address pervasive fault lines between the government and local communities and between communities themselves. Within such a context, armed groups and criminal networks have proliferated and latched onto socio-political and



ACGRI pillars: IISS calculation based on multiple sources for 2022 and 2023 (scale: 0–100), except for some cases according to data availability. See Notes on Methodology and Data Appendix for all variables and further details on Key Conflict Statistics.

economic grievances. This demonstrates the army's inability to effectively tackle symmetric and asymmetric threats. Moreover, VEOs have exploited feelings of abandonment and dispossession to turn local communities – referred to as *cadets sociaux* (social juniors) – against the central state deemed responsible for their marginalisation. Due to an absence of formal mechanisms to express grievances, the use of violence has become an important tool of political leverage in local communities' relationship with state institutions.

Violence in Burkina Faso can be highly localised, but the transnational dimensions of this conflict make it complex to manage. The pursuit of jihadist groups across national borders means that Burkina Faso is encircled by instability. Conflicting approaches among the actors striving to bring an end to the conflict have resulted in little progress being made, while JNIM and ISSP continue to strengthen their footholds and social cleavages driven by insecurity continue to grow.

Conflict Update

Two successive military coups within nine months, the expansion of VEOs and a growing humanitarian crisis show the destabilising toll of the conflict in Burkina Faso over the reporting period. The state's legitimacy was contested at multiple levels and its governing capacity was stretched to a breaking point as spiralling insecurity took hold.

Initially confined to the borders with Niger and Mali (i.e., the Liptako Gourma tri-border area), the conflict spread during the reporting period. The epicentre may remain in the north-east, but the presence of JNIM has been recorded along the entire border with Mali. The period was marked by the intensification of armed violence, with JNIM killing hundreds of civilians in a series of coordinated attacks. Meanwhile, the influence

of ISSP in Burkina Faso was limited to the northern Sahel province.

An important shift toward a state-led approach to tackling the violence was also observed. Through vast military recruitment campaigns, the junta led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré increased the capacity of the Burkina Faso Armed Forces (FABF), as well as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), a civilian auxiliary group on which it now heavily relies for local vigilante counter-terrorism operations. The annual defence budget was increased by almost 50% from 2022 to 2023.² The junta enforced various security measures in the early months of 2023 to curtail the violence, such as imposing a state of emergency in 22 of Burkina Faso's 45 provinces.³ As of June 2023, the government had signalled its intention to continue

on this trajectory and was looking at ways to further grow the size of the VDP.⁴

Reinforcing this focus on a state-led approach, transitional president Traoré ordered the withdrawal by February 2023 of French troops which had been assisting Burkinabe forces in conflict-ridden areas under *Operation Sabre*, accusing them of doing too little to re-establish security. This withdrawal allowed the Burkinabe authorities to assume greater responsibility for the internal handling of the security crisis. Despite speculation that mercenaries from the Russian Wagner Group may become active in Burkina Faso, as they have been in neighbouring Mali, there is no concrete evidence yet of their involvement in the country. As the manpower of state security forces has increased, so too have accusations of violence perpetrated by them. The most notable tragedy was a massacre in April 2023 in which armed men in uniform, allegedly members of the FABF and VDP, surrounded Karma village and killed more than 150 people.⁵ Heavy-handed military operations, frequent attacks on civilians and high rates of displacement have catalysed Burkina Faso's worst humanitarian crisis in recorded history.

In Burkina Faso, the legacy of state-led marginalisation has an important ethnic component. Because of

their perceived over-representation in VEOs, Fulani and Gourmantché communities have suffered more frequent attacks by the FABF. This has been notable in the Sahel, Centre-Nord, Est and Centre-Est regions, where they have historically been prominent. These attacks have become increasingly indiscriminate and have targeted other ethnic groups as well, most recently Mossi communities, who have long held political power.⁶ This trend is exacerbating communal conflict, intra-state divisions and other local grievances. It also contributes to massive displacements of populations both internally and into neighbouring Mali and Niger.

Finally, the multiplication of areas besieged by armed groups has severely restricted local populations' access to food, medicine, water and other critical goods, and it has hindered humanitarian assistance to isolated communities. For instance, the northern town of Djibo has been under siege by JNIM for over a year, which has further aggravated food insecurity for the 370,000 people living in the area.⁷ Frequent attacks along the roads leading to the town have prevented critical supplies from reaching the population. The unfolding humanitarian disaster only further underlines Burkina Faso's fragility and exposes the limitations of military-led approaches to overcoming the crisis.

Conflict Parties

Burkina Faso Armed Forces (FABF)

Strength: 11,200 active military personnel (air force: 600; army: 6,400; gendarmerie: 4,200), as well as an additional 250 active gendarmerie and paramilitary personnel.

Areas of operation: Active in western, southwestern, northern and eastern Burkina Faso, in particular at border areas with Mali and Niger.

Leadership: Capt. Ibrahim Traoré and Col.-Maj. David Kabre (chief of staff).

Structure: Comprised of the army, the air force, the gendarmerie and paramilitary forces.

History: Reached its current form in 1985 with the inauguration of the air force.

Objectives: Maintain national security and territorial integrity and counter jihadist groups.

Opponents: Ansarul Islam, ISSP and JNIM.

Affiliates/allies: Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), Ghana, Mali, Niger and self-defence groups.

Resources/capabilities: Burkina Faso's defence budget for 2022 was US\$467 million (2.4% of GDP), compared to US\$813m (3.9% of GDP) for 2023. Each new recruit must undergo an initial training of 18 months.⁸

Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP)

Strength: A recruitment campaign launched in October 2022 resulted in 90,000 applications. By December 2022, 50,000 volunteers had been selected.⁹ In May 2023, Prime Minister Apollinaire Kyélem of Tambèla announced the government's intention to double the number of VDP volunteers to 100,000.¹⁰

Areas of operation: Country-wide.

Leadership: Col. Boukaré Zoungrana is the de facto commander of the Brigade of Vigilance and Patriotic Defense (BVDP).

Structure: Comprised of volunteers; 35,000 remain in their residential communities and 15,000 are assigned alongside the FABF across the country.¹¹ The VDP is a constituent of

Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP)

the BVDP, which also includes FABF reserve forces. It is organised under the regiments present in each of the six regions.

History: Roch Kaboré, president between 2015 and 2022, created the VDP on the back of existing self-defence groups such as the Koglweogo and the Dozo. The government presented the VDP as an inclusive force for each 'region, ethnicity, political opinion and religious denomination'.¹² Since the VDP's creation in January 2020, however, the fighters have regularly faced accusations of discriminatory attacks against pastoralist Fulani communities.

Objectives: Support the FABF in fighting armed groups and protecting Burkina Faso's territorial integrity through local security operations.

Opponents: JNIM and ISSP.

Affiliates/allies: FABF.

Resources/capabilities: Light weaponry. Each volunteer is trained over two weeks to learn to handle weapons and integrate the code of conduct. A Patriotic Support Fund was set up in January 2023 to facilitate the mobilisation of resources.

Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM)

Strength: Unknown.

Areas of operation: Northern, eastern and, to a lesser extent, southern Burkina Faso.

Leadership: Iyad Ag Ghaly, a long-time Tuareg militant who is also the leader of Ansar Dine, one of the main groups constituting JNIM.

Structure: Created as an alliance of equals.

History: JNIM was created in 2017 as a coalition between al-Qaeda-affiliated groups such as Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb–Sahel, Katibat Macina and other smaller factions.

Objectives: Establish an Islamic caliphate in the Sahel, replacing existing state structures and expelling foreign forces.

Opponents: FABF, foreign forces, Russian private military contractors and ISSP.

Affiliates/allies: Al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb–North Africa, Katibat Macina and Katibat Serma. Cooperates with Ansarul Islam, though their relationship is ambiguous.

Resources/capabilities: Heavy weaponry and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including vehicle-borne IEDs and suicide-vehicle-borne IEDs.

Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)

Strength: Unknown.

Areas of operation: Sahel, Centre-Nord, Est, Boucle du Mouhoun, Sud-Ouest, Centre-Sud and Cascades.

Leadership: Abdul Bara al-Sahrawi (also known as al-Ansari) and a cadre of local commanders.

Structure: Unknown.

History: ISSP emerged from a split within al-Mourabitoun in 2015 and was originally known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). ISGS pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015, and in 2019 it became part of the Islamic

State West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISIS recognised the group as an independent *wilayat* (province) in March 2022 under the name ISSP.

Objectives: Establish an Islamic caliphate based on strict interpretation of the Koran and adherence to ISIS ideology.

Opponents: JNIM, UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and FABF.

Affiliates/allies: Katibat Salaheddine, ISIS, ISWAP and other smaller militias.

Resources/capabilities: IEDs and light weaponry.

G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S)

Strength: Between 5,000 and 10,000 troops provided by the four remaining member countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger).¹³

Areas of operation: Border regions between Mali and Mauritania, between Niger and Chad and in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area.

Leadership: Eric Yemdaogo Tiare (executive secretary).

Structure: In January 2023, the defence ministers of the four member countries announced the operationalisation of 14 new battalions, including five in Burkina Faso, two in Chad, two in Mauritania and five in Niger.¹⁴ However, as of 30 April 2023, the task force was still in the process of developing a new concept of operations.

History: While the G5 Sahel as an organisation was established in 2014 (comprising members Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), the joint force was created in February 2017 with the support of France and the United Nations to address threats across the Sahel, such as terrorism and transnational organised crime, including the smuggling of goods and human trafficking. Mali withdrew from FC-G5S in May 2022.

Objectives: Strengthen security along the borders of member states through intelligence sharing and the deployment of joint patrols.

Opponents: JNIM and ISSP.

G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S)

Affiliates/allies: Foreign and regional armed forces and MINUSMA.

Resources/capabilities: Suffers from underfunding and unpredictable financing. Troop deployment is slow due to a lack of logistical capacity and equipment.

Notes

- ¹ Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism', March 2023, p. 22.
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- ³ AFP, 'Jihadist-hit Burkina Extends State of Emergency by 6 Months', *Barron's*, 13 May 2023.
- ⁴ Rédaction Africanews, 'Burkina PM Vows No Deal with Jihadists, Hints at Election Delay', *Africa News*, 31 May 2023.
- ⁵ Ravina Shamdasani, 'Burkina Faso: Killing of Civilians', UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 25 April 2023.
- ⁶ Agnès Faivre, 'Au moins 150 civils massacrés dans le nord du Burkina Faso' [At Least 150 Civilians Massacred in Northern Burkina Faso], *Libération*, 23 April 2023.
- ⁷ 'Forced to Eat Leaves: Hungry and Besieged in Burkina Faso', *Al-Jazeera*, 12 December 2022.
- ⁸ 'Pourquoi des activistes sont-ils enrôlés de force comme auxiliaires de l'armée au Burkina Faso?' [Why Are Activists Forcibly Recruited as Army Auxiliaries in Burkina Faso?], *BBC News*, 30 March 2023.
- ⁹ 'L'armée au Burkina mise sur les civils contre le terrorisme' [The Army in Burkina Counts on Civilians to Fight Terrorism], *DW*, 30 December 2022.
- ¹⁰ Rédaction Africanews, 'Burkina PM Vows No Deal with Jihadists, Hints at Election Delay'.
- ¹¹ 'L'armée au Burkina mise sur les civils contre le terrorisme' [The Army in Burkina Counts on Civilians to Fight Terrorism].
- ¹² Anna Schmauder and Annabelle Willeme, 'The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland', *Clingendael Institute*, 9 March 2021.
- ¹³ UN Security Council, 'Peace and Security in Africa', S/2022/838, 16 November 2022.
- ¹⁴ A. Y. Barma, 'G5 Sahel: l'Etat-major de la Force conjointe ramené à Niamey, 14 bataillons bientôt opérationnels (Ministres de la Défense)' [G5 Sahel: Joint Force Headquarters Brought Back to Niamey, 14 Battalions Soon to Be Operational (Ministers of Defence)], *ActuNiger*, 12 January 2023.

