

Burkina Faso: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

On February 17, 2020, a group of unidentified “armed terrorists” ambushed a Protestant church in Pansi, northern Burkina Faso. The attack killed 24 and wounded 18 others. Terrorist attacks in the Sahel have increased fivefold since 2016, with casualties numbering almost 4,000. Burkina Faso is at the frontlines of the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel, where attacks are rampant in the north of the country and frequently target the Christian community. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [1], [Washington Post](#) [2])

According to the United Nations, the worsening security situation in Burkina Faso has made the country one of the “fastest-growing humanitarian crises in Africa” in 2019. In January 2019, violence in Burkina Faso had forced 80,000 people from their homes. By October, the number of displaced people had increased to nearly half a million, in a country of 20 million. In November, a spokeswoman for the World Food Programme, speaking about the worsening situation in Burkina Faso said, “We don’t want another Syria” and warned that Burkinabe youth could be recruited to joined armed groups. (Sources: [UNOCHA](#) [3], [New York Times](#) [4], [Guardian](#) [5])

In May 2019, militants launched several attacks against Christian targets in northern Burkina Faso, threatening to spark sectarian strife between the Muslim and Christian populations. The Burkinabe government has blamed the surge in violence on armed groups that operate in the country and the surrounding Sahel region. On May 12, gunmen encircled and opened fire on attendees departing Sunday mass at a Roman Catholic church in Dablo, killing a priest and five of his congregants. The attackers proceeded to burn a church, loot stores, and destroy all places serving alcohol in the town. On May 15, assailants with guns stopped a group of worshipers in a Catholic procession in the remote village of Zimtenga, killing four people and burning their religious statue. On May 26, heavily armed men killed four people during Sunday prayers at a Catholic church in the town of Toulfe. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [6], [CNN](#) [7], [Al Jazeera](#) [8])

Overview

Before the January 2016 attack on the Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino Café in Ouagadougou, which killed 30 people, Burkina Faso had been largely free of extremist and terrorist incidents. This history was all the more remarkable considering the country’s proximity to terrorist groups operating in neighboring [Mali](#) [9], where the government has long struggled to combat terrorist groups like AQIM, al-Mourabitoun, Ansar al-Dine, and others. (Source: [BBC News](#) [10], [U.S. State Department](#) [11])

Beginning in 2015, however, Burkina Faso began to suffer intermittent cross-border raids targeting Burkinabe police and military outposts near the country’s northern border with Mali. When Roch Marc Christian Kaboré replaced Burkina Faso’s longstanding president Blaise Compaoré in December 2015, Kaboré announced that counterterrorism would be among his government’s top priorities. (Sources: [LeFaso.net](#) [12], [Associated Press](#) [13], [Reuters](#) [14], [Burkina24](#) [15])

The attack in Ouagadougou two weeks after Kaboré’s inauguration revealed the country’s susceptibility to terrorism. Since the January 2016 attack, Burkina Faso has reported several terrorist incidents, including the kidnapping of foreigners by al-Qaeda’s Sahel-based group AQIM, and two attacks by an ISIS-inspired breakaway group. Facing discontent and calls to resign in October 2016, Kaboré claimed that the terrorism situation in Burkina Faso is “under control.” To secure his country’s borders, Kaboré has announced his efforts to recall Burkinabe soldiers deployed in U.N. missions in Sudan and Mali, among other efforts. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [16], [LeFaso.net](#) [12], [Associated Press](#) [13], [Reuters](#) [14], [Burkina24](#) [15], [Reuters](#) [17])

For the first time since independence from French colonial rule, Burkinabe state authorities have lost control of parts of the country, according to a January 2019 International Crisis Group report. Throughout 2018, jihadist violence spread from the Soum province—the epicenter of the Ansar-ul-Islam lil-Ichad wal Jihad insurgency—into other provinces in the north. Eastern Burkina Faso also suffered from violent extremist attacks, which were targeted at military personnel and civilians. In 2018, Islamist militants carried out 136 attacks in the country, about four times more than the previous year. As of October 2019, 486,000 have been forced from their homes in Burkina Faso—more than six times as many people who were displaced in January. According to the United Nations Office on the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Burkina Faso has become home to “one of the fastest-growing humanitarian crises in Africa” in 2019. Approximately 1.5 million people require humanitarian assistance in the country, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency. (Sources: [International Crisis Group](#) [18], [Associated Press](#) [19], [UNOCHA](#) [3], [UNHCR](#) [20])

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Burkina Faso plays a key role in counterterrorism efforts in West Africa. Under President Compaoré, Burkina Faso was known to have opened lines of communication with al-Qaeda to negotiate the release of several Westerners, a policy that—due to the quick release of an Australian hostage taken by Islamist militants in January 2016—is suspected to have continued under President Kaboré. As part of the effort to combat the threat from terrorism, Burkina Faso has served as a member of the G5 Sahel group and the U.S.-backed Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership. Burkina Faso has also worked closely with African actors to develop international cooperation on counterterrorism-related efforts. The government has served as a key partner in Western counterterrorism operations in the region, hosting both U.S. and French Special Forces in the country. (Sources: [ABC News](#) [21], [Telegraph](#) [22], [Al Jazeera](#) [23], [Guardian](#) [24], [U.S. State Department](#) [11])

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

For nearly three decades of military rule under President Blaise Compaoré, Burkina Faso had been free from armed conflict and documented instances of Islamist terrorism. Since the 2012 uprising in neighboring Mali, however, the country has become wary of its vulnerability to infiltration by terrorist actors from the region. (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [25])

This danger was borne out in 2015, when the country experienced a series of cross-border raids. [Al-Qaeda](#) [26]-affiliated militants are suspected to be behind several small-scale attacks on Burkinabe police posts in the north, near the border with Mali, resulting in the deaths of at least three Burkinabe soldiers. In January 2016, the country witnessed its first major terrorist incident in recent memory, as al-Qaeda-affiliated militants attacked a hotel in Burkina Faso's capital, killing 30 people, and wounding more than 70 others. (Sources: [Institute for Security Studies](#) [27], [Associated Press](#) [28], [UNODC](#) [29])

Recruitment and Radicalization

Despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, Burkina Faso has been frequently heralded as a relatively secure and moderate country in a notoriously volatile region. For that reason, the extremist threat to Burkina Faso is believed to come primarily from neighboring countries. (Sources: [Institute for Security Studies](#) [27], [Associated Press](#) [28], [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [30])

While the threat of homegrown radicalization is believed to be small, there have been documented incidents of terrorist recruitment within Burkina Faso. Augustin Loada and Peter Romaniuk, writing for Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2014, have done extensive research into the threat of radicalization from within Burkina Faso and concluded that although there are cases of recruitment within Burkina Faso, there is "no firm evidence of [systematic] radicalization within the country." Loada and Romaniuk have heard of extremist foreign preachers sometimes visiting Burkina Faso. Nonetheless, the researchers concluded in 2014 that the threat of homegrown radicalization from within Burkina Faso was small. (Sources: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [30], [Newsweek](#) [31])

Since then, however, the country has experienced numerous terrorist incidents, making a number of arrests and reportedly thwarting a terrorist cell in the Ouagadougou neighborhoods of Yagma and Kilwin. Of the extremist groups operating in the region, some have managed to remain active within Burkina Faso. In a June 2017 interview, Lomoussa Robgo, coordinator of Equal Access, a counter-extremism NGO, said extremism "is taking hold" in Burkina Faso. "This was foreseeable in the sense that religious extremism began to increase in recent years among certain Muslims, notably with the creation of a mosque with help from associations in Qatar and also with the return of people who studied the Koran in Mali with extremist preachers," Robgo said. In November 2019, following a months-long surge in deadly attacks that caused tens of thousands to flee their homes, World Food Programme (WFP) spokeswoman Marwa Awad warned about the potential for recruitment in the country. Speaking to the press, Awad said, "...people here have told us they are seeing the exploitation of inequality, with young people joining armed groups." (Source: [Associated Press](#) [32], [Guardian](#) [5])

Jihadists have also targeted members of the Fulani ethnic group, a nomadic Muslim people in the Sahel, for recruitment. The Fulani have historically been a minority within Burkina Faso, a fact that Salafists and al-Qaeda-linked groups have exploited. For example, Ansar-ul-Islam lil-Ichad wal Jihad has stoked ethnic tensions by directing violence at non-Fulani businesses to try and cause non-Fulani people to leave the area. In response, some military police and ethnic militias have

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raided and attacked Fulani villages because of their apparent association with the Islamist extremist group. (Sources: [Critical Threats](#) [33], [Reuters](#) [34], [Economist](#) [35])

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

[Al-Qaeda](#) [36]’s North African branch, [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\)](#) [37], operates out of neighboring Mali and has carried out attacks throughout the Sahel, including in Algeria, Niger, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Côte d’Ivoire. While AQIM is just one of many jihadist groups operating in Mali, analysts consider other groups to be extensions of the larger al-Qaeda brand. (Source: [Associated Press](#) [38])

AQIM and its affiliated group [al-Mourabitoun](#) [39] claimed responsibility for the January 2016 attack on a hotel in Ouagadougou, an attack that left 30 people dead and 71 more wounded in the deadliest terrorist attack in the country’s modern history. The two extremist groups—formerly competitors—had reconciled and regrouped in December 2015, with the al-Mourabitoun cell operating under the broader AQIM banner. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [40], [CNN](#) [41], [Al Jazeera](#) [42])

Although AQIM and other affiliated terrorist groups were not known to recruit in Burkina Faso before 2015, Burkinabe police in 2016 claimed to have uncovered and dismantled a terrorist cell in the Yagma and Kilwin neighborhoods of Ouagadougou. According to the government, the police had received tips that there was a cell looking to recruit Burkinabes there to join and train with terrorist groups abroad and return home to carry out attacks. Their specific terrorist affiliation was not disclosed, and the incident remains under investigation. However, due to AQIM’s ties to various local terrorist outlets in the region, it is suspected that the cell was in some way linked to the broader AQIM movement. (Sources: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [30], [LeFaso.net](#) [43])

In March 2017, AQIM announced it was merging with local Salafist groups al-Mourabitoun and Ansar al-Dine (AAD) to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), or Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims. JNIM also absorbed the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), an AAD-affiliated Islamist group. Though it is operating under a new name and with a new emir, JNIM appears to remain under the command of AQIM and al-Qaeda central. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [44], [Long War Journal](#) [45], [Center for Strategic & International Studies](#) [46])

Though it is mostly active in Mali, JNIM has conducted operations in Niger and Burkina Faso. Ghali named France as the JNIM’s primary enemy, stating that the former colonial power in the Sahel has historically been the number one enemy of Muslims in the region. The group has claimed several attacks on French regional interests in 2018. On March 3, 2018, JNIM launched coordinated attacks in Ouagadougou, striking France’s embassy and the Burkinabe military headquarters. The attack left 16 dead, including nine attackers, and another 85 people injured. The U.S. Department of State designated JNIM as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on September 5, 2018. (Source: [Center for Strategic & International Studies](#) [46], [International Crisis Group](#) [47], [U.S. Department of State](#) [48])

Al-Mourabitoun

[Al-Mourabitoun](#) [49] (“The Sentinels”) is a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization operating primarily in Mali, Algeria, southwestern Libya, and Niger. There was little documented activity by al-Mourabitoun within Burkina Faso until 2015. However, the group claimed responsibility for the January 2016 hotel attack in Ouagadougou, believed the deadliest terrorist attack in the country’s modern history. (Sources: [CNN](#) [41], [U.S. Department of State](#) [50])

Ansar al-Dine

Ansar al-Dine (“Movement of Defenders of the Faith,” or AAD) was founded in November 2011 by Malian Tuareg fighter Iyad Ag Ghali, cousin of AQIM senior leader Hamada Ag Hama. A largely homegrown movement comprised of Tuareg and northern Malian Berber Arabs, AAD works closely with AQIM in their joint goal of implementing sharia. Many of its members are Tuaregs who previously fought alongside deceased Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi and returned to Mali after his overthrow. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [51], [Agence France-Presse](#) [52], [Smithsonian Institution](#) [53])

AAD does not have a longstanding history of terrorist activity in Burkina Faso, but the group stepped up terrorist activity in 2016. On January 15, 2016—the same day as the deadly AQIM attack in Ouagadougou—AAD kidnapped an elderly

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Australian couple from the northern Burkinabe town of Djibo. The group released one of the hostages the following month, but has not disclosed the location of the other. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [23], [Guardian](#) [24])

Ansar-ul-Islam lil-Ichad wal Jihad

Ansar-ul-Islam lil-Ichad wal Jihad (IRSAD) is an al-Qaeda-linked group suspected behind a wave of terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso in late 2016. Led by radical Burkinabe preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko, the group reportedly seeks to reestablish the Peulh kingdom—also known as Djeelgodji—which had been toppled through French colonization in the late 1800s. According to security analysts Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, IRSAD is the first native jihadi group founded in Burkina Faso. (Sources: [International Business Times](#) [54], [International Business Times](#) [55], [CTC Sentinel](#) [56])

The newly-formed group claimed responsibility for an attack on December 12, 2016, targeting a Burkinabe military post near the northern border with Mali and leaving 12 soldiers dead. On New Year's Eve, simultaneous assassination attempts by unidentified militants left one former IRSAD member dead and another critically wounded, in attacks that were believed to have been carried out by IRSAD. On March 5, 2017, suspected IRSAD assailants targeted a Malian army post near the border with Burkina Faso, killing 11 Malian soldiers. (Sources: [International Business Times](#) [54], [International Business Times](#) [55], [Africa News](#) [57])

IRSAD was responsible for at least 78 attacks in northern Burkina Faso since December 2016. The group's primary targets appear to be civilians and civilian infrastructure, but it has also routinely targeted the Burkinabe security apparatus. (Source: [CTC Sentinel](#) [56])

Lassane Yameogo, a former researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute, says IRSAD has managed to recruit and train radicalized young men. "The main problem is the absence of Malian authorities on their side of the border. If the security forces of the countries involved cooperated, terrorists could not run over borders into hiding after attacks," Yameogo says. (Source: [Nordic Africa Institute](#) [58])

On February 20, 2018, the U.S. Department of State designated the group as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. (Sources: [CTC Sentinel](#) [56], [U.S. Department of State](#) [59])

Boko Haram

[Boko Haram](#) [60] is a Nigerian-based terrorist group that is believed to have had some activity within Burkina Faso. According to the 2014 report by researchers Augustin Loada and Peter Romaniuk, there is evidence of fundraising and weapons smuggling within Burkina Faso. (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [30])

There is also unconfirmed evidence that Boko Haram has already carried out an attack in Burkina Faso. On August 23, 2015, unidentified gunmen targeted a police post in northern Burkina Faso, near the country's border with Mali. Two soldiers were wounded in the attack, one of whom was seriously injured. A witness at the scene claimed that the assailants announced their affiliation with Boko Haram. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [61], [aOuaga.com](#) [62])

In March of 2015, Boko Haram became an affiliate of ISIS. A year later in August 2016, infighting led to a split within Boko Haram, which created two splinter groups—Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), which is led by Mamman Nur and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunnah lil-Dawa wal-Jihad (JAS), which is led by Abubakar Shekau. (Sources: [Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation](#) [63], [International Crisis Group](#) [64])

Islamic State in Greater Sahara

In addition to suffering attacks by AQIM and its affiliates, Burkina Faso has also begun to suffer attacks by the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), a breakaway faction of the AQIM-linked al-Mourabitoun group. The ISGS faction is led by al-Mourabitoun defector [Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi](#) [65], a former spokesperson for al-Mourabitoun who pledged allegiance to [ISIS](#) [66] leader [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) [67] in May 2015. (Sources: [Long War Journal](#) [68], [Long War Journal](#) [69])

Since announcing his allegiance to Baghdadi, Sahrawi has maintained control over what is believed to be a small section of

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al-Mourabitoun. His group has claimed responsibility for two attacks in Burkina Faso, both in the country's north near the borders with Mali and Niger: the first in September 2016, targeting a customs post; and the second in October 2016, targeting an army post. The attacks by Sahrawi's group have collectively resulted in the deaths of three Burkinabe soldiers and one customs official, as well as the injury of several others, including civilians. (Source: [Long War Journal](#) [68])

Macina Liberation Front

Macina Liberation Front (MLF) is a militant jihadist organization based in Mali that emerged in early 2015. President of analysis group Afrique Consulting Bat-el Ohayon has claimed that the MLF attracted foreign fighters from Burkina Faso. Ohayon further emphasized and that the threat posed by these foreign fighters is underestimated. (Source: [Newsweek](#) [31])

The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa

The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) is a militant jihadist group that splintered from AQIM. There is some evidence that MUJAO has recruited within Burkina Faso, and there are claims that the group has offered 300,000 West African CFA francs to recruits in exchange for a commitment to fight alongside the terrorist group. MUJAO has named the country's capital, Ouagadougou, as a target for a suicide bombing attack on at least one occasion. (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [30])

Foreign Fighters

The United Nations published its assessment of foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria. In these reports, there is no mention of Burkinabe fighters with ISIS, nor any proof of Burkinabe forces working with other jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria. There are, however, reports of Burkinabe foreign fighters in Mali. There are also reports of terrorist recruiting cells within Burkina Faso that have worked to lure Burkinabes to train in neighboring countries and return to carry out attacks. (Sources: [United Nations](#) [70], [LeFaso.net](#) [43], [LeFaso.net](#) [71])

Within the Sahel region, researchers Augustin Loada and Peter Romaniuk writing in June 2014 gathered "a little evidence attesting to Burkinabe involvement in regional extremist conflicts," but could not deduce estimates for the number of Burkinabes who are believed to have been involved in local conflicts. (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [30])

Loada and Romaniuk did find a few examples of Burkinabes arrested by French forces in Mali, although it was not known with which groups they were associated. They also reported a small group of young Burkinabes who were intercepted in Mali's capital while seeking to travel to the country's north, allegedly to receive religious education. At the time, the part of Mali where the young Burkinabes were reportedly traveling to was overrun by jihadist organizations. (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [30])

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Burkina Faso had not experienced a major terrorist incident on its soil until 2015. The country has, however, been embroiled in domestic conflict over the transition from decades-long military rule to democracy. The uptick in border post raids and kidnappings beginning in 2015, as well as the January 2016 attack in Ouagadougou appears to have ushered in a new wave of concern over the country's vulnerability to terrorist infiltrators. (Sources: [Institute for Security Studies](#) [27], [U.S. Department of State](#) [11])

2016 Ouagadougou Attack

On January 15, 2016, three AQIM-affiliated assailants stormed the popular Splendid Hotel and nearby Cappuccino Café in Ouagadougou, opening fire on patrons, killing 30 people and wounding 71 others. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [72], [Telegraph](#) [73], [Reuters](#) [74])

The attacks began at approximately 8:30 p.m. GMT, when three gunmen wearing Turbans fired into the air shouting

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“Allahu Akbar” before turning their AK-47 assault rifles on pedestrians, diners, and guests at the nearby Splendid Hotel. According to witness reports, the assailants targeted Westerners and white patrons in particular, with some witnesses pretending to be dead for nearly an hour in an attempt to avoid execution. As one witness said, “They shook people by the foot to see if they were alive or not and if they were alive, they shot them.” (Sources: [Reuters](#) [72], [Telegraph](#) [73])

After walking among the patrons and picking off targets, the assailants set the café—and at some point the lobby of the Splendid Hotel—on fire, shooting at patrons who attempted to flee the smoke. As one witness from Cappuccino Café told *France 24*, “They were shooting people at point-blank range. When they left they set fire to the place and the smoke started to suffocate me and the other survivors.” (Sources: [Reuters](#) [74], [New York Times](#) [75])

The assailants moved between the café and the Splendid Hotel, both of which were popular tourist hubs. As one witness told *Reuters*, “They kept coming back and forth into [the café]. You’d think it was over, then they’d come back and shoot more people. They would come back and see if the white people were moving and then they would shoot them again.” (Source: [Reuters](#) [74])

By 10:00 p.m. GMT, dozens of Burkinabe officers were prepared to start a counter-attack alongside French Special Forces. Together, the forces first stormed the Splendid Hotel. After extinguishing fire on the first floor, troops went door-to-door, freeing hostages and searching for the militants, who had managed to escape. After hours of clearing the hotel, the forces then went to Cappuccino Café, which had been scorched to the ground. The forces ultimately found and neutralized the three assailants at the nearby Bush Taxi restaurant, after discovering bullet casings in the nearby Yibi Hotel. Although there was confusion as to the number and gender of the assailants in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the Burkinabe government confirmed that there were a total of three male assailants. Al-Qaeda released what it said were the names of the assailants soon after, naming them as Battar al-Ansari, Abu Muhammad al-Buqali al-Ansari, and Ahmed al-Fulani al-Ansari. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [72], [Reuters](#) [76])

- **January 5, 2020:**A school bus strikes an improvised explosive device in Sourou province, northern Burkina Faso. The attack kills at least 14 and injures another 19. It is suspected that ISIS or al-Qaeda linked groups are behind the attack. Source: [Al Jazeera](#) [77]
- **January 2, 2020:**Assailants attack a gendarmerie in Djibo, Soum province. At least ten people are killed in the attack. No group claims responsibility for the attack. Source: [Xinhua](#) [78]
- **December 25, 2019:**Suspected jihadists ambush an army patrol near Hallale, northern Burkina Faso. The attack kills at least a dozen soldiers. No group claims responsibility of the attack. Source: [Deutsche Welle](#) [79]
- **December 24, 2019:**An ISWAP militant drives into a military base in northern Soum province. He then detonates a bomb within the premises. The attack kills seven and injures an unconfirmed number of others. Also on the 24th, a suspected group of over 200 militants attack the city of Arbinda. The hours long raid kills more than 35 before the assailants are repelled by armed forces and the air force. Source: [France 24](#) [80]
- **December 3, 2019:**Unidentified gunmen attack military positions in Toeni, Sourou province, and Bahn, Loroum province. The attack kills three and wounds seven others. Source: [Associated Press](#) [81]
- **December 1, 2019:**Unidentified armed men attack a church in Hantoukoura, eastern Burkina Faso. The attack kills 14 and wounds an unidentified number of others. It is suspected that an Islamist group launched the attack on the Christian church. Source: [France 24](#) [82]
- **November 29, 2019:**Burkina Faso’s armed forces carry out a raid in Nahouri province to dismantle the extremist group Ansarul Islam’s presence in the area. The operation kills Ansarul Islam’s leader, Abdoul Hadi, as well as five of his supporters. Source: [Associated Press](#) [83]
- **November 20, 2019:**Extremists attack a security base in Arbinda. The attack kills one and injures seven others. No group confirms responsibility for the attack. Source: [Associated Press](#) [84]
- **November 15, 2019:**Unidentified armed men attack a military patrol in Yorsala. It is unconfirmed if any soldiers were killed, but at least 24 extremists were killed in the clash. Source: [Associated Press](#) [85]
- **November 6, 2019:**Gunmen ambush a five-bus convoy carrying employees of Canadian mining company Semafo, leaving 37 people dead and 60 others wounded. The convoy, escorted by Burkina’s Faso military, are attacked while traveling to Bongou, an open-pit gold mine located in the country’s east. Burkina Faso’s ruling party, People’s Movement for Progress, calls for a state of emergency to be declared. Sources: [New York Times](#) [86], [Financial Times](#) [87], [Globe and Mail](#) [88], [International Crisis Group](#) [89]
- **October 28, 2019:**Suspected jihadists storm the commune of Pobe-Mengao, located approximately 160 miles north of the country’s capital. The insurgents threaten to kidnap children and command villagers to aid them in purchasing weapons. Those who

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- refuse are shot, leaving 16 people dead. Source: [Reuters](#) [90]
- **October 23, 2019:** Gunmen ambush soldiers near the village of Guiendbila, killing five and wounding four others. Another soldier is killed in a separate ambush in Sidogo. Source: [Defense Post](#) [91]
 - **October 20, 2019:** Armed attackers storm the village of Zoura and open fire, killing nine people. Before leaving the area, the assailants loot a store and steal cattle. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [92]
 - **October 19, 2019:** Terrorists launch nearly simultaneous attacks on military units in Bahn in Loroum province and Yense in Yatenga province. The attacks leave five soldiers and one police officer dead. Source: [France 24](#) [93]
 - **October 11, 2019:** Suspected extremists launch an attack on the grand mosque in the northern village of Salmossi. The attack takes place during Friday evening prayers, killing at least 16 worshipers. Source: [Associated Press](#) [94]
 - **October 4, 2019:** Unidentified assailants attack a gold mining site at Dolmane in Soum province, leaving 20 people dead. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [95], [Agence France-Presse](#) [96]
 - **September 29, 2019:** 20 men on motorcycles plunder the village of Komsilga in Bam province, leaving shops burned and nine people dead. Later that day in the same province, attackers kill seven people in the village of Deneon. A soldier is killed in a third attack on an army unit. Source: [Guardian](#) [96]
 - **September 8, 2019:** Two separate attacks target a food convoy and transport truck, killing at least 29 people in the northern province of Sanmatenga. According to a government statement, terrorists deliberately target the food convoy carrying provisions for civilians displaced by fighting. The truck is hit by an improvised explosive device. Source: [Deutsche Welle](#) [97]
 - **September 5, 2019:** Gunmen ambush armed forces patrolling in Soum province. One soldier and five assailants are killed. Source: [Xinhua](#) [98]
 - **August 30, 2019:** JNIM fighters ambush an army patrol near Tongomayel, injuring one soldier. JNIM claims responsibility for the attack and states that the group captured vehicles, weapons, and ammunition, and exploded barracks. Source: [Defense Post](#) [99]
 - **August 19, 2019:** Heavily armed assailants launch an attack on a Burkinabe military base in Koutougou, near the border with Mali, killing at least 24 soldiers and wounding several others. An army statement calls it the deadliest attack against the country's armed forces, carried out by "several dozen terrorists," but does not identify the attackers' identities or affiliation. On September 19, ISIS releases an issue of its online magazine al-Naba, claiming that fighters from its West Africa Province is responsible for the attack. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [100], [France 24](#) [101], [Defense Post](#) [102]
 - **July 25, 2019 - July 26, 2019:** Alleged jihadists on motorbikes launch an overnight raid on the village of Diblou in Burkina Faso's north. The assailants ransack and burn the village's market and leave 15 people dead. Source: [Voice of America](#) [103]
 - **June 18, 2019 - June 19, 2019:** Militants launch a nighttime attack on the village of Belhede in the Tongomayel department of Soum province, killing 17 people, according to the defense minister. Source: [Defense Post](#) [104]
 - **June 10, 2019:** Suspected jihadists attack Arbinda, a village in the country's north, killing 19 people. Arbinda has been subject to increasing jihadist attacks and ethnic clashes since April 2019. Sources: [France 24](#) [105], [International Crisis Group](#) [106]
 - **May 26, 2019:** Gunmen attack worshipers during Sunday prayers at a Catholic church in Toulfe, in the country's north. The heavily armed men kill four people and cause panic, forcing many residents to hide in their homes or seek cover in the wilderness. Source: [Al Jazeera](#) [8]
 - **May 15, 2019:** Armed men stop a group of churchgoers during a Catholic procession in Zimtenga, a remote village in the Kongoussi area of northwest Burkina Faso. The attackers free the children, but execute four adults and proceed to burn a statue of the Virgin Mary. Source: [CNN](#) [7]
 - **May 12, 2019:** Jihadists encircle and open fire on congregants as they depart Sunday mass at a Roman Catholic church in a northern town called Dablo. The attack kills a priest and five other people. The gunmen reportedly burn the church, loot businesses, and destroy places serving alcohol before fleeing. Source: [Reuters](#) [6]
 - **April 28, 2019:** Six people, including a pastor, are killed in a Sunday attack on a Christian church. Days earlier on Friday, gunmen shoot and kill five teachers in the country's east. There are no immediate claims of responsibility for either attack. Source: [Associated Press](#) [107]
 - **April 1, 2019:** Sixty civilians die in an exchange of hostilities between ethnic communities in northern Burkina Faso. The recent spike in ethnic clashes is caused by Islamist extremists who aim to expand their influence in the region. Source: [Reuters](#) [108]
 - **February 5, 2019:** Jihadists attack the town of Kain in the Yatenta province, killing 14 civilians. The attack occurs the day before a G5 Sahel summit in Ouagadougou. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [109]
 - **January 28, 2019:** Ten terrorists open fire on a group of villagers in Sikire in northern Burkina Faso. The attackers ransack the village, setting fire to businesses, and leave 10 people dead. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#)

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- **January 15, 2019:** Suspected jihadists kidnap a Canadian national named Kirk Woodman during a raid on a mining site in Tiabongou. Woodman, who worked for Profess Mineral Mining Company, is found dead and riddled with bullets two days later. Source: [Associated Press](#) [111]
- **January 11, 2019:** Gunmen attack a village market in broad daylight, killing 12 civilians and wounding one other. The attackers also reportedly ransack shops and set fire to a barn, a cart, and six stalls. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [112]
- **January 1, 2019:** Suspected jihadists attack the central-northern village of Yirgou, killing the village chief and five others from the Mossi ethnic group. The incident spurs an ethnically motivated revenge attack, during which Mossi villagers lynch herders from a nearby camp of the nomadic Fulani group and burn down their homes. In total, the attacks result in 13 deaths. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [113]
- **December 4, 2018:** Unidentified militants ambush a Burkinabe security patrol convoy in eastern Burkina Faso, opening fire and damaging the lead vehicle. Officers fire back, killing six of the attackers. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [114]
- **September 26, 2018:** An improvised explosive device, planted at the foot of a bridge, explodes and kills eight soldiers in the lead vehicle of a Burkinabe military convoy traveling in northern Burkina Faso. There were no immediate claims of responsibility. Source: [France 24](#) [115]
- **September 15, 2018:** Assailants in Burkina Faso's east launch two attacks that kill at least nine civilians. Six people, including an imam, are killed during one attack on a mosque. The attackers also shoot three members of the same family in the second attack. Source: [Associated Press](#) [19]
- **September 5, 2018:** Burkinabe soldiers attempt to diffuse mines laid by jihadists in eastern Burkina Faso and are themselves hit by an IED. Two soldiers are killed and six are injured. Source: [France 24](#) [116]
- **August 28, 2018:** A roadside bomb strikes a Burkinabe security vehicle en route to support the police in the country's east, where earlier there had been a jihadist attack. The mine explosion instantly kills seven persons and wounds six others. Sources: [Defense Post](#) [117], [Associated Press](#) [118]
- **August 27, 2018:** Militants launch a two-hour-long attack on a gendarmerie in the eastern city of Pama. No one is killed, but the assailants burn buildings of the police headquarters before fleeing the scene. Source: [Defense Post](#) [117]
- **August 13, 2018:** Jihadist militants target a Burkina security forces convoy, exploding the lead vehicle with a mine and attacking the rest of the convoy with gunfire, killing five police officers and one civilian. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [119]
- **March 2, 2018:** Islamic jihadists launch coordinated attacks in Ouagadougou against the French embassy and the national army headquarters. Militants in a pick-up truck open fire near the prime minister's office and attempt to enter the French embassy. At approximately the same time, assailants detonate an explosives-laden vehicle and engage in a gunfight at the Burkinabe military headquarters. According to the International Crisis Group, 16 people were killed, including nine assailants, and an estimated 85 were wounded. Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)—formed through a merger of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Dine, and al-Mourabitoun—claimed responsibility for the attack. Sources: [Guardian](#) [120], [CNN](#) [121], [International Crisis Group](#) [47]
- **August 13, 2017:** Two suspected jihadist gunmen on motorcycles storm a café popular with expats in Ouagadougou, killing 15 people and wounding 22 others. Sources: [BBC News](#) [122], [CNN](#) [123]
- **March 5, 2017:** Assailants target a Malian army post near the border with Burkina Faso, killing 11 soldiers. The attack is attributed to IRSAD, led by extremist Burkinabe preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko. Sources: [International Business Times](#) [124], [International Business Times](#) [55]
- **March 3, 2017:** Militants on motorbikes kill two persons, one a school headmaster, Kourfayl, a village in northern Burkina Faso, and then go to other villages demanding schools either close or teach the Koran and Arabic. Sources: [Associated Press](#) [125], [Nordic Africa Institute](#) [58]
- **February 27, 2017:** Militants attack two police stations in the northern Soum province, injuring one woman. Ansar-ul-Islam claims responsibility. Sources: [BBC News](#) [126], [Associated Press](#) [125]
- **December 31, 2016:** Assailants linked to extremist preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko carry out simultaneous assassination attempts, killing one person and critically wounding another. Source: [International Business Times](#) [54]
- **December 16, 2016:** Unidentified gunmen attack a Burkinabe military post in the country's north, near the border with Mali. The attack leaves 12 soldiers dead and is later claimed by extremist group Ansar-ul-Islam lil-Ichad wal Jihad (IRSAD). Sources: [Reuters](#) [127], [International Business Times](#) [55]

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- **October 12, 2016:** Militants kill three Burkinabe soldiers at an army post near Burkina Faso's northern border with Mali. Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi—leader of the ISGS breakaway group from al-Mourabitoun—claims responsibility for the attack, the second such claim in little over a month. Source: [Long War Journal](#) [68]
- **September 2, 2016:** Militants kill a customs official and civilian near Burkina Faso's northern borders with Mali and Niger. Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi—leader of the ISGS breakaway group from al-Mourabitoun—claims responsibility for the attack, the first ISGS attack in Burkina Faso. Sources: [Jeune Afrique](#) [128], [Long War Journal](#) [129]
- **January 15, 2016:** AQIM-affiliated assailants target a hotel and café in the country's capital of Ouagadougou, taking hostages at the Splendid Hotel and killing 30 people. Also on January 15, the AQIM-affiliated Ansar al-Dine claims responsibility for the kidnapping of an elderly Australian couple from Djibo, a town near the borders with Mali and Niger. Sources: [Wall Street Journal](#) [130], [Al Jazeera](#) [23], [Guardian](#) [24]
- **November 2015:** Unidentified assailants use IEDs, RPGs, and small arms to target a convoy in Djibo, killing one person. Source: [U.S. State Department](#) [11]
- **October 9, 2015:** Around 50 gunmen attack a police station near the northern border with Mali, killing three police officers and wounding two civilians. Burkinabe authorities blame Malian separatists for the attack. Sources: [Associated Press](#) [13], [Reuters](#) [14]
- **August 23, 2015:** Gunmen attack a police post in northern Burkina Faso, near the country's border with Mali. Two soldiers are wounded in the attack, one seriously. One witness claims that the assailants said they were operating on behalf of Boko Haram. Sources: [Reuters](#) [61], [aOuaga.com](#) [62]
- **April 2015:** Al-Mourabitoun kidnaps a Romanian hostage from northern Burkina Faso. The hostage is since believed to be held by al-Mourabitoun breakaway group ISGS, led by former al-Mourabitoun spokesperson Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi. Sources: [Reuters](#) [131], [Long War Journal](#) [68]
- **April 2015 - October 2016:** Burkina Faso experiences an estimated 20 terrorist incidents, including the kidnapping of foreigners, attacks on border posts, and a major terrorist attack in the country's capital, Ouagadougou. Source: [Reuters](#) [17]

Domestic Counter-Extremism

In December 2018, the government in Burkina Faso declared a state of emergency in several provinces located along the country's northern border with Mali. The declaration occurred after jihadists attack a detachment of military police on the border with Mali, killing 10 gendarmes. In January 2019, the state of emergency was extended by six months after suspected jihadists attacked a village in the central-northern area of the country and killed 13 people. The incident led to an eruption of ethnic violence in the area. On July 11, 2019, the government again extended the state of emergency in 14 provinces through January 12, 2020. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [34], [Agence France-Presse](#) [113], [Reuters](#) [132], [Reuters](#) [133], [International Crisis Group](#) [89])

Burkinabe President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré has repeatedly declared his commitment to combat the threat from terrorism. Nonetheless, corruption and scarcity of adequate military personnel continue to plague the country's counterterrorism forces. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [11])

Prior to Kaboré's inauguration in December 2015, Burkinabe police were documented carrying out abuses against civilians and violently harassing journalists, practices that have eroded trust in Burkina Faso's police and military apparatus. In October 2016, Kaboré faced calls to resign after a series of ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks on border posts in the north, in response to which Kaboré said that the terrorism situation in the country was "under control." The following month, Kaboré pledged to withdraw Burkinabe forces from U.N. missions in Sudan and Mali in order to strengthen Burkina Faso's own security forces. In June 2019, following growing accusations that security forces were committing human rights abuses, the government announced the creation of a commission on national security to address these issues. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [11], [Burkina24](#) [15], [Reuters](#) [17], [International Crisis Group](#) [106])

The Kaboré government has made a push to combat the threat of terrorism in Burkina Faso's borders, and has recently claimed to disrupt terrorist recruiting and financing networks in the country using its police force. In July 2018, the Burkinabe army launched an operation to dismantle terrorist bases in the country's north. The army said it arrested 100 people and seized IED materials during the raids. After further investigation, 60 people were transferred to the police and the others were released. (Sources: [LeFaso.net](#) [43], [LeFaso.net](#) [71], [Agence France-Presse](#) [134])

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Kaboré has repeatedly emphasized the need to strengthen the country's military capabilities and border security in an effort to combat the threat from terrorism. To secure his country's borders, Kaboré announced in November 2016 his intention to recall Burkinabe soldiers deployed in U.N. missions in Sudan and Mali. The government has also secured funding from France and Canada to invest in building new border posts with Mali and Niger to better monitor and control the country's borders. In 2017, Burkina Faso's Army-Gendarmerie-Police counterterrorism task force Groupement des Forces Anti-Terroristes (GFAT), was tasked with bolstering the effort to counter terrorist activities along its northern border. The GFAT more than tripled the amount of task force members from 500 troops in 2016 to 1,600 troops in 2017. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [17], [U.S. Department of State](#) [11], [Africanews](#) [135], [U.S. Department of State](#) [44])

Kaboré's government has also worked to address the threat from terrorism through its judicial system. In December 2009, Burkina Faso passed two laws modeled after French legislation in an effort to combat the threats of domestic terrorism and terrorist financing. The government later established a Financial Intelligence Unit to combat terrorist financing and a counterterrorist police force. Following the January 2016 attack in Ouagadougou, Burkinabe judicial authorities met in the capital to discuss new legislation to combat terrorism, including the commissioning of a "central organ" for arresting and prosecuting terror suspects. The government moved forward with draft legislation to create the specialized organ within the Burkinabe judicial system in December 2016. Experts from the U.N. Office on Crime and Drugs assisted in analyzing the draft law to ensure compliance with international conventions. Burkinabe legislators passed the legislation in January 2017. (Sources: [Shanghai Daily](#) [136], [U.S. Department of State](#) [137], [Africatime](#) [138], [United Nations System in Senegal](#) [139])

The U.S. State Department notes in its 2017 Country Reports on Terrorism that in order to counter violent extremism, the Burkinabe government deployed the Sahel Emergency Plan, which seeks to strengthen the government's role, develop community law enforcement, and spur opportunity in its Sahel region. The government has taken other steps to counter the threat from extremism beginning several years prior, reportedly sending officials to places of worship to instill messages of peace and tolerance, and monitoring the media for signs of extremist and sectarian content. Burkina Faso also hosts several international organizations that work to counter extremism. Several have sought to provide economic and vocational support to populations deemed vulnerable to radicalization and terrorist recruitment. According to the U.S. Department of State, however, Burkina Faso does not have terrorist rehabilitation or reintegration programs. (Sources: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark](#) [30], [U.S. Department of State](#) [44])

In 2017, a CVE program implemented by the U.S. Agency for International Development launched a regional messaging project in the country called Voices for Peace. The program produces and broadcasts counter narratives to terrorism over radio and social media. It also includes an effort called Partnerships for Peace, aimed at building capacity for national government, civil society, and regional organizations to counter violent extremism. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [44])

Despite these efforts, Burkina Faso appears increasingly susceptible to terrorist activity. In a report released in April 2016, the U.S. Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) assessed the terrorism risk in Burkina Faso as a medium-level risk, up from a low-risk rating in 2015. On June 7, 2017, the U.S. State Department issued a revised travel warning for the country noting a "fluid" security environment with attacks possible "anywhere in the country." It also said that ISIS, AQIM, and al-Mourabitoun all have declared their intention to attack foreign targets in North and West Africa. In late 2016, Kaboré reiterated his efforts to combat the threat from terrorism, after facing criticism over his handling of the terrorist threat. (Sources: [OSAC 2016](#) [140], [OSAC 2015](#) [141], [Burkina24](#) [15], [U.S. Department of State](#) [142])

International Counter-Extremism

Burkina Faso has worked with regional and international agencies to combat the threat from international terrorism. Burkina Faso had previously deployed soldiers to U.N. peacekeeping missions in Sudan and Mali. Due to the strain in domestic security resources, however, the government has had to scale back its support for international counterterrorism efforts. In November 2016, Burkina Faso gave notice that it was planning to recall soldiers from Mali, and announced that it would withdraw its U.N. peacekeepers in Sudan by July 2017. (Source: [Reuters](#) [17])

Burkina Faso has historically been active in regional and international counterterrorism organizations, collaborating on

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counterterrorism-related matters with the United Nations, United States, France, and the African Union, among other governments and bodies, including the G-5 Sahel group, the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS), the Global Counterterrorism Forum's Sahel Working Group, and the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). In January 2017, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali agreed to set up a joint counterterrorism force to address the transnational terrorist threat in the Liptako region. The group expanded the following month to include representatives from the entire G5 Sahel, including Chad and Mauritania. (Sources: [U.S. State Department](#) [11], [Africanews](#) [135], [Africanews](#) [143], [Africanews](#) [144])

On April 29-30, 2017, French forces, operating in partnership with the multinational G-5 Sahel group, reportedly killed about 20 suspected jihadists in a forested border region between Mali and Burkina Faso. They recovered weapons, including rocket-launchers and ammunition, according to a statement by a French counterterrorism unit. French authorities gave no indication of the jihadists' affiliation. The operation took place in an area where a French soldier was killed on April 5, 2017. On December 17, 2018, France agreed to send more trainers, military advisers, and military equipment to Burkina Faso. The increased support is meant to aid the Burkinabe government's efforts to fight against Islamists in the country's northern border region. However, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that France would not be sending additional French troops to the region. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#) [145], [Al Jazeera](#) [146], [Reuters](#) [147])

Burkina Faso also works with the inter-governmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to combat streams of financing for terrorist groups in West Africa. A report released by the FATF in October 2016 showed that Burkina Faso was working to stem the illegal trafficking of RIVOTRIL to contacts in Mali and Niger, with several people identified in the trafficking ring as having links to terrorist organizations. Burkinabe nationals have also been identified as suspected traffickers in neighboring countries, including Mali. Burkina Faso is a member of the Inter-Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA), which is an FATF- Style Regional Body (SFRB), and specialized institution of ECOWAS that facilitates adoption and implementation of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards. (Source: [FATF](#) [148], [GIABA](#) [149])

In addition to working with regional counterterrorism bodies, Burkina Faso has previously taken an active role in the Malian civil war, contributing peacekeepers since 2013, hosting French forces for that country's counterterrorism campaign in Mali, and serving as an intermediary and negotiator between the Malian government and insurgents. In June 2013, Burkina Faso hosted negotiations that yielded the signing of a ceasefire agreement between Tuareg rebels and the Malian government. In the wake of the January 2016 attack in Ouagadougou, the prime ministers of Burkina Faso and Mali met to develop integrated counterterrorism efforts between the two nations, pledging new intelligence sharing and joint border patrols. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [150], [U.S. Department of State](#) [137], [Christian Science Monitor](#) [151], [Economist](#) [152], [Reuters](#) [153])

In September 2019, ECOWAS members as well as leaders from Mauritania and Chad met in Ouagadougou. At that meeting, ECOWAS pledged \$1 billion to a common fund to financially support counterterrorism efforts, inviting Chad and Mauritania to join the financing initiative. The fund's aim is to bolster the military operations of individual countries involved in the fight against terrorism, as well as joint operations in the region, including the G-5 Sahel group forces. According to an Al Jazeera report, the G-5 Sahel joint task force has had limited effectiveness due to a lack of finance, training and equipment. As of September 2019, the force has 4,000 troop, which is 1,000 troops short of its original planned figures. During the ECOWAS meeting, leaders called on the United Nations to strengthen peacekeeping operations in the region, and announced that it would seek aid from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). (Sources: [Reuters](#) [154], [ECOWAS](#) [155], [Al Jazeera](#) [156])

Public Opinion

Burkina Faso is 60-percent Muslim and 40-percent Christian and Animist, and the country has long been lauded for its history of religious cohesion and coexistence. An April 2016 report by OSAC found that Burkinabes also have a "very positive attitude" toward Americans, with Burkinabes often found wearing clothes or owning trinkets decorated with the U.S. flag. (Sources: [Foreign Ministry of Denmark](#) [30], [OSAC](#) [140])

Nonetheless, a November 2015 poll by the Pew Research Center uncovered some support for violent extremist and anti-Western groups in Burkina Faso. Eight percent of those polled by Pew in November 2015 had a "favorable" opinion of ISIS,

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for example, while 28 percent indicated that they were unsure of their stance on the group. (Source: [Pew Research Center](#) [157])

Despite these findings, national security has not ranked highly as a concern for Burkinabes, who are primarily concerned with alleviating the immediate concerns from extreme poverty. For most Burkinabes, national security was not one of the top three concerns that government needed to address, nor was it an issue that citizens believed necessitated additional government resources, according to polls conducted in April and May of 2015. (Source: [Afrobarometer](#) [158])