On May 12, 2019, gunmen encircled and opened fire on congregants departing Sunday mass at a Roman Catholic church in Dablo, a town in the country’s north. The attack, the second on Christians in two weeks, left a priest and five other people dead. According to the mayor of Dablo, the assailants burned the church and looted the pharmacy and other stores. A government spokesman also said that the jihadists destroyed all places serving alcohol. (Sources: Guardian [1], Reuters [2])

In December 2018 and after a series of deadly Islamist extremist attacks, the government in Burkina Faso declared a state of emergency in several of the country’s northern provinces. The state of emergency was extended in January 2019 by six months due to an eruption of ethnic violence after suspected jihadists killed a village chief. According to a Reuters report, 499 were killed in Islamist extremist attacks between November 2018 and March 2019. (Sources: Reuters [3], Agence France-Presse [4], Reuters [5])

Overview

Before the deadly January 2016 attack, 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 [6], where the government has long struggled to combat terrorist groups like AQIM, al-Mourabitoun, Ansar al-Dine, and others. (Source: U.S. State Department [7])

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 [8], Associated Press [9], Reuters [10], Burkina24 [11])

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 [12], LeFaso.net [8], Associated Press [9], Reuters [10], Burkina24 [11], Reuters [13])

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. The United Nations estimated that between January and March 2019, 70,000 people were newly displaced from their homes due to the violence. (Sources: International Crisis Group [14], Associated Press [15], Washington Post [16])

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 [17], Telegraph [18], Al Jazeera [19], Guardian [20], U.S. State Department [7])

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 [21])

This danger was borne out in 2015, when the country experienced a series of cross-border raids. Al-Qaeda-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 [23], Associated Press [24], UNODC [25])

**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 [23], Associated Press [24], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark [26])

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 [26], Newsweek [27])

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. (Source: Associated Press [28])

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 raided and attacked Fulani villages because of their apparent association with the Islamist extremist group. (Sources: Critical Threats [29], Reuters [3], Economist [30])

**Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb**

Al-Qaeda’s North African branch, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) [32], 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 [33])

AQIM and its affiliated group al-Mourabitoun [34] 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 [35], CNN [36], Al jazeera [37])

Although AQIM and other affiliated terrorist groups were not known to recruit in Burkina Faso before 2015, Burkinabe
Burkina Faso: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

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 [26], LeFaso.net [38])

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 [39], Long War Journal [40], Center for Strategic & International Studies [41])

Though it is mostly active in Mali, JNIM has conducted operations in Niger and Burkina Faso. Chali 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 [41], International Crisis Group [42], U.S. Department of State [43])

Al-Mourabitoun

Al-Mourabitoun [44] ("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 [36], U.S. Department of State [45])

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 [46], Agence France-Presse [47], Smithsonian Institution [48])

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 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 [19], Guardian [20])

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 [49], International Business Times [50], CTC Sentinel [51])

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 [49], International Business
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 [51])

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 [53])

On February 20, 2018, the U.S. Department of State designated the group as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. (Sources: CTC Sentinel [51], U.S. Department of State [54])

Boko Haram

Boko Haram [55] 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 [26])

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 [56], aOuaga.com [57])

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 [58], a former spokesperson for al-Mourabitoun who pledged allegiance to ISIS [59] leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi [60] in May 2015. (Sources: Long War Journal [61], Long War Journal [62])

Since announcing his allegiance to Baghdadi, Sahrawi has maintained control over what is believed to be a small section of 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 [61])

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 [27])

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 [26])
Burkina Faso: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

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 [63], LeFaso.net [38], LeFaso.net [64])

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 [26])

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 [26])

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 [23], U.S. Department of State [7])

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 [65], Telegraph [66], Reuters [67])

The attacks began at approximately 8:30 p.m. GMT, when three gunmen wearing Turbans fired into the air shouting “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 [65], Telegraph [66])

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 France24, “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 [67], New York Times [68])

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 [67])

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
Burkina Faso: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

Burkinabé 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-

- **December 4, 2018:** Unidentified militants ambush a Burkinabé 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](https://www.agencefrancepresse.com) [70]

- **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 Burkinabé military convoy traveling in northern Burkina Faso. There were no immediate claims of responsibility. Source: [France 24](https://www.france24.com) [71]

- **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](https://www.apnews.com) [15]

- **September 5, 2018:** Burkinabé 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](https://www.france24.com) [72]

- **August 28, 2018:** A roadside bomb strikes a Burkinabé 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](https://www.defensepost.com) [73], [Associated Press](https://www.apnews.com) [74]

- **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](https://www.defensepost.com) [73]

- **August 13, 2018:** Jihadist militants target a Burkinabé 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](https://www.agencefrancepresse.com) [75]

- **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 Burkinabé 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](https://www.theguardian.com) [76], [CNN](https://www.cnn.com) [77], [International Crisis Group](https://www.icg.org) [42]

- **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](https://www.bbc.com) [78], [CNN](https://www.cnn.com) [79]

- **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 Burkinabé preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko. Sources: [International Business Times](https://www.ibtimes.co.uk) [80], [International Business Times](https://www.ibtimes.co.uk) [50]

- **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](https://www.apnews.com) [81], [Nordic Africa Institute](https://www.nordicafrica.org) [53]

- **February 27, 2017:** Militants attack two police stations in the northern Soum province, injuring one woman. Ansar-ul-Islam claims responsibility. Sources: [BBC News](https://www.bbc.com) [82], [Associated Press](https://www.apnews.com) [81]

- **December 31, 2016:** Assassins linked to extremist preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko carry out simultaneous assassination attempts, killing one person and critically wounding another. Source: [International Business Times](https://www.ibtimes.co.uk) [49]

- **December 16, 2016:** Unidentified gunmen attack a Burkinabé 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](https://www.reuters.com) [83], [International Business Times](https://www.ibtimes.co.uk) [50]

- **October 12, 2016:** Militants kill three Burkinabé soldiers at an army post near Burkina Faso’s northern border with Mali. Adnun Abu Walid al-Sahrawi—leader of the ISGS breakaway group from al-Mourabitoun—claimed responsibility for the attack, the second such claim in little over a month. Source: [Long War Journal](https://longwarjournal.com) [61]

- **September 2, 2016:** Militants kill a customs official and civilian near Burkina Faso’s northern borders with Mali and Niger. Adnun Abu Walid al-Sahrawi—leader of the ISGS breakaway group from al-Mourabitoun—claimed responsibility for the attack, the first ISGS attack in Burkina Faso. Sources: [Jeune Afrique](https://www.jeuneafrique.com) [84], [Long War Journal](https://longwarjournal.com) [85]

- **January 15, 2016:** AQIM-affiliated assailants target a hotel and café in the country’s capital of Ouagadougou, taking
Burkina Faso: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

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 [86], Al Jazeera [19], Guardian [20]

- **November 2015**: Unidentified assailants use IEDs, RPGs, and small arms to target a convoy in Djibo, killing one person. Source: U.S. State Department [7]
- **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 [9], Reuters [10]
- **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 [56], aOuaga.com [57]
- **April 2013**: 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 [87], Long War Journal [61]
- **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 [13]

**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 occurs 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. (Sources: Reuters [3], Agence France-Presse [4], Reuters [88], Reuters [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 [7])

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. (Sources: U.S. Department of State [7], Burkina24 [11], Reuters [13])

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 [38], LeFaso.net [64], Agence France-Presse [90])

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 Burkina 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 [13], U.S. Department of State [7], Africanews [91], U.S. Department of State [39])
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 [92], U.S. Department of State [93], Africatime [94], United Nations System in Senegal [95])

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 [26], U.S. Department of State [39])

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 [39])

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 [96], OSAC 2015 [97], Burkina24 [11], U.S. Department of State [98])

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 [13])

Burkina Faso has historically been active in regional and international counterterrorism organizations, collaborating on 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 [7], Africatime [91], Africanews [99], Africanews [100])

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
Burkina Faso: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

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 [101], Al Jazeera [102], Reuters [103])

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 [104], GIABA [105])

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 [106], U.S. Department of State [93], Christian Science Monitor [107], Economist [108], Reuters [109])

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 [26], OSAC [96])

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, for example, while 28 percent indicated that they were unsure of their stance on the group. (Source: Pew Research Center [110])

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 [111])