



Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso has become a stark symbol of worsening security trends in West Africa's Sahel region, due to an armed conflict that began in 2016. Islamist insurgents—some of whom have ties to the conflict in neighboring Mali, and to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State—have asserted control over parts of the country and carried out several large attacks in the capital. State security forces and tacitly state-backed militia groups have been accused of severe human rights abuses during counterterrorism operations, including torture and extrajudicial killings.

The conflict has caused a burgeoning humanitarian emergency, exacerbating longstanding development challenges. Per U.N. reports, insurgent attacks and ethnic violence had forced nearly 500,000 people to flee their homes as of October 2019 (compared to about 80,000 reported to be displaced at the start of the year) and crippled the health and education sectors in parts of the country.

The rising violence—some playing out along ethnic lines—has subsumed the initial optimism of the country's recent democratic transition. The election of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in late 2015 was the culmination of a political transition process that began in 2014, when protesters, backed by several military commanders, ousted President Blaise Compaoré. A towering figure in West African politics, Compaoré came to power in a 1987 coup; his latest attempt to change the constitution to evade term limits sparked the protests that unseated him. In mid-2015, a counter-coup by elite military forces loyal to Compaoré nearly derailed the civilian-led transitional government, but civilian protesters and conventional army units ultimately induced the coup leaders to stand down.

A former Compaoré ally turned opposition figure, President Kaboré has since struggled to respond to demands for rapid job creation, reforms, and accountability for former regime abuses. In January 2019, the entire cabinet resigned amid rising insurgent attacks, including kidnappings of foreigners. Elections are due in 2020, but whether conflict-affected areas will be able to participate is uncertain.

Terrorism and Insurgency

Ouagadougou experienced its first large terrorist attack in January 2016, when gunmen opened fire at a hotel and coffee shop popular with foreigners, killing 30 people—including an American. The assault was jointly claimed by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, an Algerian-led regional network) and an offshoot known as Al Murabitoun. Around the same time, an Islamist insurgency known as Ansarul Islam emerged in the north, where it has targeted schools, state officials, and individuals accused of collaborating with the security forces. Attacks escalated in 2017 after the merger of several Islamist armed groups active in Mali—AQIM's Sahel branch, along with Al Murabitoun and two Malian-led groups—under the banner

of the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM after its transliterated Arabic name).

Figure 1. Burkina Faso at a Glance

Capital: Ouagadougou ("wah-gah-DOO-goo")
Size: Slightly larger than Colorado
Population: 20.1 million
Languages: French (official), local languages
Religions: Muslim 61.6%, Roman Catholic 23.2%, traditional/animist 7.3%, Protestant 6.7%, other/none 1.1% (2010)
Life expectancy: 55.9 years
Adult literacy: 36% (2015 est.)
GDP growth / per capita: 6.4% / \$696
Key exports: Gold, cotton, livestock



Source: CIA and IMF public databases; 2018 estimates unless noted.

While remaining active primarily in Mali, JNIM has claimed several attacks in Burkina Faso, including deadly simultaneous assaults on the national military headquarters and the French embassy in Ouagadougou in March 2018. According to U.N. terrorism sanctions monitors, JNIM and Ansarul Islam cooperate but remain distinct. Militants have conducted several attacks on churches, though they appear to tolerate Christians in some areas they control. Mosques have also been attacked. Unlike in Mali, Islamist armed groups in Burkina Faso do not publicly claim responsibility for most attacks, for reasons that are unclear.

The conflict has particularly affected the north and east, with signs of spillover into the countries of coastal West Africa to the south. In the north, Ansarul Islam and JNIM appear to have leveraged inter-ethnic frictions, grievances stemming from corruption, patronage politics, social stratification, land disputes, and state neglect. The east has emerged as a stronghold for a different AQIM splinter faction that has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and is known as the Islamic State-Greater Sahara. The group notably claimed the October 2017 deadly ambush of U.S. troops in Niger. Militants in the east appear to have sought ties with cross-border criminal networks and exploited grievances over restrictions on poaching and logging.

Conflict Drivers

The reasons and timing behind Burkina Faso's vulnerability to civil war are a matter of debate. Sectarian tensions have reportedly risen in recent years despite a history of peaceful coexistence, in part stemming from continued minority Christian dominance of the civil service and political class. Mali-based Islamist insurgents have long threatened to attack countries, such as Burkina Faso, that contribute troops to the U.N. peacekeeping mission there. Under Compaoré, security officials apparently maintained communications with Mali-based militant factions and participated in lucrative hostage-release negotiations.

Compaoré's ouster and the transitional government's decision to dissolve his elite presidential guard after the 2015 coup attempt arguably disrupted the security apparatus, which in any case had little prior experience in active combat or counterterrorism.

Today, state counterinsurgency tactics may be driving conflict dynamics in some areas. Security forces and militias known as *koglweogos* ("guardians of the bush" in the local Mooré language) have allegedly carried out extrajudicial killings during ostensible counterterrorism operations in the north, predominantly targeting members of the minority ethnic Fulani (alt. Peul) community. Ansarul Islam, like a central Mali Islamist faction to which it reportedly has ties, was founded by a Fulani, and Fulanis are often accused of colluding with militants. Abuses may, in turn, erode state legitimacy and further encourage Fulani recruitment as community members turn to armed groups for protection and revenge.

Regional Counterterrorism Initiatives

Burkina Faso belongs to the G5 Sahel (along with Mali, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger), an ad hoc partnership that has pursued joint counterterrorism efforts in border areas. The G5 Sahel has struggled to coordinate and sustain operations. The United States, the European Union, and Arab Gulf states—have pledged support, but not at the scale that G5 members have solicited. West African leaders convened an emergency summit in September 2019 in an effort to broaden the regional fight against Islamist militancy and garner increased resources.

French Military Operations. Burkina Faso is within the scope of France's Operation Barkhane, a regional counterterrorism mission launched in 2014 after France's military intervention in Mali. The U.S. Defense Department provides logistical and intelligence support. President Kaboré has pursued additional external counterterrorism aid, and France has pledged to expand military cooperation since 2018. At the same time, increased engagement by the former colonial power has sparked criticism from some government officials and local activists.

U.S. Hostage Rescue. In May 2019, French special operations forces freed two French hostages that an Islamist armed group had kidnapped in Benin and moved into Burkina Faso. The French forces also freed two additional hostages (an American and a South Korean) of whose existence they had reportedly been unaware. Two French soldiers were killed during the mission. U.S. authorities have not disclosed the name of the American hostage or the conditions of her kidnapping, citing privacy restrictions.

Politics

The November 2015 general elections were arguably the most open and competitive in Burkina Faso's history, and produced the country's first electoral transfer of power. President Kaboré won 53% of the vote and his People's Movement for Progress (MPP) won a slim plurality in the National Assembly (55 seats out of 127), later forming a majority coalition with smaller parties. The MPP again performed well in municipal polls in 2016 that were generally assessed to be well administered, although voters in some areas were unable to vote due to security threats.

Zéphirin Diabré came in second in the presidential race and heads the political opposition; his Union for Progress and Change (UPC) holds 33 seats in parliament. Ex-President Compaoré, in exile in Côte d'Ivoire, appears to retain influence over his former ruling Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP), now the third-largest party in parliament with 18 seats.

Although political freedoms and civil liberties have expanded in some ways since 2014, the parliament and government enacted legislation in mid-2019 criminalizing reports that could "demoralize" the armed forces, potentially imposing a significant constraint on press freedom. Islamist militants have also sharply curtailed citizens' rights in areas they control.

The Economy

Landlocked and with a largely agrarian workforce, Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries. Endemic food insecurity affects much of the population. Economic growth has averaged nearly 6% annually over the past decade, per International Monetary Fund (IMF) data, but has not always outpaced population growth. The formal economy relies largely on exports of cotton and gold, for which global prices have fluctuated. Remittances from Burkinabè residing in wealthier neighboring Côte d'Ivoire are a lifeline for many. The State Department's 2019 *Investment Climate Statement* reports that Burkina Faso "welcomes foreign investment" while identifying challenges such as limited access to information, a weak judiciary, corruption, and "the lack of an effective separation of powers."

U.S. Policy and Aid

The State Department characterizes bilateral relations as "excellent, thanks in part to strong U.S. support during the 2014-2015 political transition." According to the Department, U.S. policy is focused on Burkina Faso's role in regional security and stability, while also seeking to promote democracy, human rights, and development.

U.S. bilateral aid appropriations totaled \$46 million in FY2018, for health programs (\$29 million), Food for Peace under P.L. 480 Title II (FFP, \$16 million), and military professionalization (\$0.5 million). Burkina Faso receives additional USAID regional and global aid that seeks to improve food security, mitigate conflict, and counter violent extremism. The country also has received sizable security assistance through State Department regional and global programs, as well as counterterrorism training and equipment under the Department of Defense's "global train and equip" authority (10 U.S.C. 333), which are not reflected in the figures above. Burkina Faso is developing proposals for a second U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) development aid Compact, having completed a five-year \$481 million Compact in 2014 that sought to improve land use, agricultural productivity, road infrastructure, and primary school completion for girls.

The Trump Administration has proposed to decrease bilateral aid for Burkina Faso to \$25 million in FY2020, partly reflecting a proposal to end FFP aid worldwide. The FY2020 budget request would also decrease funding for USAID's regional programs in the Sahel and West Africa, which have supported activities in Burkina Faso. Congress did not adopt similar proposals in FY2018-FY2019.

Alexis Arieff, Specialist in African Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.