

POLICY BRIEF



Burkina Faso

A beacon of religious tolerance and cohesion under threat

Since 2016, Burkina Faso has experienced an alarming escalation of violence from jihadist militants, reaching its apex, so far, in 2019. Violence spurred from radical ideology preached by a local jihadist group, Ansarul Islam, led by Burkinabe Ibrahim Malam Dicko, with close ties with other jihadist groups in Mali.¹ Other groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Group, also based in Mali, started to operate in Burkina Faso as a result of the spread of these radical narratives. These groups operate with impunity. The combination of ideology, external material and ideological support, and a lack of security has made life extremely challenging for

the Burkinabe people. Violence spread mainly in the north, east and west of the country, generating a pressing security and humanitarian crisis.

In 2023, Burkina Faso accounted for almost a quarter of people killed in terrorist attacks globally.² As a result, hundreds of thousands of Burkinabe fled their homes and villages and sought refuge elsewhere.

This violence and grave instability affects every Burkinabe, especially those residing in the north, east and west of the country. The Christian community, representing about 23.4% of the population,³

¹ R. Malley, "Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2020", *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 27, 2019. <crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2020>

² Fatalities rose from 1,135 in 2022 to 1,907 in 2023. <economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>

³ "Burkina Faso: Country Dossier", World Watch Research, January 2024, pp. 5. <opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/#2024fullcountrydossiers> (password: freedom).

is particularly targeted for their beliefs. A few examples of attacks carried out in 2023 and 2024:

- On December 20, 2023, Islamist militants killed 26 people hiding in a house in the village of Bassé. 22 of the people killed were Christians;
- On October 7, 2023, Islamist militants ordered all the Christians of the village of Débé in Sourou province to leave the village. All the belongings they couldn't carry with them (farming equipments, livestock, infrastructures, etc.) were given by the militants to other non-Christian villagers;
- On February 25, 2024, Islamist militants attacked the Catholic parish in Essakane-Village in the Oudalan province during the celebration of Sunday Mass. 15 Christians were killed and two injured;
- On April 18, 2024, Islamist militants kidnapped, tortured, and killed a Catechist of the Fada N'Gourma's Diocese while he was looking for his donkey.
- On August 24, 2024, Islamist militants killed almost 200 people in Barsalogho. According to the message issued by Bishop Théophile Nare from the diocese of Kaya, at least 26 of the people killed were Christians.

A threat to regional security and stability

With rising extremist violence, the Burkinabe Government declared a state of emergency in December 2018, covering 14 of the country's 45 provinces. The military regime that took over the country's government in 2022, under President Ibrahim Traoré, intensified its military operations against the Islamist militants. In 2023, Burkina Faso, together with Niger and Mali, withdrew from the G5 Sahel – an institutional framework for policies and security matters in the Sahel.⁴ The three countries, ruled by military junta leaders, formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) under a mutual defense agreement. The AES's objective is to create a confederation of the three Sahel countries and one of the initial measures taken towards achieving this aim is the proposal to form a common defense force.⁵ Furthermore, in early 2024, the three countries also quit the Economic Community of West Africa States

(ECOWAS), a regional political and economic union of countries located in West Africa.

Since the beginning of the crisis the Burkinabe Government lost control of territories in the north and northeast of the country to jihadist groups, which infiltrated from neighboring Mali and continue to move between borders for their attacks and operations. Islamist militant groups, who control nearly half of Burkina Faso, have wreaked havoc on the country for years.⁶ The response of the Burkinabe Government to the surging violence, which mainly manifested in increased security and military operations against the jihadist groups, resulted also in indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations from specific ethnic groups. Such responses further disenfranchised certain ethnic groups and increased resentment against the Government in the north of Burkina Faso.⁷

Burkina Faso is one of the least developed countries in the world.⁸ Its dire socio-economic conditions has also contributed to the rise of religious extremism and subsequent instability and insecurity in the country.

A pressing humanitarian crisis

As of 2024, the extreme level of violence affecting the country displaced over 2 million individuals.⁹ Serious threats of malnutrition for lack of food security exists among those displaced, particularly threatening for displaced children. Over the last few years, UNICEF reported that the population affected by the crisis was in urgent need of emergency water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services.¹⁰ Security response to the crisis is vital, however, addressing the dire humanitarian situation is necessary to provide a holistic response to the crisis and prevent future violence. IDPs face risks associated with a lack of security, and the lack of basic services and healthcare. Failure by the Burkinabe Government and the International Community to address these needs could foster resentment towards the institutions and render an already vulnerable population even more susceptible to radical ideology.

In supporting those displaced, faith-based organizations (FBOs) play a vital role in helping victims of violence, particularly women, children and IDPs, and providing spiritual sustenance in the delivery of their aid.¹¹ FBOs

⁴ <securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2024-05/group-of-five-for-the-sahel-joint-force-9.php>

⁵ <policycenter.ma/publications/alliance-sahel-states-confederation-sahel-states-road-clear-full-traps>

⁶ <aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/16/al-qaeda-affiliate-claims-responsibility-for-june-attack-in-burkina-faso>

⁷ <qz.com/africa/1756917/burkina-faso-has-replaced-mali-at-heart-of-sahel-security-crisis>

⁸ "Burkina Faso: Country Dossier", *Ibid.*, pp. 13.

⁹ Current numbers of IDPs can be found at Burkina Faso | Global Focus <unhcr.org>

¹⁰ <reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Burkina%20Faso%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%208%2C%20October%202019.pdf.>

¹¹ "European Parliament resolution of 19 December 2019 on violations of human rights including religious freedoms in Burkina Faso (2019/2980(RSP))", Para. M, 19 December, 2019. <europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0106_EN.pdf>

are often the first in, and the last out, reaching areas that are difficult for large NGOs.

The extreme level of violence affecting the country displaced over 2 million individuals.

In the first semester of 2024, the dire security situation has forced 5319 schools to close, leaving more than 818,149 children without education.¹² UNICEF has succeeded in equipping only a few schools and temporary learning spaces with necessary infrastructure and educational kits due to lack of capacity and insecurity.¹³ Access to quality education for children affected by jihadist violence in Burkina Faso is essential to prevent further radicalization.

A threat to a beacon of religious tolerance and cohesion for the whole Sahel

Burkina Faso has always been praised internationally and regionally for being a beacon of religious tolerance and cohesion in the Sahel.¹⁴ Its model of religious coexistence made Burkina Faso an exception in the Sahel region: Muslims, Christians, and Animists have lived next to each other in peace for years—Burkinabe historically have been very tolerant towards one's religious affiliation.¹⁵ Attacks by jihadist militants and the spread of radical ideology threatens this exemplary model of social cohesion.

In Burkina Faso there are a number of initiatives aimed to promote social cohesion and apply voices of tolerance and non-violence to counter radical narratives, which should be encouraged and supported.¹⁶



Militant Islamists attacked Pastor Soré's village in Burkina Faso 3 times. On the third time, they burned it to the ground. "When the terrorists find Christians, they tell them the time of Christianity is over," said Pastor Soré. "We had to flee to save our lives."

¹² Reporting period - 1 January to June 2024. Available at: Burkina Faso-2024-2024-09-09. <unicef.org>

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ <bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-37634702>

¹⁵ "Burkina Faso: Preserving the religious balance", *International Crisis Group*, 6 September 2016. <crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-preserving-religious-balance>

¹⁶ See, for example, the initiative DroitLibre.TV, a free online TV channel that promotes human rights and social cohesion. <droitlibre.tv/spip.php?page=a-propos; or CineDroitLibre, a film festival exclusively focused on human rights issues in inedroitlibre.org/news/burkina-faso>

Recommendations:

To address the current crisis affecting hundreds of thousands in Burkina Faso, and restore regional security in the Sahel, Open Doors recommends:

1 On addressing the dire security situation, especially in the north of the country:

- The International Community should consider security cooperation with the Burkinabe Security Forces mainly through military-to-military contacts, providing capacity training, military equipment and expertise advice through agencies such as the European Peace Facility, a European Union mechanism;
- The AES countries should design and **implement policies of intelligence sharing to strengthen border control** to prevent terrorists from using Mali as a base to attack Burkina Faso and escape the Burkinabe Security Forces;
- The Burkinabe Government should exert **close oversight** on the Security Forces to ensure a proportionate response to the security crisis and **ensure that any operation deployed will be compliant with international human rights standards**. The Security Forces must prevent any indiscriminate attacks against civilians and any action that will foster the stigmatization of specific people groups.

2 To address the humanitarian crisis severely affecting more than 2 million IDPs:

- The International Community should immediately set in action programs providing **aid and support in IDP camps**.

Support should include water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH) and food, and should be **channeled through established faith-based organizations**, which are trusted partners for the community, have provided impartial assistance and have already established their vital role in helping victims of violence, including women, children and IDPs;

- The International Community should actively fund and sponsor **UNICEF's Burkina Faso Emergency Response Plan**, in particular those provisions pertaining to education for children whose schools were closed or who were displaced because of the crisis, and promote partnerships with reliable faith-based organizations, well-known for providing excellent quality education.

3 On countering radical narratives, ensuring and promoting social cohesion:

- The International Community and international donors should consider promoting and investing in **educational programs and vocational training** focused on communities in the north of Burkina Faso, that are more vulnerable to radical ideologies. Such programs should especially target women and youth;
- The International Community should invest in **programs and initiatives that nurture, preserve and reinforce social cohesion and unity amongst religious groups** in Burkina Faso and create resilience against radicalization and violent extremism.