

Burkina Faso

CONFLICT MAP

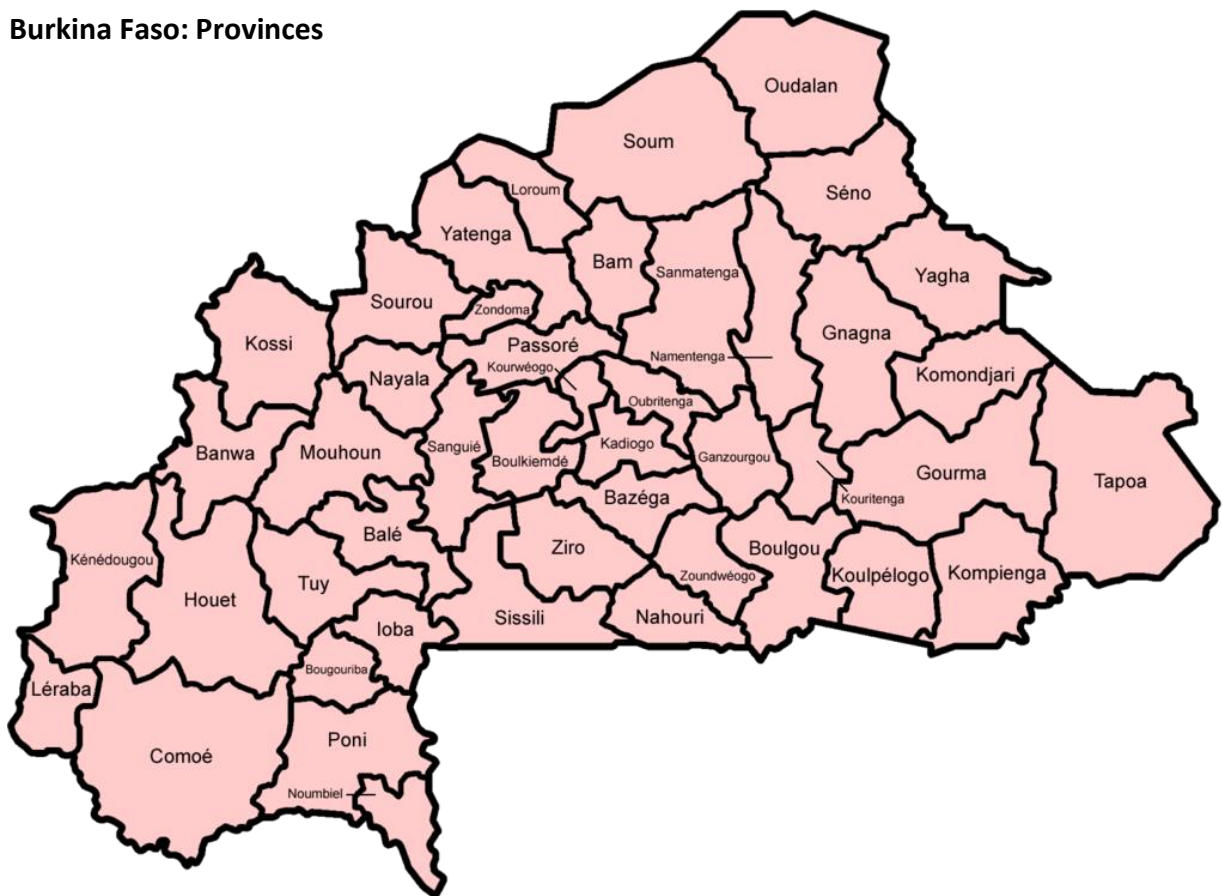
Protection of Civilians, PAX

Maps

Region



Burkina Faso: Provinces



Country Overview

General

CAPITAL	Ouagadougou
LOCATION	West-Africa; borders with Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Niger, Mali.
POPULATION	± 19 million
LANGUAGE	French (official); various other languages.
RELIGION	61.5% Muslim; 23.3% Roman Catholic; 7.8% traditional/animist; 6.5% Protestant; 0.9% other/none.
ETHNICITY	Main ethnic group is Mossi (52%); smaller groups include Fulani (8.4%), Gurma (7%), Gurunsi (4.6%), among others.

Political Situation

Burkina Faso became independent from France in 1960 (UCDP). While a democratic country by constitution, the transfer of power mostly took place through military coups during the first decades of independence until multi-party elections took place in the early 1990s (UCDP; CIA World Factbook). In 2014, then-President Blaise Compaoré resigned following popular protests against his efforts to modify the two-term presidential limit (CIA World Factbook). New elections were held in 2015, following which Roch Marc Christian Kaboré became Burkina Faso's new President (Ibid.). New elections are scheduled for 2020.

Economic Situation

Burkina Faso finds itself in a poor economic situation, attributable to a wide range of factors including: high population growth, limited natural resources, lack of infrastructure, climate factors like recurring droughts, and so on (Ibid.). An estimated 40 per cent of Burkinabes live below the poverty line and nearly one fifth of the population is food-insecure (ICG, 2019).

Conflict Overview

Since 2015-16, the situation in Burkina Faso has been one of escalating [insurgent violence](#), most notably in the country's northern and eastern regions and with occasional attacks in the capital city, as well as of increasing [social discontent](#) (ICG, 2019). According to numbers provided by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, attacks by armed Islamist groups have grown from 3 in 2015, to 12 in 2016, 29 in 2017, and 137 in 2018 (HRW, 2019). Violence is perpetrated by both [home-based](#) and [foreign-based](#) armed groups, most notably: **Ansarul Islam**, Al-Qaida in the Maghreb (**AQIM**), the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (**JNIM**), and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (**ISGS**) (HRW, 2018). These groups have made their presence in Burkina Faso manifest through attacks on government buildings, schools, cafés and other gathering places, as well as through the execution of civilians suspected of collaboration with the Burkinabé authorities (Ibid.). However, the **national security forces** have also been accused of numerous human rights violations during their counterinsurgency operations in 2017 and 2018, including extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests (Ibid.).

Due to an increasingly insecure situation in some parts of its territory, the Burkinabé government has effectively lost its control in certain eastern and northern regions; courts have closed and police officers are no longer safe enough to carry out patrols (ICG, 2019). While the degree of local support for the various insurgencies remains somewhat unclear, many northern Burkinabes feel alienated from the central government due to both decades of state neglect of the region, as well as due to indiscriminate violent behaviour by the national military in its counterinsurgency efforts (Ibid.). Because of continuing insecurity, the President has declared a state of emergency in 14 out of 45 of the country's provinces (ICG, 2019).

Highlighted Actors



Overview of the main **armed insurgent forces**, as well as **the government forces** (not all included in the more detailed descriptions below).

Ansarul Islam

The main instigator of violence in northern Burkina Faso, mainly in the Soum and Sourou provinces, where they target both government forces and civilians (ICG, 2019; UPCD). The founder of the group, Malam Dicko¹, gained popularity mainly through his questioning of the existing social order in Soum and while his turn to violence lost him many of his followers, support remains high enough to be able to carry out violent insurgency (ICG, 2017). Ansarul Islam is often perceived solely in terms of a religious movement, but International Crisis Group strongly warns against such a narrow assessment of the organisation and argues that it is as much an expression of a social uprising that gives expression to the grievances of a silent majority that has neither religious authority nor political power (ICG, 2017).

JNIM

The 'Group to Support Islam and Muslims' is not a single uniform group, but rather a coalition of various jihadist factions that includes groups formerly known as Ansar Eddine and al-Mourabitoun (ICG, 2018). JNIM is also known to have ties to AQIM (Ibid.). Like Ansarul Islam, this group is active mostly in the north, but is unclear if and to what extent there exist relations between both groups (ICG, 2019).

National security forces

The Burkinabé forces have had differing success in their attempts to combat the various insurgent groups in the country. The army suffers from several (structural) weaknesses: poor communication among ranks, poor training, shortages in personnel and equipment, inadequate planning, low morality, and so on (ICG, 2019). Many soldiers moreover refuse to serve in the country's more remote areas (Ibid.). At the same time, the counterinsurgency efforts are exacting its toll on government spending and the consequent decrease in social spending has led to significant unrest and protests in Ouagadougou (Ibid.).

Joint G5 Sahel Force

This force shows some weaknesses too: Although one of the reasons for its existence is to secure border areas in the Sahel regions, it has not carried out one single joint mission in 2018 in Burkina Faso's border areas despite the occurrence there of many attacks (ICG, 2019). The participating countries mostly choose to continue operating separately (Ibid.). The G5 Sahel Force coordinates operations with the French-led Operation Barkhane and with MINUSMA (HRW, 2018).

¹ Malam Dicko himself seems to have died in 2017, although this has not been officially confirmed.

Burkina Faso's Sahel Region

All major ethnic groups residing in the northern Sahel region have been subjected to intimidation by the various Islamist groups that are active there (particularly in the Soum and Oudalan provinces), who also oblige them to follow a strict interpretation of Islam (HRW, 2019). Most victims, however, belong to the **Bella**, **Mossi** and **Foulese** communities, which are suspected of supporting the Burkinabé government (Ibid.). Security forces, on the other hand, have been known to execute men they suspect of supporting the armed groups; these victims largely belong to the **Peuhl** community (Ibid.). Recruitment efforts by armed Islamist groups have focused mainly on the ethnic Peuhl who are vulnerable to such efforts because of grievances over poverty, government corruption and abusive conduct by Burkinabé security forces (Ibid.). Consequently, many civilians interviewed by Human Rights Watch indicated feeling trapped between the Islamist groups – who execute those suspected of collaboration with the government – and the Burkinabé armed forces who expect civilians to provide intelligence (Ibid.). It has moreover led to increasing tensions between the Peuhl on the one hand, and the Mossi and Foulese on the other hand (Ibid.).

Conflict Causes and Drivers

Regional dynamics

- Burkinabé troop deployment to Mali / along the Malian border have made Burkina Faso a target for some armed groups previously operating in Mali (ICG, 2018).
- The conflict in Mali has increased the availability of weapons and provides a safe haven to Burkinabé militants (ICG, 2017).
- Insecurity is exacerbated by the trafficking of light arms from Algeria, Libya and Mali (Ibid.).

National dynamics

- In the northern Sahel region, there exists a strong perception of governmental neglect and abandonment; locals perceive a stark contract between their region's economic potential and its poor infrastructure and development. State/Security officials are generally treated with distrust, regarded as there to enrich themselves rather than as the providers of social and security services (ICG, 2017).
- Within some of the northern regions, there is discontent about the existing socio-political order. The main group there is the Fulani, which is divided between so-called noble classes and descendants of former slaves; clear hierarchical differences continue to exist between both groups, which has fed resentment and garnered support for Ansarul Islam (Ibid.).
- Weak national army and intelligence services (ICG, 2018).
- Locals are not keen on cooperation with security forces because of the previously mentioned distrust, as well as because of human rights violations committed by the army during its clearance operations (HRW, 2018).

Sources

Conflict map is based on:

International Crisis Group

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<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-fasos-alarming-escalation-jihadist-violence>
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HRW

- Report published in March 2019:
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/22/we-found-their-bodies-later-day/atrocities-armed-islamists-and-security-forces>
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Uppsala Conflict Data Program – Burkina Faso

<https://ucdp.uu.se/#country/439>

CIA World Factbook – Burkina Faso

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uv.html>