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Fighting The Enemy Without The Community: Interrogating the Strategy of Countering Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso

VIOLENT EXTREMISM
RADICALISATION

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Introduction

The fight against violent extremism in the Sahel region of West Africa has largely remained a unidimensional effort. This is because the threat has been conceived primarily in a state-centric mode in which the response strategy has been reduced to military operations. Indeed, besides the use of state security forces such as military, gendarmerie, police, and forest guards, other response efforts—especially those with international involvement—such as the G-5 Sahel and Operation Barkhane have all been cast in a military strategy. Airstrikes, troop deployment, and/or intelligence-led combat have been the key feature in this asymmetric combat. On the other hand, the extremist elements have used kidnapping and explosives (bombing) as their tactics.

While the military response has seen some successes (especially with the killing and capture of extremists) in the region, more casualties have also resulted on the part of the security forces and civilians. Moreover, desperate attempts at seeking justice for the victims of violent extremists have also culminated in more human rights violations committed by the state security forces. Even though far from the current reality, issues of mass atrocity crimes may become topical if the extremism threat and the method of response continue to remain unchanged.

Due to the asymmetric nature of the threat, most communities have become ‘conflict theatres’ (zones) and more civilians have suffered forced displacements and casualties in the hands of both security forces and extremists. Ironically, and from the perspectives of the security forces and the extremists, the communities are suspiciously perceived as ‘collaborators’ of either side of the conflict. Similarly, while others are seen as vulnerable and thus needing security protection, some communities, individuals or groups are also seen as passive members without any capacity to be part of the response effort.

Community leaders and other civil society groups, though without weapons, may be “armed” with mobilization capacity to facilitate alternative

responses which may prove durable against the threat. Already in the theatre, some civilian groups are able to negotiate with extremist groups for humanitarian access. Such efforts can be extended to, or included in the overall response strategy. This paper explores the strategies and approaches used to resolve violent extremism in Burkina Faso and in the Sahel region. The paper is based on an analysis of secondary and primary data secured from interviews with relevant stakeholders in Ouagadougou in February 2021.

Violent Extremism in the Sahel Region¹

Defined as a vast, empty, trackless desert and known as a strip of a semi-arid transition zone between the arid Sahara and humid tropical Africa, the Sahel region of West Africa is notable for its twin environmental problems of drought and desertification.² In the description of Sivakumar and Wallace, the region is “... one of the harshest climatic regions of the world, with low and highly variable rainfall, high soil and air temperatures, high evaporative demand, and poor soils”.³ Its annual rainfall pattern varies from 100–200 mm in the North to 600–700 mm in the South.⁴ Climate variability and erratic rainfall patterns over the years have resulted in multiple environmental challenges, including famine, and drought, with implications on agriculture, which is the mainstay of most Sahelian countries. For instance, the 1974 famine and the accompanying death of several thousands of cattle had devastating implications on the socio-economic lives of most Sahelian states,⁵ with specific implications on farming, cattle rearing, and related livelihood sources.⁶

The widespread and persistent nature of these environmental challenges, coupled with weak capacities of most states have resulted in multiple governance deficits (such as marginalization and exclusion, levels of poverty, and unemployment, leading to the emergence of several security challenges such as drug, arms, and human trafficking, and growing radicalization among the youth due to warped understanding and interpretation of the

¹The Sahel Region broadly comprises portions of ten (10) African countries, including: northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, southern Algeria, southwestern Niger, northern Nigeria, central Chad, central Sudan and northern Eritrea. See http://ponce.sdsu.edu/sahel_081015.html

²Agnew, C. T., & Chappell, A. (1999). Drought in the Sahel. *GeoJournal*, 48(4), 299-311.

³Sivakumar, M. V. K., & Wallace, J. S. (1991). Soil water balance in the Sudano-Sahelian zone: need, relevance and objectives of the workshop.

⁴Nicholson, S., 1978. Climatic variations in the Sahel and other African regions during the past five centuries. *Journal of Arid Environments* 1,3–24. See also Walther, O., & Retaille, D. (2010). Sahara or Sahel? The fuzzy geography of terrorism in West Africa. *Ceps/Instead Working Papers*, (2010-35).

⁵Raynaud, C. (2001). Societies and nature in the Sahel: ecological diversity and social dynamics. *Global Environmental Change*, 11(1), 9-18.

⁶Brooks, N., 1998. Climate and history of West Africa. In: Connah, G.(Ed.), *Transformations in Africa: Essays on Africa's Last Past*. Leicester University Press, London, Washington, pp. 139–159; Brooks, N., 2004. Drought in the African Sahel: long term perspectives and future prospects. Working Paper 61, Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, Norwich, UK. See also Le Houerou, H.H., 1977. Man and desertization in the Mediterranean region. *Ambio* 6 (6), 363–365.

concept of Jihad. The complex interlinkages of these challenges conspired to exacerbate the violent extremism situation in the Sahel region, especially after the removal of Amadou Toumani Toure in 2012 in Mali. With an initial presence in northern and central Mali, the extremist began to operate in Niger and since 2016, they have gained a significant foothold in Burkina Faso with mutating targets on Western interests, symbolic security targets, as well as civilians.

Violent extremism in Burkina Faso: Understanding the Background

The emergence and evolution of violent extremism in Burkina Faso should be understood; first, within the context of the general security situation in the Sahel as discussed above, and second, within the country's specific context relating to political history, geographical location, and geo-strategic interest of the country to key external actors. There is no doubt that the 2012 Malian coup and the emergence of radical jihadist groups in the northern part of the country, their operation in neighbouring Niger, and their 'unholy alliance'⁷ with criminal groups have had negative impacts on Burkina Faso. These developments are connected to weak borders between the three Sahelian states of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. However, critical for consideration are the internal political trajectories, socio-economic dynamics, and the paradox of the resource curse thesis. Known as the "land of honest men", Burkina Faso had a turbulent political history of coups d'état, recording six between 1960 and 1987; the sixth one led by the former President Blaise Compaore, who also remains the longest serving president in the country.⁸ Compaore's almost three decades of being in power were characterised by a lack of competitive elections although he theoretically introduced mild democratic reforms through the adoption of the June 1991 Constitution. During his 27-year political administration, he was credited for ensuring that Burkina Faso was free from the internecine armed conflict that characterized other West African countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire.⁹ Moreover, through political compromise reached between Compaore and criminal groups,

the former was able to prevent the establishment of partnerships between extremists and criminal groups to engage in attacks in the country.¹⁰ As a result, while Mali and Niger, and northern Nigeria faced different forms of extremist threats between 2009 to 2015, Burkina Faso remained relatively peaceful.¹¹ However, the semblance of peace and democratic stability was ephemeral and only guaranteed security and protection to political elites and enriched some of them through connivance with criminal groups; but did not translate into addressing the multiple socio-economic and governance challenges confronting the broad masses of the citizenry.¹² For example, a 2014 study indicated that there were growing levels of poverty, youth unemployment, lack of development, and corruption, creating a state of despondency, especially among the teeming unemployed youth.¹³ It was not surprising therefore that pent-up feelings of frustration culminated in protestations, resulting in the attack on the National Assembly and subsequently led to the resignation of Blaise Compaore in October 2014.

A temporary power tussle ensued between General Honoré Traoré, head of the armed forces, and Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Zida, head of the presidential guard at the presidency¹⁴, as well as an attempted insurrection against the interim leader, Michael Kafando. However, Kafando managed to supervise the November 2015 general elections in which former Prime Minister Roch Marc Christian Kabore won. Typical of new political administrations, Kabore departed from the governance style that established a cooperative relationship between Compaore and criminal groups operating in the northern regions. The breakdown in the relationship and a radical halt to business partnership arguably opened Pandora's box for extremists operating in neighbouring Mali and Niger to forge alliances with the existing criminal networks in the northern regions of Burkina Faso, (including; the Sahel, Nord, Centre-Nord, and Est)¹⁵

Incidentally, the northern regions are endowed with different mineral resources such as manganese, limestone, marble, and phosphates, making them attractive for multi-national companies. In the Sahel

⁷Aning, K., & Amedzrator, L. (2014). Security in the Sahel. Linking the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. *Transatlantic Security from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa*, 12, 59.

⁸See Romniuk, P. and Loada, K. (2014) 'Preventing Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso: Towards National Resilience Amid Regional Insecurity', Global Center on Cooperative Security.

⁹Barlow, E., Doboš, B., & Riegl, M. (2021). Beyond Ouagadougou: State-building and jihadism in Burkina Faso. *African Security Review*, 1-18.

¹⁰Interview with Civil Society Actor, Ouagadougou, February, 2021.

¹¹See Burkina Faso Country Report on Youth Radicalization (Unpublished)

¹²Interview with CSO, Ouagadougou February, 2021.

¹³Romniuk and Loada (2014), op cit, '

¹⁴See 'Power struggle over leadership in Burkina Faso's "Black Spring"' <http://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20141101-power-struggle-over-leadership-burkina-faso-black-spring-compaore> (accessed 30 March, 2020).

¹⁵Aning and Amedzrator, 2014, op cit

Region, for example, mining companies abound, including Essakane and Inata goldmines and Tambo manganese mines in Oudalan province. In the Est Region, mining sites include; Tapoa, Gnagna, Komondijari, Kompienga, and Gourma, while Kasalka Mine operates in the Yatenga province of the Nord Region. The expectation is that exploitation of the mineral resources could bring hope and prosperity to the people in the community through the creation of job opportunities and improvement in basic infrastructure. The irony, however, is that “new companies established by the Western countries have rather worsened the economic situations of the local people by replacing the traditional ways of mining gold with the standard mechanized methods”.¹⁶ As a result, the northernmost regions, which share contiguous boundaries with Mali and Niger remain among the poorest, making them susceptible to radicalization and a hub of extremist attacks. The levels of poverty, unemployment, and perception of neglect and exclusion by the state have been exploited by extremists such as AQIM and al-Mourabitoun, for example, to recruit and indoctrinate the teeming unemployed youth, especially in the Est Region.¹⁷ However, what brought Burkina Faso into the limelight of extremism is the 2016 attacks in Ouagadougou against the restaurant ‘le Cappuciono’ and the Splendid Hotel.¹⁸

Perpetrators, Strategies, and Dynamics of Extremism in Burkina Faso

Since the first major terrorist attacks by a group known as al-Mourabitoun in January 2016 in Burkina Faso, killing several people, the country has increasingly become the epicenter of violent extremism within the wider Sahelian states.¹⁹ Thus, countries such as Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, which have been on the extremism radar for the past years seem to pale in comparison with the current dynamics of extremist attacks in the country. Besides the militancy by the locally formed group by Mallam Diko known as Ansarul Islam, the country has witnessed the emergence of multiple

regional extremist groups, that are aligned to the two main international organizations namely; al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).²⁰ These two groups together with their affiliate regional extremist organizations continue to spread their extremist ideologies across the country through jihadist indoctrination as well as physical entry into the country through the existing weak borders with the neighbouring countries of Mali and Niger. The process of entry into Burkina Faso is aided by an established partnership between the extremist and criminal networks operating at the northern borders of the country.²¹ The al-Qaeda groups largely engage in the indoctrination of the local population, sometimes with the contorted interpretation of jihad and Islam. Similarly, while the ISIL group also engages in indoctrination like al-Qaeda, together with its affiliates also seeks to establish Islamic states in the Sahel-Saharan region.²² Both groups have a similar and barbaric method of killing and also engage in other criminal activities such as trafficking and kidnapping for ransom. Extremist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda include al-Mourabitoun, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Ansar-ul-Islam lil-Ichad wal Jihad (IRSAD), Ansar Dine, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Macina Liberation Front (MLF). On the other hand, those aligned to ISIL include the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Boko Haram, which largely operates in the northern part of Nigeria, attacking security installations, and civilians and particularly engaged in the kidnapping of school girls/students.²³

¹⁶Quoted from the “Burkina Faso Country Report on Youth Radicalization” (Unpublished).

¹⁷Interviews with CSO, Ouagadougou, February, 2021.

¹⁸Ridde, V., Lechat, L., & Meda, I. B. (2016). Terrorist attack of 15 January 2016 in Ouagadougou: how resilient was Burkina Faso’s health system? *BMJ global health*, 1(1). See also Barlow, E., Doboš, B., & Riegl, M. (2021). Beyond Ouagadougou: State-building and jihadism in Burkina Faso. *African Security Review*, 1-18.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Interview with Centre for Democratic Development (CDD), Ouagadougou, February, 2021.

²²Interview with Security Officer, Ouagadougou, February, 2021,

²³2nd Joint NSD-S HUB & ACRST Four-Monthly Report (2020), “Terrorism in the Sahel: facts and figures”, *NATO Southern Hub*

Violence in the Sahel Theatre

The 1,170 violent events observed in the Sahel (specifically Mali, Burkina Faso, and western Niger) in 2020 represent a 44-percent increase over the previous year. This continues an uninterrupted rise in violence involving militant Islamist groups in the region since 2015.

Two groups, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) and the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) account for nearly all of these attacks. FLM is part of a consortium of groups with ties to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb known as Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

The 4,122 fatalities linked to these violent events in 2020 were 57 percent higher than the previous year, underscoring the growing lethality associated with these groups.

Battle-related fatalities (2,902) accounted for 70 percent of all reported fatalities. This mostly reflects the escalation of clashes with national and regional security forces. Almost 21 percent of the battles, however, were between JNIM affiliates and ISGS over territory, revenues, and recruitment.

The violence in the Sahel theater has displaced some 1.7 million people, including more than 170,000 refugees and 1.5 million internally displaced. Burkina Faso accounts for the bulk of this displacement, with roughly 1.1 million displaced. The militant violence has contributed to increased food insecurity—affecting more than 3 million in both Mali and Burkina Faso.

Source: African Center for Strategic Studies, February, 2021.

An interesting, but also worrying development within these groups operating in Burkina Faso and other Sahelian states is the constant disagreements within their ranks over ideologies and strategies of attacks, leading to schism and forging of new alliances with other groups. For example, JNIM, whose name means the “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims,” and

currently operating in Burkina Faso was formed by alliances between al-Qaeda affiliates: Ansar al-Din; al-Murabitoon; and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s (AQIM) Sahara branch. It also absorbed the Macina Liberation Front (also known as the Macina Battalion), an affiliate of Ansar al-Din in central Mali.²⁴ Similar alliances have been established between Ansaroul Islam, formed by a Burkinabe militant, Ibrahim Dicko, and Macina Liberation Front (FLM) established by Amadou Koufa, who tapped into local grievances harbored by Fulani pastoralists in central Mali in 2015.²⁵ On the other hand, the existing relationship between JNIM and ISGS has turned into deadly confrontations due to a quest to control territories.²⁶ In essence, the growing rift between different groups and the forging of new alliances have consequently resulted in the spread of their operations across many regions in the country, using different strategies. Initially, the extremist group’s target was Western interests. To this end, Iyad Aghali, the leader of JNIM had publicly intimated that the organization’s primary enemy is “France, who has been the historical enemy of the Muslims in this part of the Muslim world,” while France’s allies in West Africa (including the United States) serve as secondary targets.²⁷

Over the years, however, the strategies have mutated to include exploitation and recruitment of vulnerable youth through a warped understanding of Jihad. They also use Salafi jihadism²⁸, perceived marginalization of some ethnic groups, especially the Fulani, and general inequality and underdevelopment to engage in extremism. Hence, attacks have spread from the North, Est, Sahel, and Centre-North regions to the south-western part of the country,²⁹ and increasingly spreading towards the coastal states such as Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, and Togo.³⁰ In Burkina Faso, the attacks are partly attributed to increased security operations in Mali and Niger, forcing some of the jihadists across the porous border with Burkina Faso.³¹ As a result of the increased number of radical groups in Burkina Faso, differences in ideologies and strategies, the number of attacks has gradually changed, not only targeting Western and security actors but also civilians, which has generated different forms of violence in many Burkinabe regions, with varied

²⁴See ‘Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM):TNT Terrorism Backgrounder, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <https://www.csis.org/programs/past-projects/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/jamaat-nasr-al-islam> (accessed 25 June, 2021).

²⁵Elizenga, D. and Williams, W. (2020) ‘The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamists Groups in the Sahel’, African Security Brief No.38.

²⁶<https://www.theafricareport.com/29184/sahel-a-new-battlefield-between-is-and-al-qaeda/>

²⁷See ‘Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM): TNT Terrorism Backgrounder, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <https://www.csis.org/programs/past-projects/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/jamaat-nasr-al-islam> (accessed 25 June, 2021).

²⁸Salafi Jihadism means a way of practicing Islam that seeks a return to what the extremist describe as ideal past- a traditional way of practicing Islam by the Prophet Mohammed.

²⁹Barlows and Dabos, 2021, Op cit. See also Interview with CDD official, Ouagadougou, February, 2021.

³⁰Interview with Security Actor, Ouagadougou, February, 2021.

³¹Interview with Civil Society Actor, Ouagadougou, February, 2021.

forms of reactions by the security forces.³² Between 2015 and 2019, Burkina Faso recorded the deaths of 270 civilians in extremist and other militant-related attacks.³³ In 2020, an analysis of recorded extremist incidents in the country was high compared with three other Sahelian states of Mali, Niger, and Chad. While there was a general increase in attacks in the Sahel by 21.5%, Burkina Faso was the most affected with an average of 29 attacks per month, followed by Mali, Niger, and Chad.³⁴ Like other Sahelian states, the attacks in Burkina Faso have been aided by the use of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), which are locally made and also imported from other countries within the region. For example, Ammonium Nitrate (known locally as fertilizer and used to manufacture explosives) is partly imported from Ghana through weak border and control mechanisms, but more palpably occurring at the distribution levels between farmers.³⁵ The use of these devices has exacerbated the security situation, with implications on internal displacements, disproportionately impacting women, and the youth. For example, as of January 2019, about 60, 000 persons have been internally displaced in the country. This number increased by about another 68, 000 between January and March of 2019, and further soared to 765, 000 in total as of February 2020.³⁶

These developments are worrying and are compounded by new dynamics relating to the conflation between extremism, criminality, and local banditry. Stated differently, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between extremist attacks and acts of criminality. In the past, extremists claim responsibility for attacks and challenge the security forces to pursue them in their various cells. However, in recent times, besides the expanding focus of the attacks, targeting marketplaces, churches, and mosques, claiming responsibility for such attacks has

reduced significantly, suggesting the involvement of criminal groups and local bandits.³⁷ This assertion is buttressed by the fact that extremist groups thrive on their ability to generate funds through criminal activities, including kidnapping for ransom, drug, and human trafficking, and more recently theft of cattle and clandestine gold panning in the country. For example, kidnappings of local or international NGO staff have been reported on several occasions in Burkina Faso.³⁸ Similarly, clandestine gold panning remains a financial windfall for extremists operating in the country; though in many instances not through direct participation in the production value chain, but through specialized roles of protecting producers, securing clandestine sites, and transport.³⁹ Such indirect roles have given financial support to militant groups operating in the Liptakpo Gurma region, enabling them

“to procure means of subsistence (in particular consumable goods—food, medicine, etc.), operational means (arms, ammunition, motorbikes, spare parts, fuel, and means of communication such as phones, top-up cards, or phone credit), and generate financial resources (namely through selling stolen livestock)”⁴⁰

Response Strategies to the Extremism and Terrorism

In the first place, it is suggested that there was a “bad” assessment of the security situation due to the politics around the crisis. The present government has accused the former President of harboring the extremists (criminals) in the country during his tenure; he made little effort to equip the security forces with, for instance, intelligence capabilities to deal with the extremist threat which was imminent. Similarly, there was an initial presumption that the terrorists were coming from neighbouring countries such as Mali. However, the authorities and the populace have now realized that Burkina Faso citizens are also directly involved in the extremism attacks.⁴¹ This makes

³²Barlows and Dabos, 2021, Op cit.

³³See Acaps. ‘Burkina Faso: Conflict and Displacement.’ January 24, 2019 <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/acaps-briefing-note-burkina-faso-conflict-and-displacement-24-january-2019> (accessed 28 June, 2021)

³⁴2nd Joint NSD-S HUB & ACRST Four-Monthly Report (2020), “Terrorism in the Sahel: facts and figures”, NATO Southern Hub.

³⁵Interview with a Retired Military Officer, Ouagadougou, February, 2021.

³⁶United Nations. ‘Burkina Faso: Situation Report’. February 27, 2020.

³⁷Interview with a Retired Military Officer, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February, 2021.

³⁸Seminary Report (Feb, 2020) ‘The countries of the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea facing the jihadist peril: Operationalizing and Coordinating Response’ Promediation, Bamako

³⁹ibid.

⁴⁰Assanvo, W., Dakono, B., Thérroux-Bénoni, L. A., & Maïga, I. (2019). Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma.

⁴¹. Interview in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February, 2021.

the fight even more complicated as citizens' human rights are often perceived to be in the way of security operations. Tapping into, and utilizing local knowledge and intelligence gives the extremists a competitive edge over the security forces who supposedly operate in a top-down hierarchical structure. The confusion over whether the threat was internal or external also created another layer of difficulty in which neither deciding if the military or the internal security forces such as the gendarmerie should lead in the response effort.⁴²

Moreover, being an asymmetric threat, the military and security forces had great difficulty in responding to the situation. This was because the security forces and, indeed, the political establishment were unprepared for such a threat. The initial strategy was, however, that "if there were no attacks, the security forces needed not to react or respond".⁴³ Thus, even though, the security forces may have some intelligence about suspicious militant characters and behaviours in the communities, they had no policy to pursue, nor capture nor kill. However, this security posturing has since shifted to a "robust" pursuit of the suspected extremist or terrorists.⁴⁴

The new security posturing was necessitated by a recognition to introduce national security which emphasised reorganization of the security institutions, training and recruitment of personnel, and effective collaboration with foreign partners, especially within the framework of G-5 Sahel and Operation Barkhane in the wider Sahel region security intervention.

1. Reorganisation Of The Security Sector

The new security policy proposed coordinated sectoral security strategies within each of the 6 key ministries:

- a. Ministry of Defence;
- b. Ministry of Social Action;
- c. Ministry of Security ;
- d. Ministry of Justice;
- e. Ministry of Human Rights; and
- f. Ministry of Territorial Administration.

Each ministry is required to develop its own strategy for its sectors to complement the response effort against violent extremism.⁴⁵

2. Enhancing Civil-Military Relations

The strategy is also ensuring that police stations and military camps and installations are extended to

areas where there were no such facilities or services to protect the citizens. There is also recruitment and formation of "Volunteers for the Defence of Security" (VDPs) in the communities. The VDPs are recruited and trained by the security forces (especially the military) and are given weapons and work in close collaboration with the security forces.⁴⁶

3. The police, military, and gendarmerie are stationed in the villages now, especially where there was no such physical security presence in the past.

- a. Operational mechanism
- b. Military approach (symmetric or asymmetric approach?)
- c. Military objective (fighting a clear enemy which has been identified?)
- d. Link with G-5 Sahel and Accra Initiative

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has sought to discuss the nature of violent extremism in Burkina Faso, tracing the antecedents to both internal socio-economic, political, and geo-strategic dynamics, as well as external imperatives within the wider Sahel. It also examined the perpetrators of the acts, strategies employed, evolving dynamics of the threat, as well as responses by the military, other security forces, and community actors in the country. The paper has demonstrated that although Burkina Faso was relatively peaceful during the 27-year rule of Blaise Compaore, it did not translate into addressing the drivers of fragility such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, injustice, marginalization, and mismanagement of state resources. Consequently, the semblance of peace and stability during Compaore's regime only guaranteed security and protection to the President and political elites who had established an 'unholy alliance' with criminal groups operating in the northern part of the country. The removal of Compaore from power through persistent protestations by the frustrated and disgruntled youth exposed the weaknesses in the country. Exacerbated by the weakness of the country's borders, especially with neighbouring Mali and Niger, the country began to witness a deterioration in its security with the first major terrorist attack occurring in 2016 in Ouagadougou. This was attributed to several factors, including growing jihadism, weak borders that allowed extremist groups operating in Mali to gain

⁴². Interview in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February, 2021.

⁴³. Interview in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February, 2021.

⁴⁴. Interview in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February, 2021.

⁴⁵. Interview senior security officer in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February, 2021.

⁴⁶. Focused group discussions with security officers in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February, 2021.

access to the country, but more importantly due to the uncompromising posture of the new government led by Marc Christian Kabore, who severed the relationship with alleged criminal groups operating in the northern part of the country. Since the first incident, therefore, Burkina Faso has increasingly become notorious for extremism targeting Western interests by engaging in kidnapping for ransom, attacking security forces and installations, as well as soft targets, including churches, marketplaces, mosques, and killing innocent civilians.

Besides the known global extremist organizations namely; al-Qaeda and ISIL, other affiliate groups operating in the country include; JNIM, ISGS, al-Mourabitoun, IRSAD, Ansar Dine, MUJAO) and MLF. Among these, however, JNIM has become the most lethal, using SALWs and IEDs to launch attacks, undermining the security of the country. Although the military, together with other security forces (eg police, Gendarmerie), has responded to the growing threat of extremism in the country, the initial difficulties relate to the improper assessment of the threat, which is asymmetrical in nature, lack of adequate training and logistics to deal decisively with the threats. Other non-core security agencies like the forest guards and community watch groups such as the VDP and Kaleogo also play a role in responding to the threat. However, the country has largely relied on the Kinetic (hard military approaches), which has generated a series of reactions relating to human rights infractions and also worsened the security situation. This has consequently raised the debate about the need to change the response approach or better still combine hard and soft measures as critical to addressing the threat of violent extremism. In this regard, the need to strengthen the role of community groups in intelligence gathering has become imperative. This will, however, require training to reduce the potential of such groups engaging in similar human rights abuse characteristics of the military approach.

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