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# Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso: Examining Responses From The State Defence And Civil Self Defence

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### Summary

On January 24, 2022, members of the army, who were critical of the government's policy for combating terrorism, overthrew the government of Burkina Faso. The military coup exacerbated months of worsening ties between former President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and the army in a nation where the populace and military were fed up with the state's despair in the face of lethal terrorist assaults. Since 2015, jihadists affiliated with *Al Qaeda* and the Islamic State have killed thousands and displaced an estimated 1.5 million people in Burkina Faso. Although the state employed strong methods to respond to violent extremism, the approaches have had limited impact as efforts among the security agencies are not clearly defined due to a lack of coordination. This policy brief offers an analysis of how the state defence institutions together with civil self-defence groups such as *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (VDP) which is the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland have responded to violent extremism in Burkina Faso. The study indicated that:

- The Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) is a civil self-defence organisation formed by Kaboré's government to engage local communities in responding against violent extremism.
- In Burkina Faso, the VDP is accused of aggravating intercommunal conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, as well as being implicated in several arbitrary arrests, summary executions, torture, and rapes.
- Gender integration in counter-terrorism strategies is limited.

### Introduction

With another coup d'état on 23 January 2022, Burkina Faso's political instability became more obvious. The military seized control of the country after becoming increasingly disillusioned with a government that was unable to address the country's spiralling terrorist and security crisis.<sup>1</sup> Burkina Faso's President, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, was overthrown by a military coup on January 24 2022. The country is currently experiencing a security crisis. Civilians, as well as the military and security forces, have long expressed frustration with Kaboré's political leadership.<sup>2</sup> Since 2015, the country has been wracked by an unparalleled crisis that has resulted in 7569 casualties and displaced over 1.6 million people within six years.<sup>3</sup> Violent extremist groups have targeted civilians, and government officials particularly the armed forces who have sustained significant losses.<sup>4</sup> The deadliest attack in Burkina Faso occurred on June 2021 in the village of Solhan causing 132 casualties. However, the violent extremist attacks in the capital Ouagadougou drew national, international and public media attention, obscuring the growing insecurity in the north. The violent extremist groups have found new constructive grounds in Burkina Faso, allowing them to spread their operations in the country by exploiting interwoven local disputes such as political and economic marginalization, ethnic, religious, as well as political conflicts, and grievances.<sup>5</sup> Since 2018, violent extremist groups including Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Security Studies (2022). *What caused the coup in Burkina Faso?* <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/what-caused-the-coup-in-burkina-faso> (Accessed 20th February 2022).

<sup>2</sup>Demuyneck, M. & Coleman, J. (2022). *Political Upheaval and Counter-Terrorism in Burkina Faso: Between a Rock and a Hard Place*. International Centre for Counter-terrorism. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/political-upheaval-and-counter-terrorism-burkina-faso-between-rock-and-hard-place> (Accessed 20th March 2022).

<sup>3</sup>Abdallah, M. & Lartey, E. (2022). *Fighting The Enemy Without the Community: Interrogating the Strategy of Countering Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso*. KAIPTC Occasional Paper 48. <https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/occasional-paper-48.pdf> (Accessed 21 March 2023).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2021), *Burkina Faso Strategic Framework 2021-2025* <https://um.dk> (Accessed 18th June 2021).

and Ansar-ul Islam have claimed responsibility for the attacks on schools, hospitals, government offices as well as security checkpoints in the country's north and east.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, these extremist groups attacked churches in remote areas to incite religious conflict. According to government estimates, as of June 2021, violent extremism and inter-communal violence have killed over 1,400 people and forced over 1.3 million people to flee their homes, with children accounting for 60% of the victims and women for 23%.<sup>7</sup> Recent events in Burkina Faso certainly put present policies into question, but they also highlight the danger of prioritizing counter-terrorism over tackling the complex circumstances that have allowed violent extremism to spread throughout the country.

This insecurity context prompted a rethink of security provisions on two levels in Burkina Faso, firstly at the national level - a rethinking of the security governance model and improving the operations of state security forces<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, at the local level, the non-state security initiatives such as Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherland (VDP), established by former President Kabore's government in January 2020 have grown into a much larger group.<sup>9</sup> The objectives of these self-defence groups aim to take care of the responsibilities that are ignored by the state with regard to protecting the community, animals as well as natural resources.

### The Nature of Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso

Al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist organisations include al-Mourabitoun, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Jama'at Nusrat al-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 are some of the organisations involved (MLF).<sup>10</sup> Ansarul Islam, the first native Islamist extremist group in Burkina Faso has claimed responsibility for most

of the violent attacks in Burkina Faso. This group is assumed to have ties to JNIM in the Sahel and is challenging the prevailing social system in the Soum province in Burkina Faso.<sup>11</sup> JNIM more recently took over the northern and central regions of Mali, while Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) was confined to the northern Burkina Faso and western Niger as a result of conflicts with JNIM that started in 2020.<sup>12</sup> It is believed that most of the fighters originate from Burkina Faso and are not motivated by religious fanaticism. However, the extremist groups have taken advantage of the State's weakness and exploited local tensions to gain a foothold. Even though violent extremism is largely a result of a spill over from the insecurities of the affected neighbouring countries such as Mali, the crisis in Burkina Faso has strong domestic trajectories.<sup>13</sup> Some of these include banditry, violent community conflict, organised crime, and erosion of the state's legitimacy and monopoly over violence. Furthermore, livestock-theft, illicit exploitation of natural resources such as artisanal mining and poaching as well as trafficking of weapons and ammunition are all interwoven with links to various forms of organised crime.<sup>14</sup> There is also an increase in unresolved grievances of the local population feeling abandoned by the state concerning access to basic services.<sup>15</sup> Many of these extremist groups, led by a small core of ideologies are believed to be made up of farmers and herders who have been victims of land-related abuses or racketeering, bandits with weapons, gold miners in need of security as well

as stigmatized groups who are motivated by local grievances.<sup>16</sup> Burkina Faso's situation has been worsened by overburdened and overstressed security personnel, who have suffered numerous losses and have unlawfully killed civilians because they are usually unable to discern between foes.<sup>17</sup> As a result, jihadist recruitment is motivated less by ideological and religious reasons and more by

<sup>6</sup>Interview with a National Youth Council Representative, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February 2021.

<sup>7</sup>The North Africa Journal & MEA Risk (2021). *Burkina Faso: Quarter million people forced to abandon their homes so far this year*. <https://north-africa.com/2021/07/burkina-faso-quarter-million-people-forced-to-abandon-their-homes-so-far-this-year/> (Accessed 20th August 2021).

<sup>8</sup>Interview with a Senior Security Officer, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February 2021.

<sup>9</sup>Schmauder, A. & Willeme, A. (2021). *The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland*. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/volunteers-defense-homeland> (Accessed 15 March 2021).

<sup>10</sup>International Crisis Group (2020) Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/287-burkina-faso-sortir-de-la-spirale-des-violences> (Accessed 20th April 2021).

<sup>11</sup>International Crisis Group (2017) The social roots of jihadist violence in Burkina Faso's North. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-fasos-north> (Accessed 5th March 2021).

<sup>12</sup>Center for Preventive Action (2023). *Violent Extremism in the Sahel*. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel> (Accessed 21st March 2023).

<sup>13</sup>Interview with an official of National Youth Council, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February 2021.

<sup>14</sup>ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2021). Burkina Faso Strategic Framework 2021-2025.

<sup>16</sup>International Crisis Group (2020) Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/287-burkina-faso-sortir-de-la-spirale-des-violences> (Accessed 20th April 2021).

<sup>17</sup>Interview with an official of Centre for democratic Governance (CGD), Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 21 February 2021.

the desire to exact revenge for painful losses. The groups incite ethnic feuds, then offer protection, promising security, and justice, as well as economic opportunities, while instilling hatred and mistrust in allegedly corrupt and misguided authorities.<sup>18</sup>

### The State Response to Violent Extremism

In 2013, the government launched a series of reforms and initiatives to respond to the threat of violent extremism, such as *Operation Northern Security Mission*. In addition to the deployment of security forces along the most porous borders, the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), attached to the Presidency was founded in 2015.<sup>19</sup> With the Ouagadougou attack in 2016, which drew international attention, the Burkinabè government originally misjudged the seriousness of the threat and was thus caught off guard and unprepared.<sup>20</sup> Despite Burkina Faso's location in the volatile Sahel region, the 2016 incident in Ouagadougou exposed the state's unpreparedness to respond to the threat. Burkina Faso's defence forces then developed several distinctive structures in response to the 2016 attacks. For instance, they have enhanced their hostage rescue, explosives neutralization, and investigative abilities.<sup>21</sup> In addition, police patrols in cities and on highways have been boosted. Local security measures, such as the formation of civilian self-defence forces, forest squads (Koglweogo), and Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland' (VDP) among others have been part of the state response to curbing violent extremism. The self-defence forces have semi-formal affiliation with the security forces and the recruitment process is governed by a VDP law.<sup>22</sup> VDPs established in 2020 are to support the military forces, and safeguard areas where defence personnel are absent.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, VDPs were formed with the dual goal of organizing the populace in the face of armed group attacks and

establishing stronger governmental reach over the country's increasingly disruptive extremist groups.

While the violent extremist responses have primarily been military in nature, various efforts have been put in place to address the crisis in Burkina Faso. For instance, the imposition of a state of emergency in some regions, allows the government to use strong measures in the fight against violent extremist groups.<sup>24</sup> Also, military forces started *Operation Otapuanu* to combat the Islamist insurgency in the country's east, followed by *Operation Ndofou* in May 2019 for the North, Centre-Nord, and Sahel regions.<sup>25</sup> By restricting The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) capacity to readily cross the region, Operation Otapuanu has had some successes. Operation Ndofou, however, struggled to re-establish security in the North, where extremist groups are familiar with the terrain and can easily cross into Mali.<sup>26</sup> The State defence also collaborates with some civil society organizations (CSOs), such as Partnerships for Peace and the Women's International League for Peace Freedom (Wilpf), to develop national plans for non-military approaches to countering violent extremism (CVE) and programmes to assist communities at risk of being targeted by violent extremist groups, organizing sensitisation campaigns as well as to combat arms proliferation.<sup>27</sup> The critical role played by CSOs in Burkina Faso's Security Sector Reform (SSR) processes, aims to effectively tackle insecurity through information, education, and communication, as well as the development of vital skills. The Defense Policy (2004) and the National Internal Security Strategy (2010) serve as the foundation of Burkina Faso's national security policy.<sup>28</sup> A National Strategy to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism was adopted in May 2021.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Abdallah & Lartey (2022). Op cit.

<sup>19</sup>Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (2020) Burkina Faso Country Background note. <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Country-Profiles/Burkina-Faso-Note-d-information-RSS>.

<sup>20</sup>International Crisis Group (2020). Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/287-burkina-faso-sortir-de-la-spirale-des-violences>. (Accessed 18th March 2021).

<sup>21</sup>Interview with a Senior Security Officer, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February 2021.

<sup>22</sup>Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (2021) *Burkina Faso-Current Critical Security Issues*. <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library/Case-Studies/Burkina-Faso-Current-Critical-Security-Issues> (Accessed 8th September 2021).

<sup>23</sup>Schmauder, A. and Willeme, A. (2021) The Volunteers of the Defense of the Homeland <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/volunteers-defense-homeland> (Accessed 2nd April 2021).

<sup>24</sup>Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (2020) *Burkina Faso Country Background note*. <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Country-Profiles/Burkina-Faso> (Accessed on 8th September 2021).

<sup>25</sup>Interview with a Senior Security Officer 1, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February 2021.

<sup>26</sup>Le Roux, P. (2019). Responding to the Rise in Violent Extremism in the Sahel. Spotlight, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, <https://africacenter.org/publication/responding-rise-violent-extremism-sahel/> (Accessed 5th March 2021).

<sup>27</sup>Interview with an official of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Wilpf), Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso February 2021.

<sup>28</sup>Ouédraogo, E. (2018). National Security Strategy Development. Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/NSSD-WORKING-DRAFT-BURKINA-FASO.pdf> (Accessed 5th March 2021).

<sup>29</sup>DCAF (2021) Burkina Faso-Current Critical Security Issues. <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library/Case-Studies/Burkina-Faso-Current-Critical-Security-Issues>. Accessed 08th September 2021.

## The Obstacles of The State Response Strategy

Member States were confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic with numerous, varied, and ever-changing challenges that impacted almost every area of policy and practise including, counter-terrorism and violent extremism (CVE). Furthermore, the sudden requirement to give emergency aid towards the control of the pandemic put a strain on the national budgets, since economic activities decreased across the region.<sup>30</sup> This resulted in the eruption of protests across the country in response to jihadist violence and the army's powerlessness. State security actors, notably military officers, and the gendarmerie are generally unwilling to share security information with other agencies and seek to maintain control and monopoly of security intelligence under the guise of secrecy.<sup>31</sup> Situations in which the state is unable to ensure the safety of its population, and without effective protection systems in place have contributed to a decrease in public trust in the state and the legal system. This has led to societal friction and disputes resulting in violent conflict. While calling for effective operational and collaborative efforts between VDPs and the armed forces as well as the police, there is a lack of resources earmarked to train, operate, and manage VDPs. State Security Forces (SSF) are legitimate but ineffective because the operational coverage in the country is limited and incoherent. For example, half of the 30 departments in the Centre-East area, where Tenkodogo is located, have no state security forces.<sup>32</sup> Since mid-2020, some community leaders in some of the hardest-hit north-eastern districts in Burkina Faso have taken matters into their own hands and are collaborating with the extremist groups for their own safety. resolutions. For instance, in Nassoumbou, a province in Soum, the community agreed to adhere to the strict Islamic rules introduced by the extremist groups and offered support in exchange for protection such as permitting residents to return to their villages and imposing less harassing checkpoints.<sup>33</sup> This is because the community leaders

perceived this to be their only route to safety since the state security institution is hardly present. Despite the budget assessment, there has not been a significant improvement in, for instance, the "living conditions" or "operational capabilities," such as the supply deficit of the security forces which has slowed operations while extremist groups have taken advantage of this deficit.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

Violent extremist attacks have been intense in Burkina Faso, specifically in the northern and eastern parts of the country along the borders with Mali and Niger. This security situation is extremely disturbing as extremist groups exploit inter-community tensions and state fragility to expand their operations. The ability of violent extremist groups to coerce support from locals has led to mistrust and uncertainty for the state in its efforts to combat violent extremism.

## Recommendations

- The government of Burkina Faso in collaboration with stakeholders such as civil society organisations, private sectors as well as religious leaders should foster resilience through development programmes and community involvement to prevent the growth of violent extremism in the country.
- There should be public sensitization for security services, civil self-defence forces, youths, civil society organizations, and religious leaders to build mutual confidence in order to share intelligence and reduce inter-community tension.
- As a preventive measure, the VDPs should be subsumed into the security forces. To achieve an effective enlistment, applicants should pass all the security checks and behavioural aspects.

<sup>30</sup>AFP (2021). *Burkina Faso assesses army failures after deadliest jihadist attack*. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/burkina-faso-assesses-army-failures-deadliest-jihadist-attack-3629296> (Accessed on 25th November 2021).

<sup>31</sup>Interview with an official of Rasalao, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso February 2021.

<sup>32</sup>Leclercq, S. and Matagne, G. (2019). *With or Without You: The Governance of (Local) Security and the Koglweogo Movement in Burkina Faso*. <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/article/10.5334/sta.716/> (Accessed 2 April 2021).

<sup>33</sup>Interview with a an official of Centre for democratic Governance Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February 2021.

<sup>34</sup>Interview with a Senior Security Officer, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February 2021.

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