

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

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in 2019 alone. The perpetrators justified the killings by explaining that the victims were Christian, or had sided with the Government or the West.² As a result, hundreds of thousands of Burkinabe fled their homes and villages and sought refuge elsewhere.

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This violence and grave instability affects every Burkinabe, especially those residing in the north and north east of the country. The Christian community,

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

² "Burkina Faso: Armed Islamist Atrocities Surge", *Human Rights Watch*, January 6, 2020. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/06/burkina-faso-armed-islamist-atrocities-surge>.

representing about 25% of the population,³ is particularly targeted for their beliefs. A few examples of attacks carried out in 2019 and beginning of 2020:

- On April 28, 2019, jihadist militants executed the pastor and 5 Christians from the Assemblies of God church in Silgadji village;⁴
- On May 12, 2019, jihadist militants attacked a Catholic church in Dablo and killed six people, including the priest, Father Simeon Yampa. The gunmen then set fire to the church and other buildings in the area.⁵
- On December 1, 2019, alleged armed jihadist militants executed 14 Christians of the Protestant church in Hantoukoura. The victims include the pastor of that church and a young boy of around 12 years old.⁶
- On February 16, 2020, militants attacked a protestant church in the town of Pansi, in Yagha province, killing 24 and injuring at least 18. Militants set the church on fire.⁷

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 Government also launched two military operations: Operation Otapuanu in March 2019 to counter the jihadist insurgency in the eastern part of the country; and Operation N dofou in May 2019 for the north, center-north, and Sahel Regions. Comprised of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, the G5 – an institutional framework for policies and security matters in the Sahel – has enhanced security cooperation by creating the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which is supported by the European Union.⁸ On January 13, 2020, the G5 heads of state and the French President Macron held a Summit in Pau to discuss strategies to combat Islamic militancy, resulting in the reinforcement of French-led Operation Barkhane, which has been active in the Sahel since August 2014. They also created the “Coalition for the Sahel” to which the G5, France and other partnering countries will participate to combat Islamic militancy.⁹

Since the beginning of the crisis the Burkinabe Government lost control of territories in the north and

³ “Burkina Faso: Country Dossier”, *World Watch Research*, December 2019, pp. 10. Available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Burkina-Faso-WWL-2020-Country-Dossier-February-update.pdf> (password: freedom).

⁴ “Burkina Faso: Armed Islamist Atrocities Surge”, *Ibid.*

⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/12/africa/burkina-faso-church-attack/index.html>

⁶ “Burkina Faso: Armed Islamist Atrocities Surge”, *Ibid.*

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/02/17/world/africa/ap-af-burkina-faso-killings-.html>.

⁸ <https://africacenter.org/publication/responding-rise-violent-extremism-sahel/> and “The European Union's Partnership with the Sahel Counties Factsheet”, Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet_eu_g5_sahel_july-2019.pdf.

⁹ <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200113-sommet-pau-paris-le-g5-sahel-resserrent-rangs-contre-jihadistes> (in French), and <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/01/13/sommet-de-pau-declaration-conjointe-des-chefs-detat>.



Photo: Naomi's husband was killed in a militant attack in Arbinda in April 2019. She was forced to move to Kaya with her 9 children. While they were accommodated with the church, they struggled to get enough food.

north east of the country to jihadist groups, which infiltrated from neighboring Mali and continue to move between borders for their attacks and operations. Moreover, 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.¹⁰

Burkina Faso is one of the least developed countries in the world.¹¹ 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

The extreme level of violence affecting the country displaced over a half million individuals.¹² Serious threats of malnutrition for lack of food security exists among those displaced, particularly threatening for displaced children. In October 2019, UNICEF reported that the population affected by the crisis was in urgent need of emergency water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services.¹³ 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.¹⁴ FBOs

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

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The dire security situation has forced more than 2,000 schools to close, leaving more than 320,000 children without education.¹⁵ UNICEF has succeeded to reach less than 15% of the affected children with access to education (in some cases, informal education) due to lack of capacity and insecurity.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

¹⁰ <https://qz.com/africa/1756917/burkina-faso-has-replaced-mali-at-heart-of-sahel-security-crisis/>.

¹¹ "Burkina Faso: Country Dossier", *Ibid.*, pp. 11.

¹² Current numbers of IDPs can be found at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/bfa>.

¹³ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Burkina%20Faso%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%208%2C%20October%202019.pdf>

¹⁴ "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. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0106_EN.pdf.

¹⁵ <https://www.nrc.no/news/2020/january/burkina-faso-shattered-by-worlds-fastest-growing-displacement-crisis/>.

¹⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Burkina%20Faso%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%208%2C%20October%202019.pdf>.

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-37634702>.

¹⁸ "Burkina Faso: Preserving the religious balance", *International Crisis Group*, 6 September 2016. Available at : <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-preserving-religious-balance>.

¹⁹ See, for example, the initiative DroitLibre.TV, a free online TV channel that promotes human rights and social cohesion <http://droitlibre.tv/spip.php?page=a-propos>; or CineDroitLibre, a film festival exclusively focused on human rights issues <http://cinedroitlibre.org/news/burkina-faso/>.

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 provide **further assistance to the Support Joint Force G5S contingents** and the wider Burkinabe Security Forces, providing capacity training and expertise advice on the model of EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali deployed by the European Union;
- The G5 Sahel 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 half a 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.

Any questions? Please email advocacy@od.org