

Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso

Executive Summary

Violent extremism is on the rise again in several regions of Burkina Faso after talks between authorities and insurgent groups collapsed around early 2021. An attack on the northeastern village of Solhan in June resulted in the death of over 150 people and was carried out by children between the ages of 12 and 14 according to the Burkinabe government and the United Nations. This atrocity was one of the most violent assaults on Burkina Faso since the security crisis started in the country in 2015. Burkina Faso's strategic location in the heart of west Africa means its security situation is deeply linked to transnational trends. That said, the depth of cohesion between violent extremist groups (VEGs) and their affiliates, or regional offshoots, remains somewhat unclear.

The two key regional violent extremist groups (rVEGs) are Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), an umbrella coalition of Salafi-Jihadist insurgents led by Iyad Ag Ghaly and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) whose leader, Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahrawi, is reported to have been killed by French forces in September 2021. JNIM has pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda (AQ). ISGS to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (IS). Firstly, the depth of these allegiances is not clear cut. The pragmatic JNIM is increasingly focused on its regional objectives and although it has pledged allegiance to AQ, the depth of the relationship and the amount of information it receives from AQ leadership is not well known. While ISGS uses the branding of IS they seem to be more of a terrorist franchise rather than a group receiving direct instruction from IS' leadership in the Middle East.

Local violent extremist groups (IVEGs) are dispersed predominantly throughout Burkina Faso's north and east and like rVEG's relationship to global violent extremist groups (gVEGs), the depth of their relationship to rVEGs can often be thrown into question. IVEGs can often take credit for an attack that they did not plan, target opposition groups without permission from rVEG leadership or engage in violence rooted in ethnic grievances rather than ideological struggle. In a social media driven world, this opportunism should always be a key factor in regional analysis of VEG trends. This is not to underestimate the relationships that do exist but more to encourage a critical approach to Burkina Faso's security situation.

The behaviour and strategic goals of VEGs in Burkina Faso can also depend on their geographical location. In the northern Sahel region religious ideology appears to be a key driver of violent extremism. In the East, economic factors play a significant role in both group allegiances and land disputes. In the Centre-North region, which is home to the majority of the country's internally displaced population (IDP), conflict between IVEGs can often be fuelled by ethnic grievances that were established before, or exacerbated by, the Sahel crisis. The growing number of IDPs has also created tension in this region.

The introduction of the 'Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland' (VDP) in January 2020 further added to the complexity of Burkina Faso's security crisis. Created as auxiliaries to support the country's beleaguered security forces, they are essentially armed local groups given little training and the authority to defend their community through force. Instead of improving the security situation they have often worsened it by targeting pastoralists, such as the Peuhl, using their new powers for economic gain, or exacerbating inter-communal tensions. They have sparred with other self-defence groups such as the Koglweogo and Dozo, who are also accused of abuses against civilians. While officially the VDP's strategic goal is to fight violent extremism, their desire for influence should not rule out a role in criminal networks, especially those in relation to everyday goods smuggling.

Much about the day-to-day-movement on the ground in Burkina Faso remains unknown and leaders of gVEGs, rVEGs and IVEGs rarely, if ever, relay reliable information that gives a clear insight into their network, aspirations, and struggles. Across the badlands of the Sahel and indeed across Burkina Faso the situation can change rapidly due to the failure of negotiations, generations-old land disputes, control of strategic locations, the implementation of religious ideology or shifting alliances among VEGs. That said, there are trends and geographical locations that are controlled by groups who pledge allegiance to the same gVEGs regularly. It is not only the expansion of VEGs strategic goals that has led to Burkina Faso's weakened security state. Land degradation due to the impact of climate change and changing land ownership laws has also triggered competition for natural resources which in turn has benefited VEGs.

Methodology

Data for this report was gathered throughout 2021 and included a two-week mission in Burkina Faso in February. Field interviews with 20 diplomats, local analysts, human rights activists, displaced persons, self-defence groups, local officials and state representatives took place in Ouagadougou, Kaya, Barsalogo, Fada-N'gourma and Tanwalbougou. In October follow-up calls were conducted with six local and international analysts and human rights campaigners who have reliable secondary accounts of recent events.

Key Findings

Critical Approach to VEG Allegiances

Since the 2016 attacks on the Splendid Hotel and the Cappuccino restaurant, which killed 28 people, violent extremism in Burkina Faso has gained international recognition¹. Both Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and

¹ BBC: Burkina Faso attack: Foreigners killed at luxury hotel <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-35332792> [accessed October 2021]

Al-Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for the attacks, since then both groups have merged under the banner of JNIM². It is unknown how many IVEGs are in existence in Burkina Faso but the two significant rVEGs are JNIM and ISGS. Firstly, although these two groups have pledged allegiance to gVEGs the depth of the relationship leaves room for question. These insurgencies are not run from above meaning they are not thought to receive daily or weekly instruction about key targets to attack or a quota of fighters to recruit³. JNIM is a transnational group focused on expanding its influence across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. ISGS does not command the same influence as JNIM in Burkina Faso and is more of a “terrorist franchise” than a group directed closely by higher ups in the Middle East⁴. Both JNIM and ISGS have showed signs of adhering to AQ and IS direction. This was most notable when the relationship between the two broke down around 2019 when they stopped pooling resources to expand their sphere of influence⁵. Between 2019 and January 2021 analysts have reported that ISGS and JNIM “have clashed at least 125 times”⁶. It is believed this decision by both groups has been supported by their gVEG allies, especially IS central⁷.

While there is no sign yet that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has benefited rVEGs or IVEGs across the Sahel, other gVEG losses and gains have impacted the region. As IS lost most of its territory in Iraq and Syria between 2017 and 2018, media support from IS leadership to ISGS and other affiliates across the African continent was boosted in an attempt to show strategic gains globally⁸. Despite new leadership at the helm of AQ’s North African branch it is thought their collaboration with JNIM will continue, showing a trend at AQ’s strategic goals across North Africa and the Sahel remain somewhat flexible as long as they feed long-term objectives⁹.

Territorial Differences

According to The World Bank, Burkina Faso is a country of approximately 20 million people¹⁰. There are also thought to be roughly 60 different ethnic groups with the majority being the Mossi¹¹. 61% of the population is Muslim and 19% Roman Catholic according to the US State Department¹². Recognising that this is an

² CSIS: Examining Extremism: Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-jamaat-nasr-al-islam-wal-muslimin> [accessed October 2021]

³ Phone interview with international analyst October 2021

⁴ Phone interview with international analyst October 2021

⁵ Phone interview with international analyst October 2021

⁶ ISPI: The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/conflict-between-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-sahel-year-29305> [accessed October 2021]

⁷ Phone interview with local analyst October 2021

⁸ Phone interview with international analyst October 2021

⁹ NewLines Institute: Implications of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s New Leadership <https://newlinesinstitute.org/al-qaeda/implications-of-al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-new-leadership/> [accessed October 2021]

¹⁰ World Bank <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=BF> [accessed October 2021]

¹¹ IWGIA Indigenous peoples in Burkina Faso <https://www.iwgia.org/en/burkina-faso.html> [accessed October 2021]

¹² State Department: 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burkina Faso <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/burkina-faso/> [accessed October 2021]

oversimplified approach to breaking down the complexities of Burkina Faso's dire security situation and the numerous state and non-state actors driving it, local analysts have noticed some trends in the North, East and Centre-North regions that can help shine a light on the short-term and long-term strategies and strategic goals driving IVEGs and rVEGs. Both the North and East regions are the poorest in the country and the civilian populations there have had little to no interaction with state officials in the capital, Ouagadougou¹³. Religious influences are thought to dominate the conflict in the North. Of course they also play a role in the East but economic factors often play an additional role in this region¹⁴. The Centre-North currently houses the majority of the country's IDP population, who number one million, the arrival of these people is thought to have fuelled local grievances and inter-communal tensions¹⁵.

The behaviour of IVEGs in the northern Sahel region has often fallen into line with those of IVEGs and rVEGs in neighbouring Mali who have pledged allegiance to JNIM and by extension, AQ. While the North of Burkina Faso has seen overspill from the conflict in Mali, homegrown VEGs exist. The most influential is Ansaroul Islam which was established by Malam Ibrahim Dicko, a Peuhl preacher from Soum Province who was killed in 2017¹⁶. The group came to prominence in 2016 following an attack on the Burkinabe military in Nassoumbou where 12 people were killed¹⁷. Dicko had built up a following by highlighting the class inequality in the North, the central state's indifference to local and indigenous communities and the lack of investment in the area¹⁸. The core and majority of the group has strong links to JNIM, while some units have pledged allegiance to ISGS. There have been reports of Ansaroul Islam conducting attacks on the Burkinabe and Malian side of the northern border, which indicates close alignment to JNIM¹⁹. Although the group is majority Peuhl it is also thought to include members from the Mossi and other ethnic groups. The strength of Ansaroul Islam has directly impacted civilian Peuhl communities who have been branded "extremists" by local self-defence groups such as the Koglweogo and later, the VDP²⁰. The group's strategic goal is thought to be a mix of rebuilding the ancient Peuhl empire Djeelgodji, thus a establishing a safe haven for the community, and advancing JNIM's influence through support, coordination, and collaboration²¹. They are vehemently anti the Burkinabe state and push back against ISGS influence.

¹³ Interview with local analyst by phone in October 2021

¹⁴ Interview with local analyst by phone in October 2021

¹⁵ IMDC: Burkina Faso <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/burkina-faso> [accessed October 2021]

¹⁶ Ansaroul Islam https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansaroul-islam#highlight_text_8401 [accessed October 2021]

¹⁷ Aljazeera: Deadly attack targets army base in Burkina Faso <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/16/deadly-attack-targets-army-base-in-burkina-faso> [accessed October 2021]

¹⁸ Crisis Group: 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 October 2021]

¹⁹ Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso <https://ctc.usma.edu/ansaroul-islam-growing-terrorist-insurgency-burkina-faso/> [accessed October 2021]

²⁰ Interview with local human rights activist October 2021

²¹ Interview with international analyst October 2021

The East of Burkina Faso is abundant with natural resources but despite this the local community has seen little by way of development or prosperity. Changes to land laws introduced capitalist frameworks, which in some cases abolished the tradition of familial land inheritance. Under these new rules land could be sold to the highest bidder, who was often an outsider, this helped to create disenfranchised youths and hostility towards alien property investors²². JNIM and their affiliates are active in the East. ISGS and their supporters are also present although they tend to be more mobile – moving from place to place rather than imposing embargoes on villages like JNIM has done in Tankoulou²³. An embargo is the effective cutting off of a village from the rest of the region. Burkina Faso's new capitalist approach to land ownership has meant many people in the East have been kicked off their land or their access to natural resources has been curtailed. Then when rVEGs take over the territory, IVEGs and the original inhabitants in the area can often be open to cooperation²⁴. The rVEGs can provide protection from state reprisal or earning opportunities in the case of hunting game or mining as long as the community adheres to their strict demands²⁵. In the case of mining this can be especially prevalent, and controlling mines is a strategic goal of rVEGs²⁶. Although access to mines, big game and smuggling routes can be income generators for rVEGs, their earning potential should not be overestimated²⁷. Due to the porous borders with Niger the movement of fuel, everyday goods, drugs, and gold has been in existence long before 2015 when Burkina Faso's security situation began to deteriorate – at certain points along these established trade routes blind eyes will be turned by locals, IVEGs, state authorities and self-defence groups who frequently skim off the top²⁸.

In the Centre-North a million people are currently being held in camps after fleeing violence in the North and East. In the town of Barsalogho the camps are divided along ethnic lines with the Peuhl in their own completely separated from the others²⁹. Access to these camps is being tightly controlled by the government and journalists have frequently been denied access. The surge in people into the area has contributed to the worsening security situation as locals feel scarce resources is being given to the IDPs and not to them. The increased military presence and the use of Barsalogho as a fall-back position has made it more of a target for IVEGs and rVEGs³⁰. In October 14 soldiers were killed in the area following an attack by an armed group³¹.

²² The Local Roots of Violence in Eastern Burkina Faso <https://noria-research.com/the-local-roots-of-violence-burkina-faso/> [accessed October 2021]

²³ Twitter <https://twitter.com/menastream/status/1411832987398852610?s=21> [accessed October 2021]

²⁴ Interview with local analyst by phone October 2021

²⁵ Interview with local analyst by phone October 2021

²⁶ Interview with international analyst by phone October 2021

²⁷ Interview with international analyst by phone October 2021

²⁸ Interview with local analyst by phone October 2021

²⁹ Observation from trip to Barsalogho in February 2021

³⁰ Interview with local analyst and human rights activist by phone October 2021

³¹ AFP: Suspected Jihadists Kill 14 Soldiers in Burkina Faso <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/10/05/jihadists-kill-14-burkina/> [accessed October 2021]

Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland

In November 2019 five buses carrying the staff of Canadian mining firm SEMAFO were targeted by armed insurgents on the road between the eastern town of Fada-N’gourma and the company’s Bounbou mine. According to media reports 39 people were killed and 60 wounded³². The attack led Burkina Faso’s President, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, to call for the mobilisation of civilians to help the state fight the growing extremist threat sweeping the country. In January 2020 the Land of the Upright Men – as Burkina Faso is often called – adopted a bill which created the ‘Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland’, or VDP. Article 2 of the bill defined the VDP as *“a person of Burkinabe nationality, auxiliary to the Defence and Security Forces (FDS), serving voluntarily the security interests of their village or area of residence, under a contract signed between the volunteer and the state”*. The bill also stated recruitment of people over the age of 18 would be handled by the local community and individuals would receive training from the state for 14 days³³.

It’s estimated that around 2,000 people are officially VDP, although the actual number could be higher as not all fighting VDP register³⁴. These local groups have both contributed to the rising violence and prevented it. They can be more organised and motivated than state security services but can also exacerbate local ethnic tensions thus benefiting rVEGs.

In May 2020 the alleged extrajudicial execution of 12 men detained by Defence and Security Forces included the involvement of the local VDP, witnesses told Human Rights Watch. The witnesses said the volunteers helped to block “village entrances” and arrest “numerous Peuhl men” – the Peuhl, or Fulani, are semi-nomadic herders – in Pentchangou close to the town of Tanwalbougou³⁵. The VDP in this area are Gourmanché and harbour deep resentment towards the Peuhl³⁶. While they present themselves as concerned citizens seeking to combat the rising violence, it is evident from conversations that their day-to-day operations are not monitored by any higher authority. They also claim to have aided small-scale “negotiations” between local government representatives and IVEGs, although no evidence is available of the effectiveness of these so-called talks. Members of Tanwalbougou’s VDP range from late teens to adulthood, and all are equipped with a fully automatic weapon³⁷. In April 2021 five VDPs in this area were

³² BBC: Burkina Faso: Gunmen kill 37 in ambush on mining firm convoy <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-50326743> [accessed October 2021]

³³ APA News: Burkina Faso: Recruiting armed volunteers to tackle terrorism <http://apanews.net/en/news/burkina-faso-recruiting-armed-volunteers-to-tackle-terrorism> [accessed October 2021]

³⁴ AFP: Volunteer militia becomes latest target for Burkina’s jihadists <https://news.yahoo.com/volunteer-militia-becomes-latest-target-092417049.html> [accessed October 2021]

³⁵ Human Rights Watch: Burkina Faso: Credibly Investigate Apparent Executions <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/20/burkina-faso-credibly-investigate-apparent-executions> [accessed October 2021]

³⁶ Interview with VDP commander in Tanwalbougou in February 2021

³⁷ Observation from interaction with VDP in Tanwalbougou in February 2021

reported killed by an armed group of men, their affiliation has not been made clear, although JNIM and their associates operate in the area^{38,39}.

There is no evidence of a relationship between the VDP and IVEGs or rVEGs, only rumour of a blind eye being turned when there is a chance at small-scale mutual economic gain⁴⁰. The VDP have mostly benefited IVEGs and rVEGs by deepening ethnic grievances. Both the Mossi and Gourmanché have a negative view of the Peuhl community who they argue are more prone to joining IVEGs or rVEGs. Targeted attacks on the Peuhl can often drive disenfranchised youths into the arms of extremists, especially when livestock has been stolen or access to land prohibited⁴¹. In the northwestern town of Koumbri analysts have suggested that it was the local VDP's targeting of the Peuhl that initiated attacks by JNIM who took over the area for a short time in April before being pushed back by security forces⁴².

The VDP are not the only self-defence group in Burkina Faso, there are also the Koglweogo and the Dozo. The Koglweogo have been linked to several targeted attacks on civilian Peuhl populations, one of the most recent being the ambush of Dinguila-Peuhl, Barga and Ramdolla-Peuhl villages in March 2020 where at least 43 people were killed. Witnesses told Amnesty International that members of the group armed with hunting rifles raided the settlements and burnt them⁴³. The attacks in Yirgou were also initiated by Koglweogo who were seeking retaliation for the death of a prominent Mossi chief at the hands of a IVEG⁴⁴. The attackers said the Peuhl had played a role in the chief's murder. A 53-year-old-Peuhl man who fled to Ouagadougou from Arbinda in the north in late 2020 said he left with his family because he felt "hunted" by the local Koglweogo who suspected him and his community of terrorist activity⁴⁵.

The Koglweogo were formed around the 1990s or 2000s and have long been part of Burkina Faso's milieu of self-defence groups. After the popular insurrection in 2014, which saw the removal of President Blaise Compaoré and his flight to neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, the Koglweogo's influence increased as the state went

³⁸ AFP: Several killed in attack in eastern Burkina Faso <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210406-several-killed-in-attack-in-eastern-burkina-faso> [accessed October 2021]

³⁹ Interview with key analyst on Burkina Faso in October 2021

⁴⁰ Interview with local analyst by phone in October 2021

⁴¹ Interview with local analyst by phone in October 2021

⁴² ACLED: Sahel 2021: Communal wars, broken ceasefires, and shifting frontlines <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines> [accessed October 2021]

⁴³ Amnesty International: Burkina Faso: Witness testimony confirms armed group perpetrated mass killings <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/burkina-faso-witness-testimony-confirms-armed-group/> [Accessed October 2021]

⁴⁴ The New Humanitarian How jihadists are fuelling inter-communal conflict in Burkina Faso <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/02/20/How-jihadists-fuelling-inter-communal-conflict-Burkina-Faso> [Accessed October 2021]

⁴⁵ Interview with Peuhl man in Ouagadougou February 2021

through a prolonged period of flux⁴⁶. Today they allege they fill the gap where a state-supported police force should be, targeting low-level crime and delivering justice to local communities⁴⁷. However numerous reports have surfaced of the Koglweogo making arbitrary arrests and detention and being susceptible to bribes⁴⁸. In the eastern region there have also been claims that Koglweogo “*appear to have joined the jihadist groups, or to collaborate with them on a regular basis*”⁴⁹. Some members of the Koglweogo have joined the VDP, while others have come into conflict with them over territory disputes⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ Pandora’s box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pssc/17590.pdf> [October 2021]

⁴⁷ Interview with Koglweogo leader February 2021

⁴⁸ Interview with local analyst by phone in October 2021

⁴⁹ The Local Roots of Violence in Eastern Burkina Faso <https://noria-research.com/the-local-roots-of-violence-burkina-faso/> [accessed October 2021]

⁵⁰ Interview with local analyst by phone in October 2021