

BURKINA FASO

Conflict Diagnostic



March 2022

INAF 5203

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An early 2022 coup in Burkina Faso has manifested as the result of civil unrest related to the ongoing jihadist threat in the Greater Sahel region. Since 2014, militarization and jihadism have increased and the humanitarian crisis has worsened in the last year as the Burkinabés are being internally displaced from rural to urban Burkina Faso. This diagnostic asserts that within the next 6-9 months, the worst-case scenario involves an increase in terror attacks, growing militia ranks, a potential counter-coup, and aggravating economic and humanitarian crises. The best-case scenario would require improved socio-economic conditions and restoration of peace, order, and respecting the proposed electoral timeline of three years. The most likely scenario is that because of chronic underfunding of the crises, terror attacks persist, support for the military junta decreases and the proposed electoral timeline is delayed. The conflict does not seem to have reached its peak, and escalation is expected given that [January displacement numbers](#) were the second largest since the crisis broke out 3 years ago.

BACKGROUND

Burkina Faso, originally named Upper Volta, gained independence from France in 1960. In 1983, Upper Volta became Burkina Faso under the rule of Thomas Sankara who was later assassinated in 1987. Blaise Compaoré ruled Burkina Faso between 1987 and 2014. In 2015, Kaboré was elected president and was eventually re-elected in 2020. During Kaboré's presidency, there were multiple events that exacerbated instability in Burkina Faso. In 2016, the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou was the target of an al-Qaeda terrorist attack, which left 28 people dead.¹ Between 2018 and 2020, there was a rise in terrorist attacks which caused popular discontent. In 2021, 160 people died from an attack in the Yagha province which was characterized as one of the worst terror attacks in six years.² Terrorist attacks have caused instability in the region, but so has the COVID-19 pandemic. From January 2020 to February 2022, there have been 20,649 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 371 deaths.³ The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted trade, tourism and transport sectors.⁴ More recently, there has been political instability and increased violence in the greater Sahel region. In 2021, there were four successful military coups in various countries in the Sahel: Chad, Mali, Guinea and Sudan.⁵ The militarization of politics has been caused by the presence of international actors prioritizing their own interests, widespread public frustration against corruption, as well as insecurity and poor governance.⁶ Widespread instability in the region has caused increased violence and protests which favored conditions for the coup in January 2022.

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS [Role in Conflict: Conflict Escalator (CE), Conflict De-escalator (CD), Rising Influence (RI), Decreasing Influence (DI)]

Internal Stakeholders

The Peoples Movement for Progress (DI): The formal government, and target of the recent coup, has lost much influence in recent weeks. A failure to provide basic governmental protections to rural regions of the country has prompted dissatisfaction from military leaders. Former President Kaboré failed to make good on election promises to thwart terrorist activities in the country and protect rural regions in the north.

The Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (PMSR) - (CE) (RI): Led by Lt. Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the PMSR is responsible for the 2022 military coup and detainment of president Kaboré. Damiba accuses Kaboré of failing to contain a worsening security crisis that has seen fighters linked to Al-Qaida and ISIL assert control in northern regions of the country. Damiba has assumed the role of President in the interim, and has promised the state's international partners that a return to constitutional order is a priority of the military.

External Stakeholders

The Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and other Extremist Organizations (CE) (RI): Cited as the primary driver of the coup, the previous government's inability to control/secure vast areas of the country has enabled Al-Qaida and ISIL backed forces to infiltrate and establish power in northern and eastern regions of the country. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), various terrorist organizations have begun to seize gold mines in Burkina Faso to finance their operations, and radicalize local Burkinabé residents.⁷

Mali & Niger (Border States to the North and East) (CE): Violent conflict has spread from Northern Mali to the Burkinabe border region, with an uptick in extremist violence perpetrated by foreign terrorist organizations. Violence is commonly directed towards civilian populations and national security forces, affecting local communities in the peripheral regions of the state.⁸ Ultimately, the rise of Islamic extremist groups in Mali have resulted in protracted consequences for the Sahel region, which is already affected by structural factors of state fragility (i.e.- climatic, economic and development problems).⁹

Regional Military/Security Alliances: In the wake of the 2022 coup, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) contemplated economic sanctions on Burkina Faso. In the past, ECOWAS has imposed sanctions on both Mali and Guinea for failing to present a viable path towards the return of constitutional order after their own coups. Mali in particular has been affected by these sanctions, resulting in high inflation

and essential goods shortages across the country.¹⁰ Although the economic organization has yet to impose any sanctions on Burkina Faso in the interim, future sanctions may complicate an already dire economic situation.

The United States of America: The United States have played an integral role in the funding and training of Burkinabe security forces (often in counter terrorism contexts). While the exact amount of military aid is unknown, it is estimated that the total amount of US security cooperation aid to the country in 2018 and 2019 was as high as \$100 million.¹¹

France - (CD) (DI): The French have played a major role in supporting the Burkinabé governments attempts to mitigate terrorism in the region. As Al-Qaida and ISIL operatives gain influence in the northern provinces of the country, France led operation Barkhane (2014). While the operation is touted as relatively successful, President Macron has decided to end this military operation in the coming months.¹² While France has been a key security partner, the Burkinabe people have begun to voice their dissatisfaction with the French as terrorist attacks/control in the Northern and Eastern regions of the country continue to proliferate.¹³

United Nations (CD): The United Nations plans to send a UN Envoy to Burkina Faso on a 'good offices mission' in the wake of the military coup. The UN secretary-general calls for calm, the release of detained political officials, as well as for the return to constitutional order in Burkina Faso.¹⁴

Russia (Wild Card): Public dissatisfaction with France and other Western security partners is pushing some of the populace to question the countries security alliances. Celebrations in the streets of Ouagadougou following the coup saw many Burkinabe protesters garnering Russian flags.¹⁵ News outlets have reported that Lt. Damiba asked former President Kabore to employ the Wagner Group (a Kremlin-backed mercenary organization working in various African nations) to assist in the countries fight against terrorism just weeks prior to the coup.¹⁶ As the situation develops in the coming months, it is plausible that the new military government could seek the assistance of Russia.

CONFLICT INDICATORS

Militarization (High risk/Worsening)

Stabilization Factors The share of armed forces personnel (% of the total domestic labor force) steadily decreased between 2012 and 2018 (most recent data) from 0.19% to 0.15%.¹⁷ As of 2021, the state had 11,200 active members and 250 paramilitary members.¹⁸ There are defense maintenance facilities in the country, but no defense-manufacturing sector, and the state's deployment capacity is limited to neighboring countries.¹⁹ Burkinabé aviation capacities are slowly increasing with the arrival of additional helicopters and France has supplied armed 4x4 vehicles, but financial challenges hinder broader capability developments.²⁰

Destabilizing Factors Burkina Faso's share of the military expenditure in the Western and Central Africa region (expressed as % of GDP) steadily rose from 2014 to 2020 (from 2.7% to 5.4%).²¹ The share of domestic GDP allotted to military expenditures almost doubled in Burkina during that same period (from 1.4% in 2014 to 2.7% in 2020).²² Prison conditions are poor, and allegations of torture and abuse of individuals in custody by police are common (notably for violating COVID-19-related curfews).²³ In 2021, several protests were banned and/or brutally dispersed by riot police.²⁴ Regional military instability is high, especially in Mali, where Wagner, a Russian paramilitary group, is now reportedly supplying security resources and training.²⁵

Assessment Increased military expenditures reduced investments in the social sectors; state priorities focused upon the military (to address terrorism/security concerns) rather than upon human development (to address its economic/humanitarian crisis). The putsch blurred the political and military decision-making powers; this could increase state militarization and arbitrary population persecution. France said the coup was no reason for it and its allies to cease security operations in the Sahel²⁶ but the ex-colonizer and main G5 Sahel donor is increasingly unpopular in Burkina Faso. If Burkinabé military leaders followed Mali by aligning with Russia, its militarization process could soon escalate. However, it is important to note that further Russian involvement may prove to be questionable given the country's on-going focus on Ukraine.

International Linkages (High Risk/ Worsening)

Stabilizing Factors Burkina Faso demonstrates a moderate engagement in international organizations. It is a party to a total of 55 international institutions - including 21 United Nations agencies and 15 economic organizations.²⁷ While membership has been suspended to regional military/economic alliances, namely ECOWAS and the AU, further regional sanctions have not been imposed given the military's assurance that a return to constitutional order is a priority.²⁸

Destabilizing Factors A number of land disputes complicates regional political cohesion. Demarcation processes are currently underway with Mali, and disputes over several villages with Benin continue to fuel political tensions between the two states.²⁹ Cross-border terrorist activities destabilize the northern and eastern regions of Burkina Faso, with many of the attacks carried out by foreign-based organizations (i.e.- Al Qaeda), predominantly from neighbouring Mali.³⁰ Additionally, the recent military coup has prompted international donors, like the United States, to withhold hundreds of millions in humanitarian funding.³¹ Finally, France's upcoming presidential election and its recent decision to end Operation Barkhane in the first quarter of 2022 further complicates the situation.

Assessment The increasing number of military coups in the West African region has emboldened the Burkinabe military to act. The region has now seen five coups in recent years, highlighting a troubling trend away from democratic rule towards military rule in the Sahel region of Africa. According to the Bertelsmann Transformation index, Burkina Faso has been trending positively in terms of international cooperation indicators (8/10 in 2020, up from 6.3/10 just 15 years ago).³² However, the recent coup risks backsliding these gains. International organizational suspensions and pauses on humanitarian funds from international partners will undoubtedly affect its overall ranking in terms of international cooperation and credibility.

Economic Performance (High risk/Worsening)

Stabilizing Factors GDP per capita (PPP, Current International \$) has been steadily increasing since 2012 reaching \$2273.17 in 2020.³³ Trade openness is at 58.66% (2019) and has been consistently around 60% since 2012.³⁴ Although trade openness has not increased in the past few years, it has remained stable since 2016. Although ECOWAS has suspended their activity in Burkina Faso after the military coup in January 2022, they have not imposed any further sanctions.³⁵

Destabilizing Factors Burkina Faso is considered a low-income Sahelian country. It has a GDP growth rate of 1.93% (2020) which is a large decrease from its GDP growth rate of 5.69% in 2019.³⁶ The decrease in Burkina Faso's GDP growth rate in 2020 was mainly caused by a slowdown in activity in trade (primarily gold and cotton), tourism, and transport to contain the spread of COVID-19.³⁷ In 2019, inflation decreased from 1.95% to -3.23%. However, in 2020, inflation increased again to 1.88%.³⁸ The inflation rate is expected to have risen in 2021 and it is projected to continue to rise in 2022 due to an increase in food prices.³⁹ Foreign direct investment (% of GDP) has decreased from 2.62% in 2016 to 1.08% in 2019.⁴⁰ The inequality score (GINI coefficient) is 35.3, but minimal data is available on its progress since 2014.⁴¹

Assessment Resurgence of Islamist terrorist attacks are forecasted to cause massive population displacements⁴², which would result in a rise in unemployment, further decrease in its GDP growth rate and a rise in inflation (for example, a rise in food prices). Political and security tensions as well as COVID-19 restrictions are forecasted to continue to negatively impact Burkina Faso's trade, tourism and transports sectors. A decrease in activity of trade of gold and cotton incentivizes people to join military factions, leading to increased instability. Moreover, ECOWAS has suspended their activity in Burkina Faso after the military coup in January 2022⁴³, which will also impact trade.

Governance and Political Instability (High risk/Stabilizing)

Stabilizing Factors A democratic foundation was laid in 2014 after Compaoré was ousted by a popular uprising. Elections were held in 2015 and 2020 (won by Kaboré). Political rights have remained fragile but stable since 2017 (consistent 23/40 FH score)⁴⁴ and civil society and organized labor remain strong forces for democracy.⁴⁵ Finally, the country improved its *World Press Freedom Index* rank (from 52nd most free country in 2014 to 37th in 2021).⁴⁶

Destabilizing Factors The *Control of Corruption* indicator improved from -0.5 in 2014 to -0.1 in 2020⁴⁷ but Burkina remains below the world's 2021 average in the *Corruption Perception Index* (WA: 43/100 vs. 42/100 for BF).⁴⁸ Regional political instability is high, especially in Mali, where diplomatic relations with France have greatly deteriorated in 2022 after back-to-back Malian putsches. In Burkina Faso, regime durability was on an upward trend since 2015⁴⁹ but Kaboré fell to a military coup in January 2022.⁵⁰ Damiba is now the junta's leader. The Burkinabé constitution was suspended, then reinstated within a week.⁵¹

Assessment Among many factors, corrupted and ineffective political institutions have enabled traffickers, militias and terrorist groups to thrive. Burkinabé people celebrated Kaboré's ousting but Western stakeholders (France, the UN, ECOWAS) condemned the coup and now push for a return to democracy.⁵² However, France - ex-colonizer and main G5 Sahel donor - is increasingly unpopular among the Burkinabés. Lack of loyalty to the military government could also enable jihadists and militias to increase their influence and deepen the crisis. Organizing elections seems unrealistic within the next 6-9 months given the growing regional security crisis, but there is hope; despite being suspended from ECOWAS, Damiba was reportedly cooperative when he met with ECOWAS leaders in early February.⁵³

History of Armed Conflict (High risk/Stabilizing)

Stabilizing Factors The external and multilateral presence in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions - including Operation Barkhane led by France, the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the European Task Force Takuba - is contributing to the counterterrorism efforts in Burkina Faso.⁵⁴

Destabilizing Factors Since 2015, deadly attacks on villages from armed groups affiliated to al-Qaeda and ISIS have become increasingly frequent across northern Burkina Faso. The annual conflict-related deaths exceeded the 1,000 cap in 2019 and remained the same in 2020.⁵⁵ The number of displaced persons produced by the country was consistent until 2018 but then increased by 325% between 2017 and 2018 with around 2,700 to 11,500 persons. Since then, it steadily rose from 2018 to 2021 (from 11,447 to 15,813 persons).⁵⁶ Similarly, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) exponentially increased between 2017 and 2021 (from 2,350 to 1,312,071 IDPs). Nonetheless, the annual percentage increase of IDPs is slowly reducing annually (from a 92% increase in 2020 to 22% in 2021). Before 2018, most displaced persons within Burkina Faso came from Mali.⁵⁷

Assessment Despite the presence of external operations in the region, the armed conflicts affecting the tri-state border area with Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have worsened in intensity. Burkina Faso is particularly affected as its *Peoples Under Threat* 2021 rank has fallen by 7 since the previous year's ranking, compared to Mali and Niger's ranks having respectively fallen by 2 and 4.⁵⁸ The recent southward expansion of armed religious groups - affiliated with the Sahelian branches of al-Qaeda and ISIS - and the proliferation of community-based militias in the West African region contributed to the deterioration of the security situation and the growing displacement crisis in Burkina Faso.⁵⁹ The military coup witnessed in late January 2022 is prompting fears of further instability and insecurity in the country which could give an opportunity for armed insurgency groups to further armed attacks.⁶⁰

Human Development (High Risk/Worsening)

Stabilizing Factors Life expectancy has been steadily increasing since 2012, reaching 61 years in 2019.⁶¹ Both the infant mortality rate and the maternal mortality rate decreased since 2012. In 2019, the infant mortality rate totaled 53.9 (per 1,000 live births)⁶² and in 2017 the maternal mortality rate totaled 320 (per 100,000 live births).⁶³ Although primary school enrollment decreased slightly in 2020, it remains high at 92.63%.⁶⁴

Destabilizing Factors Burkina Faso has a human development index (HDI) score of 0.452 which ranks it in the low human development category.⁶⁵ The proportion of the total population using an improved water source is 78%, but only about half of the total population (54%) is using an improved sanitation facility (2020).⁶⁶ While primary school enrollment is high, secondary school enrollment remains low at 40.56% (2020).⁶⁷ Furthermore, Burkina Faso has a value of 0.594 on the gender inequality index (GII) which ranks it 147 out of 162 countries in the 2019 index.⁶⁸

Assessment Burkina Faso has only been able to vaccinate about 3.1% of the country's population against Covid-19⁶⁹, which could lead to lower life expectancy and lower school enrollment. With the resurgence of extremist Islamic terrorist attacks, Burkina Faso's human development index (HDI) score will most likely decrease in 2022. As a result of the intensification of violence, over a million people have become internally displaced and 3.5 million people are in need of urgent assistance.⁷⁰ Therefore, socioeconomic conditions such as access to improved water sources and access to secondary school enrollment will likely worsen. While the maternal mortality rate has been decreasing, 320 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births remains a high⁷¹, which contributes towards its ranking on the GII. With this rise in Islamic extremism, Burkina Faso's value on the gender inequality index will likely decrease. Additionally, in support of NGO operations in the Ukraine, certain NGO donors are considering [reducing funding for Burkina Faso by up to 70 percent](#), which could worsen access to health care services, especially for displaced Burkinabes.

Demographic Stress (Moderate Risk/Stabilizing)

Stabilizing Factors The population has nearly doubled in the last 20 years for which data was available (from 11,607,951 in 2000 to an estimated 20,903,278)⁷², but population density remains moderate at 79/km².⁷³ There has also been a steady decline in the number of infant deaths⁷⁴ despite the increase in live births. The percentage of total population in urban centers is low, at 30.61%⁷⁵ and the urban population growth annual percentage has steadily decreased in the past 20 years.⁷⁶

Destabilizing Factors There is a significant youth bulge in Burkina Faso, with 43% of the population being between the ages of 0-14.⁷⁷ Though still extremely high, the youth bulge has declined by 5.13% since 2000.⁷⁸ Although the urban population percentage is low, the recent rate of internal displacement related to the conflict has pushed more people towards urban centers which may increase strains on services and infrastructure.⁷⁹

Assessment The increase in Burkina Faso's population is unlikely to contribute to destabilization considering the low population density. The increase in population is correlated to fewer infant and youth deaths. The youth bulge is still extremely high and could be cause for concern considering the recent coup and fivefold increase in the recruitment of child soldiers.⁸⁰ Recent increases in violence have caused people to flee to urban centers which may have a negative impact on stability.

Environmental Stress (Low risk/Worsening)

Stabilizing Factors Burkina Faso's forest area has decreased by 1.7% from 2010 to 2020 but remained stable in the last two years.⁸¹ Plus, the 2020 *Environmental Performance Index* (EPI) assigned Burkina Faso's tree cover loss a score of 100, where 0=worst and 100=best.⁸²

Destabilizing Factors Arable land has decreased consistently in the last decade, going from 0.4 hectares per person in 2010 to 0.3 in 2018.⁸³ Freshwater in cubic meters reduced by more than 13% per capita from 2012 to 2017. To note that no data is available for more recent years.⁸⁴

Assessment Land and water resources in Burkina Faso are under pressure due to a rapidly growing population and higher exposure to extreme weather and climate change impacts like droughts, floods, soil degradation and higher duration variability of rainy and dry seasons.⁸⁵ Burkina Faso's economy is predominantly based on agriculture, which employs 80% of the workforce, and is highly vulnerable to droughts and

water shortages.⁸⁶ The Sahelian zone in the north is the most impacted by climate change but the eastern and southeastern parts of the country are increasingly vulnerable to changing climate conditions like high temperatures and droughts.⁸⁷

Population Heterogeneity (Low risk/ **Worsening**)

Stabilizing Factors Compared to its other Sahel neighbors, the people of Burkina Faso are very tolerant of ethnic and religious diversity.⁸⁸ The ethnic makeup of the country is very diverse with the main group being the Mossi (52%), followed by the Fulani (8.4%) and the Gurma (7%), and dozens of smaller ethnic groups.⁸⁹

Destabilizing Factors The country is typically dominated politically by the Christian elite who are a minority (31.5%), whereas most Burkinabé are Muslim (63.2%).⁹⁰ In the last few years there has been an increase in terrorist attacks targetting churches and mosques as a result of the jihadist threat and the attempts to sew ethnic and religious tensions between groups.⁹¹ Since the start of the pandemic, an increase in violent operations has been reported, including the targeting of refugees and Fulani people by the government under the guise of COVID-19 related health measures.⁹²

Assessment The diversity of the population has not been a major cause of conflict for Burkina Faso in the past, and the Burkinabé are tolerant of diversity. However, the jihadist threat in rural communities, inflamed by government targetting of the Fulani has the potential to turn groups against one another. The risk posed by heterogeneity is lower than in the wider Sahel, however, recent extremist violence is a concern.

CONFLICT RISK SCENARIOS

Worst Case

Terror attacks intensify in the North and the East, the junta cannot contain/respond to them, loses popular support, and inflames the conflict. Conflict intensification, delayed harvest after the rainy season (May to September) worsen humanitarian crises and increase the number of IDPs. Damiba's cooperation with the West fails, severe economic sanctions and aid reduction from international allies ensue, thus aggravating the economic crisis. A lack of domestic support for junta leadership leads to counter coup, potentially growing militia/jihadists ranks. Domestic and international dissatisfaction with the junta increases over the next 6-9 months as stakeholders begin to question whether the military government intends to respect the proposed electoral timeline.

Most Likely

Chronic underfunding of basic public goods/services (persisting low capacity/low aid flows) and inability to contain terror attacks reduce domestic support for junta. Terror attacks persist in the North and East in the coming months, France reduces its security support, thus the status quo prevails in security response from the Burkinabé military. The interim government collaborates with the West on socio-economic issues, but is slow in operationalizing its electoral timeline. Damiba explores alternative security partnerships (Wagner/Russia), possibly using it as leverage in negotiation with Western stakeholders.

Best Case

The military government sets an electoral timeline and gets reinstated in ECOWAS and the African Union, secures humanitarian aid/economic support from the West. Harvest and rain levels are sufficient not to aggravate the humanitarian crises. Strong security support from Western allies enables the government to restore peace and security in the Northern and Eastern regions of the country, creating a viable path for future return of IDPs. Improved socio-economic conditions and popular support for the interim government stop the growth of militia/jihadists ranks.

Endnotes

- Hyperlink source: "Burkina Faso: Second biggest spike in displacement since crisis began" *UN OCHA*, March 10, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-second-biggest-spike-displacement-crisis-began?fbclid=IwAR0W0rldymCkGiGQ1A2zqQFwFvSfHpCkCULERU47G7rZ6KXv316cXOKNuk>
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