



Burkina Faso: In Focus

Landlocked with a largely agrarian economy, Burkina Faso remains one of the world's poorest countries. Per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated at \$696 in 2017. Nearly 45% of the population is under the age of 14, life expectancy is less than 56 years, and the infant mortality rate is the seventh-highest in the world.

Burkina Faso has made progress toward strengthening democracy and civilian control of the armed forces since a tumultuous political transition in 2014-2015, but it faces a range of political and security challenges. Previously, under the rule of former President Blaise Compaoré (1987-2014), Burkina Faso was known as a relatively stable, semi-authoritarian state that dabbled in regional conflicts without being subsumed by them. Compaoré was ousted by a combination of street protests and military intervention in 2014, and a similar mix of actors faced down a coup attempt by a prominent Compaoré loyalist in 2015. The November 2015 election of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré marked the country's first democratic transfer of power since independence from France in 1966. A former Compaoré ally turned opposition figure, Kaboré has struggled to respond to high popular expectations and public demands for rapid job creation, governance reforms, and sweeping prosecutions of former regime figures.

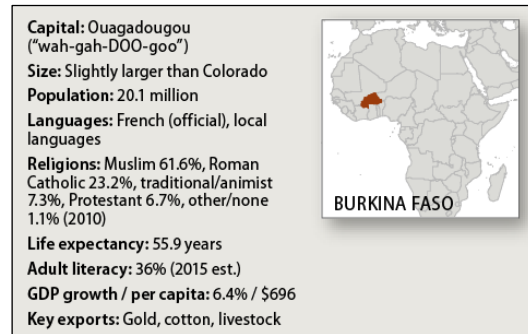
Over the past three years, an Islamist insurgency has emerged in the rural north, while the capital, Ouagadougou, has been hit by three large terrorist attacks against Western and domestic targets. The growing threat posed by Islamist armed groups is linked to the conflict in neighboring Mali, where an Al Qaeda-aligned Islamist insurgency has coalesced and expanded southward since 2015. It also appears to be increasingly locally rooted, despite Burkina Faso's history of stability and religious tolerance.

Background

Compaoré's seizure of power in a 1987 coup brought relative stability after decades of alternating civilian and military rule. Despite his closeness to Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and reported backing of various rebel groups in neighboring states, Compaoré eventually developed a reputation as a competent leader in a turbulent region, and served as a mediator in several West African political crises. Compaoré's 27-year tenure was nonetheless roiled by periodic street protests and army mutinies.

In October 2014, youth-led protesters stormed the National Assembly to force the withdrawal of a bill that could have allowed Compaoré to run again for reelection. As protests escalated, and amid indications that a military coup might be under way, Compaoré resigned and fled to Côte d'Ivoire. The deputy commander of the elite Presidential Security Regiment (RSP) proclaimed himself president, but he later accepted the post of Prime Minister in a transitional government led by a career diplomat, Michel Kafando.

Figure 1. Burkina Faso at a Glance



Source: CIA World Factbook and International Monetary Fund (IMF, October 2017); 2017 estimates unless otherwise indicated.

As interim leader, Kafando sought reforms to reduce the power of key pillars of the Compaoré regime, including the ruling party and the RSP itself. In October 2015, RSP commander Gen. Gilbert Diendéré attempted to overthrow Kafando in a coup, sparking resurgent street protests and international condemnation. Ultimately, conventional army units surrounded the RSP's barracks, forcing Diendéré's surrender and Kafando's reinstatement. Kafando then ordered the RSP's dissolution and disarmament, although the extent of implementation has been uncertain. Burkinabè courts later brought charges against Diendéré and others in connection with the 2015 coup attempt, but the trial has been slow to progress. Efforts to prosecute various high-level state crimes allegedly committed under Compaoré have largely stalled, prompting frustration among activists.

Presidential and parliamentary elections in November 2015 marked the end of the formal transition period. Kaboré won the presidency with 54% of the vote, and his People's Movement for Progress (MPP) won a slim plurality of seats (55 out of 127) in the National Assembly, later forming a ruling coalition with several smaller parties. The political opposition is headed by Zéphirin Diabré, leader of the Union for Progress and Change (UPC) party. Diabré came in second in the 2015 elections, with 30% of the presidential vote, and the UPC won 30 Assembly seats.

The Economy

Annual economic growth has averaged over 5% during the past decade, according to the IMF, but has not consistently outpaced population growth. The formal economy relies largely on exports of cotton and gold, for which global prices have fluctuated. The vast majority of the labor force is engaged in agriculture, which reportedly generates one-third of GDP. Remittances from as many as 3 million Burkinabè residing in wealthier neighboring Côte d'Ivoire also contribute to the economy. The State Department's 2017 *Investment Climate Statement* reported that Burkina Faso "welcomes foreign investment and actively seeks to attract foreign partners to aid in its development," but the

report identified “poor access to information, a weak judiciary, limited enforcement powers of anti-corruption institutions, misappropriation of public funds, and the lack of an effective separation of powers” as key challenges.

While the most recent severe food security emergency was a 2012 regional drought in the Sahel, endemic food insecurity affects much of the population. In 2018, high prices for staple foods and rising insecurity in the north are placing additional stress on poor households, according to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET). About 70% of the population lives in rural areas, where access to basic services is limited.

Terrorist Threat

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—an Algerian-origin network active across North and West Africa—has cultivated safe havens and local affiliates in neighboring Mali for at least 15 years. AQIM and its local allies have proven resilient, positioning themselves to leverage the evolving, complex war in Mali to their advantage and to withstand an ongoing French military intervention that began in 2013. Islamist violence spared Burkina Faso prior to 2015, but these groups since appear to have successfully leveraged proximity and a combination of domestic factors to expand their influence there.

In Burkina Faso’s rural, predominantly Muslim and ethnic Fulani north, entrenched patterns of poor governance, patronage politics, social stratification, and government neglect may have fed grievances leveraged by jihadist groups. Compaoré’s ouster and the decision to dissolve the RSP may also have deprived Burkinabè authorities of means to collect intelligence and influence regional jihadist networks. Deeper security sector reforms have not advanced significantly. Sectarian tensions have also reportedly risen in recent years, despite a history of peaceful coexistence among Burkina Faso’s Muslim majority and Christian and animist minority communities.

The capital, Ouagadougou, experienced its first ever terrorist attack in January 2016, when gunmen opened fire at a hotel and coffee shop popular with foreigners—days after the country’s new cabinet was seated following President Kaboré’s inauguration. The assault, claimed jointly by AQIM and its erstwhile splinter faction Al Murabitoun, killed 30 people, including a U.S. citizen. Around the same time, a domestic Islamist insurgency, Ansarul Islam, emerged in northern Soum province along the Malian border. The group, whose founder was reportedly mentored by a key jihadist figure in central Mali, has largely targeted local state actors, schools, and individuals seen as collaborating with the security forces. In February 2018, the Trump Administration designated Ansarul Islam for sanctions under Executive Order 13224.

The January 2016 Ouagadougou attack was one in a series of three large attacks in West African cities between late 2015 and early 2016 that signaled greater fusion between AQIM and its Sahel-based offshoots. In early 2017, AQIM’s Sahel “emirate,” Al Murabitoun, and two Malian-led jihadist groups announced they were forming a new coalition known as the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM, after its transliterated Arabic name). In

March 2018, JNIM—which has mostly been active in Mali—claimed a simultaneous attack on the Burkinabè military headquarters and the French embassy in Ouagadougou. The attack reportedly killed eight Burkinabè soldiers and wounded about 80; eight alleged assailants were also killed. It appeared to signal a significant escalation in the threat facing the country.

U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. policy has focused on encouraging Burkina Faso’s democratic transition, improving food security, and building counterterrorism capacity. In December 2017, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated (on the occasion of Burkina Faso’s National Day) that the United States and Burkina Faso would “continue to work together to promote democratic principles, security, economic opportunities, and social development.” Burkina Faso is eligible for U.S. trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, reauthorized in P.L. 114-27).

“U.S. relations with Burkina Faso are excellent, thanks in part to strong U.S. support during the 2014-2015 political transition.” *State Department Fact Sheet, “U.S. Relations with Burkina Faso,” October 13, 2017*

Bilateral aid is modest by regional standards, totaling \$36.7 million in FY2017, nearly all for health and food aid programs. Additional funding for food security initiatives has been provided under USAID’s Sahel Regional Program, which promotes resilience to repeated crises, and through the President’s Malaria Initiative (PMI), for which Burkina Faso was made a focus country in 2017. The Trump Administration has proposed to decrease bilateral aid for Burkina Faso in FY2019 to \$20.3 million, nearly all of which would be for health programs. Burkina Faso is also developing proposals for a second U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact, having completed a five-year, \$481 million Compact in 2014 that focused on land tenure and management, agricultural productivity, road infrastructure, and primary school completion for girls.

Burkina Faso has received substantial security assistance through regional and centrally funded programs, which are not reflected in the bilateral aid figures above. Notably, Burkina Faso participates in the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and the Africa Contingency Operations Training & Assistance (ACOTA) program, which prepares African troops to deploy as peacekeepers. (Burkina Faso is the largest troop contributor to the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali.) The Defense Department has also provided assistance to Burkinabè forces under its global train-and-equip authority. Since 2017, the Trump Administration has pledged at least \$30 million to support Burkina Faso’s participation in a “joint force” launched by the G5 Sahel—Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Chad—to counter cross-border security threats.

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