



# Burkina Faso: Conflict and Military Rule

Burkina Faso experienced two military coups in 2022, part of a wave of military seizures of power in Africa. Successive governments have been unable to contain the spread of violence by insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS). Abuses by state security forces and militias appear to have fueled insurgent recruitment. Conflicts have caused a spiraling humanitarian emergency in the already impoverished country.

Following a pattern set by neighboring Mali, Burkina Faso’s junta has ended military cooperation with former colonial power France and pursued closer ties with Moscow. Russia’s Wagner Group has been active in Mali since 2021. Since the death of Wagner’s founder in August 2023, Russia’s government has signaled an intent to exercise more direct control over the group’s operations, and top Russian officials have engaged in outreach to Burkina Faso. Burkina Faso and Mali have vowed to defend the junta in neighboring Niger—where soldiers ousted the elected president in July 2023—from regional sanctions and from a threatened regional military intervention.

Developments in Burkina Faso, once viewed as a nascent democracy and U.S. regional security partner, are part of a chain of setbacks for U.S. policymakers in the region. Militaries have seized power in seven African countries since 2020. Security and humanitarian crises in the Sahel appear likely to deteriorate further, given tensions in Niger, France’s military drawdown, the withdrawal of the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali, resurgent hostilities between Mali’s military and northern separatist rebels, and the Wagner Group’s regional activities (however these are restructured).

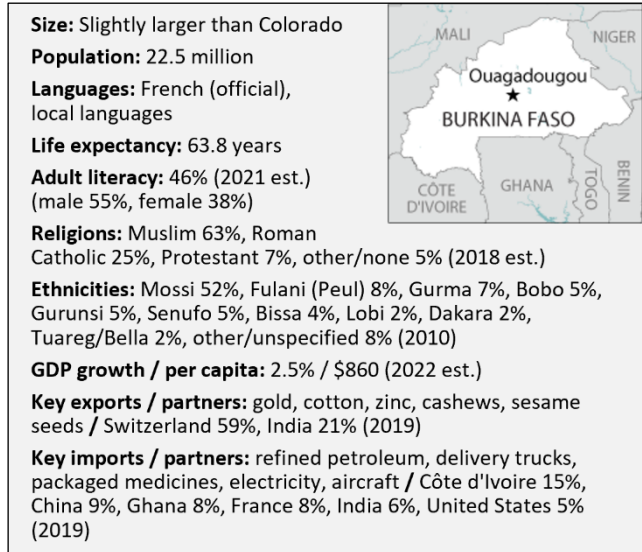
## An Uncertain Military-Led Transition

Self-declared “Transition President” Capt. Ibrahim Traoré is the world’s youngest head of state at age 35. He has emphasized national sovereignty and self-reliance, themes with strong historical resonance in Burkina Faso. Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla, a lawyer and media commentator, is serving as Prime Minister. Traoré has been in power since September 2022, when he ousted the previous coup leader, Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. The second coup came amid a renewed wave of tensions in the military and on the streets over authorities’ inability to stem insurgent attacks. Rivalry among specialized military units may also have been a factor. Authorities have since claimed to foil several coup plots.

Traoré has pledged to keep his predecessor’s commitment (made under threat of regional sanctions) to hold elections by July 2024, but prospects appear uncertain. Authorities have not issued a clear timeline for stated transition goals, including a new constitution. How conflict-affected areas might participate is also unclear. State intimidation, security-related legal restrictions, and bans on several

media outlets have inhibited political competition and free expression, as have insurgent threats.

**Figure 1. Burkina Faso at a Glance**



Source: CIA *World Factbook*, IMF; 2023 figures unless noted.

## Background

Burkina Faso has a history of military mutinies, coups, and social unrest, though it was seen as relatively stable under former authoritarian leader Blaise Compaoré, who came to power in a 1987 coup. A towering and controversial figure in West African politics, Compaoré was ousted in a popular uprising in 2014 while trying to bypass constitutional term limits. Civilian politician Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected in 2015, after a failed coup attempt against the civilian-led transitional government by officers associated with Compaoré. Kaboré was Burkina Faso’s first post-independence leader to enter office via elections.

In his first term, President Kaboré faced growing public demands for security amid growing insurgent threats, along with job creation, governance reforms, and accountability for abuses under Compaoré. Among other controversial actions, Kaboré oversaw the expansion of state-backed militias and “volunteer” fighters that human rights groups have accused of abuses. He was reelected in 2020 in a vote that local civil society observers deemed satisfactory, although opposition leaders initially claimed fraud; insecurity prevented voting in several areas. Kaboré was ousted in a coup led by Lt. Col. Damiba in January 2022.

## Terrorism and Insurgency

Armed Islamist violence erupted in Burkina Faso in 2016, as conflicts expanded in neighboring Mali. That year, Al Qaeda-affiliated groups carried out an unprecedented terrorist attack in Ouagadougou (**Figure 1**), killing 30 people, including an American. At the same time, a locally-led Islamist insurgency, Ansarul Islam, emerged in the rural

north. Attacks escalated in 2017, after several regional Al Qaeda affiliates merged to form the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM), led by a Malian national. In northern Burkina Faso, JNIM has subsumed Ansarul Islam and exploited ethnic tensions, state neglect, and grievances over corruption, patronage politics, social stratification, and land disputes. Eastern Burkina Faso is a stronghold of a rival splinter movement that has affiliated with the Islamic State. Both groups appear to be pressing southward into West Africa's coastal states.

JNIM has regularly blockaded towns in the north, an apparent tactic to force residents into submission and preclude cooperation with state security forces. This has reportedly caused severe shortages of food and medicines in some areas. Insurgents have also targeted gold mines, threatening a major economic sector and reportedly raising revenues from gold smuggling.

Traoré has vowed to defeat insurgents by force, rejecting backchannel negotiations that previous leaders reportedly pursued. Abuses attributed to state security forces and state-backed militia and “volunteer” forces may be boosting insurgent recruitment, however. As in some neighboring countries, abuses during counterterrorism operations have reportedly disproportionately targeted members of the minority ethnic Fulani community, who are generally Muslim and often livestock herders, prompting some to turn to armed groups for protection or revenge.

### Shifting International Alliances

Under Capt. Traoré, Burkina Faso has expelled France's ambassador, terminated a bilateral defense agreement, and expelled several hundred French troops that had supported regional hostage-rescue missions, counterterrorism operations (conducted with U.S. logistical and intelligence support), and security cooperation. At its peak, France's “Barkhane” counterterrorism operation in the Sahel involved over 5,000 French troops, most based in Mali and Chad. In 2022, France ended Barkhane and withdrew its over 2,000 troops from Mali, amid worsening tensions with the Malian junta and the latter's decision to contract with the Wagner Group. In September 2023, France announced it would also withdraw some 1,500 troops from Niger.

Capt. Traoré's rejection of French military cooperation has garnered domestic support amid a wave of anti-French sentiment in the Sahel. Increased engagement with Russia has accompanied the shift, with Mali's junta reportedly facilitating Russian outreach. After referring to Russia as a “strategic ally” in May 2023, Traoré played a prominent role in the July 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg, where he held talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and voiced support for Russia's “special military operation” in Ukraine. Putin, for his part, pledged to ship free grain to Burkina Faso. Traoré has publicly solicited increased military cooperation with Russia (and with China), including arms transfers. While Traoré's stated emphasis on autonomy and indigenous solutions may limit his willingness to engage openly with Russian military contractors, official state-to-state ties may be less sensitive.

### Humanitarian Emergency and the Economy

Over 2 million Burkinabè were internally displaced as of mid-2023 (some 10% of the population)—one of the worst and fastest-growing internal displacement crises in Africa—

and an estimated 4.7 million were in need of humanitarian assistance, per U.N. data. Insurgent violence has shuttered thousands of schools and health centers. Much of the country's north and east faces “crisis” or “emergency” level food insecurity in 2023, according to the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET). The district of Djibo, in the north, faces an even more dire risk of famine, due to a protracted JNIM blockade. In late 2022, the junta expelled the top U.N. official in the country after she wrote about insurgent violence forcing state services to shrink.

Landlocked with a largely agrarian workforce, Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries. Exports of cotton and gold represent key sources of state revenues and foreign exchange. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ripple effects of the Russia-Ukraine war have hurt the economy, driving up food and fuel prices. The economy grew by 2.5% in 2022 (anemic for a developing country with high population growth), per International Monetary Fund data, while public debt rose from 42% of GDP in 2019 to 58% as of early 2023. In mid-2023, the government introduced new taxes, including levies on phone services, citing the rising costs of counterinsurgency efforts.

### U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. engagement has generally focused on regional security, development, and humanitarian relief efforts—although developments in the Sahel have disrupted and challenged longstanding U.S. regional counterterrorism and development initiatives. Efforts to counter Russia's Wagner Group have also taken on greater salience. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland traveled to Burkina Faso in late 2022, and stated that Capt. Traoré assured her that he had “no intention of inviting Wagner.”

The United States allocated \$72 million in bilateral aid in FY2022 (latest public data), of which \$63 million was for health programs. Additional funds have been allocated via regional and global programs. After the January 2022 coup, the Biden Administration applied coup-related restrictions on certain aid to the government under Section 7008 of annual aid appropriations measures. This primarily affects military aid, along with some economic aid in which the government plays an important role. Some security assistance and military cooperation has continued, either because it is not bound by Section 7008, or because it is authorized or appropriated “notwithstanding” other provisions of law. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) also terminated a planned \$450 million development aid compact, citing statutory eligibility criteria. The Administration ended Burkina Faso's eligibility for trade preferences under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, P.L. 106-200, as amended) in 2023, again citing statutory requirements.

In August 2023, the *Washington Post* reported that U.S. officials were considering invoking a new waiver authority under Section 7008—enacted for the first time in FY2023—to provide nonlethal military aid in an effort to deter Burkina Faso from working with the Wagner Group. Funds would be subject to congressional notification requirements. Prior to 2022, U.S. officials had threatened to suspend security assistance due to human rights concerns.

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