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ATTACKS IN BURKINA FASO

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Attacks on Houses of Worship and Religious Leaders in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso was long viewed as a bastion of religious tolerance and interfaith harmony in west Africa. However, in recent years, religious freedom conditions in Burkina Faso have deteriorated, with the country facing interrelated security and humanitarian crises. Attacks on both Muslim and Christian houses of worship and religious leaders have spiked as jihadist and other militia groups expand their area of influence throughout the country. The government is struggling to rein in the violence, and poor performance and misconduct by government affiliated forces are exacerbating the situation.

Background

Burkina Faso is a landlocked west African nation roughly the size of the state of Colorado. The country is home to nearly 20 million people: approximately 61 percent are Muslim, 23 percent are Christian, 15 percent maintain indigenous beliefs, and less than one percent is atheist or practices other [religions](#).

A former French colony, Burkina Faso achieved independence in 1960. Following decades of military coups, Blaise Compaoré ascended to the Presidency in 1987 and remained in power for 27 years. In October 2014, President Compaoré's regime was toppled by widespread civil unrest as he attempted to extend his tenure. Civil society groups played a key role in establishing a transitional government to govern the country until national elections could be held the following year. Following a failed military coup attempt against the transitional government, elections took place in November 2015 and Roch Marc Christian Kaboré became [the first non-incumbent](#) elected in the country's history.

Despite its demographic diversity and its political and development challenges, Burkina Faso has long been lauded for its [religious tolerance and social harmony](#). The country is secular, in accordance with the constitution, which along with other laws protects the right of individuals to practice the religion of their choice and change their religion if they [desire](#). In the past, the Burkinabe government has made deliberate efforts to demonstrate equity in its treatment of religious groups, including by allocating an equal amount of funding each to Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and traditional animistic communities. Both [government officials and religious leaders](#) often encourage religious tolerance and praise the country's history of interfaith harmony in public statements and speeches.

Security and Humanitarian Crises

In recent years, Burkina Faso has found itself at the epicenter of several interrelated and rapidly evolving crises that are engulfing much of West Africa. These compounded security and humanitarian crises are testing the limits of Burkinabe religious tolerance and intercultural harmony as conflicts over land, jobs, and scarce resources have begun to erode social cohesion and overwhelm existing mechanisms for conflict resolution. Armed actors and violent opportunists, including Islamic State and al Qaeda affiliated actors, have been stoking conflict between religious groups for personal gain.

Following the French defeat of insurgents and jihadists in northern Mali in 2012 and 2013, many jihadists fled to the border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where they regrouped. Since 2016, both al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates have expanded their reach deep into the Burkinabe territory, aggravating other local tensions and triggering a security crisis.

Violent events in Burkina Faso have [increased over 1,000 percent](#) since 2016. In 2016, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED) reported 54 violent incidents in Burkina Faso. In 2019, [ACLED reported 641 violent incidents](#). [A third](#) of Burkina Faso is now a conflict zone, with abuses and attacks on civilians being perpetrated by a complex array of armed actors, including Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM), Ansarul Islam, national security forces, and an intricate web of local militias and self-defense groups.

This rampant insecurity, combined with underdevelopment and widespread poverty, has led to a dire humanitarian situation. The number of people needing life-saving assistance [doubled](#) over the course of 2019 to over two million people. Since the start of 2019, the country has seen [over a 900 percent increase](#) in the number of people who have fled their homes—from 87,000 to more than 920,000 people. The United Nations assessed that Burkina Faso is [the world's fastest growing displacement crisis](#).

Insecurity and displacement have also disrupted agricultural activities and market chains, triggering [“catastrophic”](#) levels of food insecurity, leaving more than [3.2 million people](#) in need of immediate food assistance. Humanitarian actors were caught unprepared by the speed and scope of the humanitarian crisis, and displacement and security conditions have further inhibited the provision of humanitarian assistance.

The widescale desperation brought on by these crises has increased crime and banditry in rural areas with poor state presence, which in turn has increased demand for informal security providers. Militia groups have used this opportunity to entrench themselves as job creators and community protectors. Some of these militia groups have challenged existing authorities by attacking institutions like schools, traditional leaders, and houses of worship.

Attacks on Houses of Worship and Religious Leaders

Amidst this confluence of crises, religious institutions have been under increasing threat. Attacks on houses of worship and on religious leaders have increased in recent years, targeting both Muslim and Christian communities. The [U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report](#) for 2019 noted that both Muslim and Christian communities in the country had experienced “unprecedented levels” of violence, including the targeting and killing of [at least 38 people](#) based on their religious identity.

For example, in September 2018, jihadist-affiliated fighters [attacked two mosques](#) and killed two imams in East Region. In February 2019, an unknown attacker [hacked worshippers in a mosque](#) with a machete in Gaoua, wounding five people. In October 2019, an [attack on a mosque](#) in Salmossi caused the deaths of 16 civilians.

Churches also have been attacked. In May 2019, heavily armed individuals [attacked a Catholic Mass](#) in Toulfe, killing four. In August, militants [attacked](#) a Catholic and a Protestant church, killing three people. In December, [14 people were killed](#) when unidentified gunmen attacked a church near the border with Niger. In February, 24 more were killed, including a priest, when [armed men attacked a church](#) in Pansi.

Muslim and Christian leaders have also been under threat. Examples of attacks on Muslim leaders are numerous, including a May 2018 incident in which jihadist-affiliated fighters [burned down a Muslim teacher's house](#) in Center-North Region. Terrorists kidnapped and beheaded the [deputy Imam of Boukari](#) in January 2019. In March 2019, terrorists killed a [prominent local Muslim leader](#) and six of his family members in Arbinda. In April 2019, a [prominent religious sheikh was killed](#), alongside three others, in Hamkan village. In August 2020, the [Grand Imam of Djibo](#) and president of the Muslim community of Djibo, the capital of Soum province, was abducted off a public transport bus by unidentified armed men and later found

dead—he had been known for his work bringing Christian and Muslim communities together and was considered a moderate religious figure.

Attacks on Christian leaders include the [kidnapping of a Catholic catechist](#) and his wife in Arbinda in May 2018 by individuals that identified as extremist fighters. In June 2018, armed fighters [abducted an Assembly of God pastor](#) and three members of his family in Soum Province. In April 2019, [a Protestant pastor](#) and five followers were killed near the border with Mali, supposedly for their perceived support for local militias. In February 2020, suspected jihadists [seized seven people at the home of a pastor in Sebba](#); five bodies were found days later, including that of the pastor.

The perpetrators of these attacks and their motivations are often unclear, although several government and independent analysts familiar with the situation reported to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) that they suspected members of jihadist-affiliated groups like ISGS and Ansarul Islam. Analysts posit that the selection of religious targets, even by fighters with jihadist-affiliated armed groups, may not always be religiously motivated. Attacks against religious leaders and houses of worship resemble other attacks on local authorities and symbols of foreign influence, as these groups attempt to establish control over certain areas for political and economic gain. Other tactics in this vein have included [attacks on local magistrates](#), [abductions of tourists](#) and expats, attacks on teachers and [Western-style schools](#), and efforts to coerce communities to speak Arabic instead of French.

However, in some instances the religious motivations are apparent. In [June 2019](#), armed assailants attacked the village of Beni, killed those they found wearing crucifixes, and warned the other villagers that they would be killed if they did not convert to Islam. In recent months, ISGS fighters have attacked rival JNIM jihadists in the region and accused JNIM leaders of being [“fake” and “bad Muslims.”](#) In some areas under their jihadist control, militants have implemented [Shari’a-style rules](#) and [forced civilians](#) to dress in a particular form of Islamic garb.

Burkinabe Government Response

In its effort to maintain order and restore security, the Burkinabe government has prioritized a military approach to the fight against jihadist groups operating in their territory and along the borders with Mali and Niger. Burkina Faso is a member of the [G5 Sahel Joint Force](#)—an ad hoc security initiative including Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad—who all collaborate in addressing the cross-border terrorist threat in the region. The Burkinabe government has undertaken [several counterterrorism operations](#) in the north of the country and has coordinated with Malian and Nigerian security forces in intelligence sharing and cross-border operations.

Despite these efforts, the Burkinabe government is struggling to rein in the violence and address the jihadist threat. Several analysts [report](#) that Burkinabe authorities lack the capacity and resources to control the border with Mali and Niger. Villagers criticized that security forces present in the town of Dablo during an attack on a Catholic church in May 2019 [waited for reinforcements](#) to arrive before responding. In September 2019, Burkinabe security forces [quietly left](#) the town of Djibo in Soum Province because they were too ill-equipped and undermanned to address the security situation. Internal fissures within security forces and general distrust between the civilian government and the military have also challenged the government’s efforts.

[Human rights abuses](#) committed by government-affiliated forces during counterterrorism operations have reportedly contributed to jihadists’ recruitment efforts. Last year, the Burkinabe National Assembly [modified the country’s penal code](#) to include new articles prohibiting the “demoralization” of Burkinabe forces. Many human rights organizations expressed concern regarding this new law, as in practice it may be used to block monitors from reporting on the military’s poor conduct. In July, the U.S. Department of State [expressed its concern](#) regarding the growing number of allegations of human rights violations and abuses perpetrated by state security forces in the Sahel.

In February, Burkina Faso’s parliament [voted](#) to provide financial support and training to local self-defense militias known as *Kolgueogo*, or “guardians of the bush.” This development has further raised fears among human rights observers regarding oversight and professionalism of armed actors in a country where informal and unofficial security actors are proliferating at an alarming rate.



Conclusion

Burkina Faso, an impoverished and little-known west African nation, has suddenly found itself at the epicenter of several global crises, which have contributed to the devolution of religious freedom conditions in the country. The past three years have seen an apparent increase in attacks on houses of worship and religious leaders, targeting both Muslim and Christian communities.

Despite a genuine desire by the Burkinabe government to protect its citizens rights to freedom of religion and belief, the federal government is overwhelmed by security crises.

Recent tensions between competing jihadist groups in the region could further exacerbate these trends, as could further human rights abuses and lack of accountability for government-supported security forces.

Without deliberate, coordinated, and holistic efforts to determine and address the drivers of religious freedom violations and hold the individuals and groups responsible, Burkinabe citizens' rights to freedom of religion and belief will continue to be eroded into the future.

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