

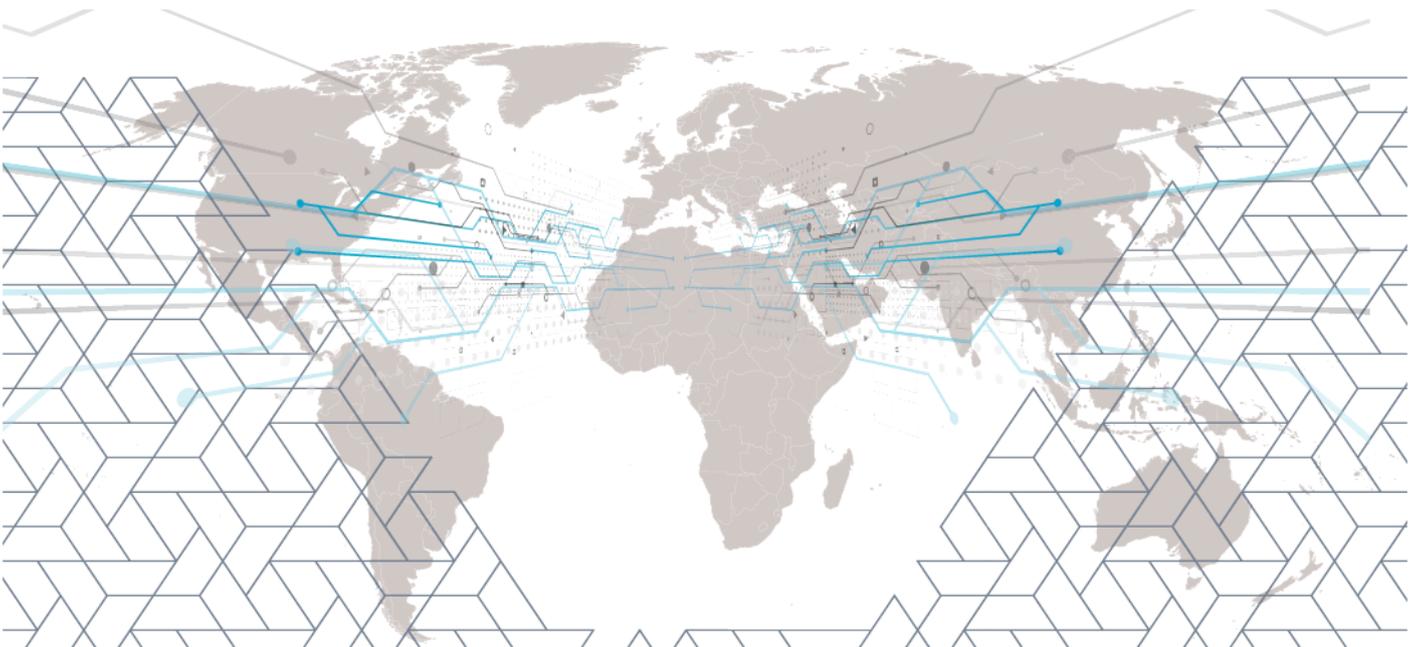
DCAF Geneva Centre
for Security Sector
Governance

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY SECTOR
ADVISORY TEAM (ISSAT)

Burkina Faso

Current Critical Security Issues

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Introduction and context

In recent years, Burkina Faso has emerged as a country of interest for ISSAT Members. After the security events that impacted the Sahel region recently, Burkina Faso stands at a milestone in its reform and State-building processes. It been increasingly exposed to the threats and attacks of violent armed groups, targeting symbols and representatives of the State, including the defence and security forces, local leaders and political figures.

With a history of several coup d'états, the country has entered a cycle of more frequent terrorist attacks since 2014. The northern parts of the country, bordering Mali and Niger, are particularly at risk as a result of the spill-over of their conflicts. The President, Christian Roch Kaboré, has faced demonstrations criticising his handling of the country's recent security crisis. In December 2018, a State of Emergency was declared in several regions, granting extraordinary powers to the security forces and restricting freedom of movement and assembly in the country. In January 2019, the Prime Minister and his cabinet resigned in a context of growing violence and a new Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces was appointed.

The below analysis is an ISSAT Note on Burkina Faso's current critical security issues, which ISSAT considers to be of key relevance to its Members' priorities and programming in the country. This short knowledge product builds on ISSAT's work, as well as on open-source documents and map out the top challenges impacting the security landscape in the country. This note also aims to be a conversation starter and ISSAT welcomes comments and contributions from its Members and Community of Practice.

Poverty and Weakness of the State Apparatus

Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries with more than half of its population living on 1.90 USD per day. It is a traditionally rural country and agriculture is its main source of income. Despite recent economic growth, poverty levels remain the same. This is partly driven by a population growth, combined with recent climate shocks. Cities are particularly affected, with an unemployment rate of 50%. Poverty, combined with a weak government and State apparatus, creates a breeding ground for social tensions and violent conflict. It also leaves room for armed groups activity, in particular in areas where the community experiences exclusion, especially among the youth, and frustration with corruption and unequal distribution of resources and wealth.

Porous Borders and Spill-over Effects from the Conflict in Mali

The broader security landscape in the Sahel region needs to be taken into consideration when examining the worsened security situation in Burkina Faso. Following the conflict in northern Mali and the military interventions led by the government and its allies in those areas, the jihadist armed groups have moved down to central Mali and have contributed, among other factors, to the rise of intercommunal violence, not only in Mali, but also in Niger and Burkina Faso.

The attacks in Burkina Faso were previously mainly conducted across the border by groups based in Mali, using the porous border areas to escape the authorities. Absence of government and State facilities due to unequal



distribution of security sector presence over the country have made it possible for these groups to operate in the northern parts relatively freely, increasing their capacity and presence in the country.

While their areas of operation were at first concentrated in the administrative provinces of Soum and Oudalan, in the northern Sahel Region bordering Mali and Niger, the attacks have now spread into other administrative regions notably the Est, Boucle du Mouhoun and Northern Regions and are also threatening the capital, Ouagadougou, and the border areas with Benin and Ivory Coast.

Population Displacement

Indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Burkina Faso have led to the displacement of more than half a million people as of December 2019 (compared to 50,000 in January 2019). This represents around 3% of the country's population, a number that is expected to increase further in 2020.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) face several critical challenges such as food insecurity and limited access to the fields and markets. Access to basic services such as health, education, water and sanitation is also a major concern. Their presence also weight on the resources of the host communities and puts an extra burden on an already weak resource management system and public services infrastructure, leading to increasing tensions among the communities and risk of intercommunal violence.

Population displacements also impact the surveillance of the territory, and the ability of the security forces to track members of the armed groups, while there are growing concerns that IDPs and people living in refugee camps may become fertile recruitment grounds for violent extremism.

Lack of Resources and Capacity among the Security Forces

During his presidency, Blaise Compaoré reorganised the military and assumed increased control over the security apparatus of the country. After his fall, many of his followers among the security forces deserted or arrested. The Presidential Guard, which represented some 10% of the total military body, was dissolved after the coup d'état in 2015, creating an institutional and human resources gap.

Burkina Faso's security forces are considered inadequately equipped and lack operational capacity to perform their duties. They have sometimes been accused of disproportionate use of violence, extrajudicial killings and human rights violations, including towards civilians. Furthermore, corruption, lack of accountability and weak legitimacy undermines the role of the security forces. National security personnel may also be members of non-state forces such as the Koglweogo, which is one of the largest security non-state actors in Burkina Faso. It has gradually become recognized as a key player by the government.

Several of the international donors present in the country, such as the EU, US and the Joint G5 force for Sahel are supporting programs aiming at operational capacity development, including skills and equipment provision to the security forces. However, lack of sufficient attention to management and accountability aspects in a country where those are perceived to be corrupt, politicised and abusive of their powers, is a risky endeavour.



Lingering SSR Process

In October 2017, a National Security Forum held in Ouagadougou with over 600 participants from ministries, agencies and civil society kicked-off the SSR process led by the National Defence and Security Council (CSDN). The country set itself on a reformative agenda to elaborate on a new national security policy and strategy, develop an anti-corruption strategy, increase governance of the security sector and develop a strategy to combat violent extremism, among other commitments.

However, due to the worsened security situation in the country with increased violence, more than half a million people internally displaced and lack of State presence in all parts of the country, the SSR process has been lingering. The government is now focusing on preventing violent extremism and has declared a state of emergency in 14 out of 45 regions. Lessons from Central African Republic and South Sudan indicate that stalling or halted SSR processes could be potentially an indicator of escalation in political and security tensions.

Unclear Delineation of Roles and Deployment of the Police and Gendarmerie

The National Police is placed under the authority of the Ministry of Security and organized around the General Directorate of the National Police. It is responsible for public security and consists of civil servants. The National Gendarmerie is technically under the authority of the Ministry of Defence; but reports to the Ministry of Security. It is a military force with similar ranking system to the army. The police and gendarmerie perform their activities across the country. While the law provides that a decree shall specify the respective areas of territorial jurisdiction, both police and the gendarmerie often end up working in the same locations at the expense of certain regions. The traditional role of the police to operate in urban areas and the gendarmerie in the countryside, has been blurred during the last years, leading to a shift of the National Police outside urban areas and the "urbanization" of Gendarmerie units. Despite several requests for the opening of new police stations or gendarmerie brigades in neglected areas, there is no clear plans to organise and restructure the territorial grid. This has led to inefficient use of human resources, incapability of ensuring consistent coverage of all the territory, in addition to, unequal distribution of service to the entire population.

Lack of updated information hamper the analysis of the situation. However, an assessment conducted in partnership with ISSAT in 2018 showed that security forces were absent in 36% of the communes. The ratio of security personnel of 1/758 is well below the international standard of 1/400. With a total strength of 5,219 gendarmes, the gendarmerie ratio is 1/2,685. The country has 350 territorial departments in total, 85 of which have at least one Police station and one Gendarmerie unit; 109 have one Gendarmerie unit or a Police station; and 156 do not have any Internal Security force unit established at all.

Fragmentation of the legitimate use of force

Increased violence and limited response capacity from the state security forces has led to the multiplication of defence militias and paramilitary groups such as the Koglweogo. Formed by farmers to respond to rising insecurity in the northern regions, those groups have since evolved into more organised armed groups implementing their own sets of rules and passing sentences. Those groups have established semi-formal



relations with the security forces with whom they might collaborate and who sometimes hand out alleged delinquents or criminals to the traditional groups. In 2018, the government has launched several initiatives to strengthen the dialogue with the Koglweogo and has adopted a decree formally allowing them to participate in the fight against insecurity alongside the State forces.

More recently, the government adopted a new decree creating the status of “Defence Volunteers”. According to the decree, the mission of the Volunteer is to contribute, if necessary, by force of arms, to the defence and protection of persons and property in his or her village or area of residence. After going through initial military training for fourteen days, the Volunteers will receive a weapon and are placed under the supervision of a group leader chosen among his peers at the village level. The groups are loosely placed under the military chain of command, though it is unclear how this control will be implemented.

Koglweogo and similar community defence have already been accused of committing human rights violations and their activities are often inconsistent with the respect of basic rule of law principles such as the presumption of innocence. They however benefit from the support of the population, tired of the state's inability to ensure one of its basic functions: the safety of citizens. The legitimization and legalisation of such groups therefore raise the question of the State's ability to control them and of the risk of a fragmentation of the legitimate use of force.

Weapons proliferation and intercommunal violence

The trafficking and diversion of weapons and ammunition are fuelling the conflict in the Sahel and continue to threaten community safety across the region, in particular in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Burkina Faso is located along some of the most important weapons trafficking routes in West Africa. Traffickers make use of the porous border areas to link the gulf countries to main recipient countries such as Mali, making weapons easily accessible. Important stocks were also diverted from the government stockpile during the 2011 police and military mutiny. To prevent the worsening of the situation, the Burkinabe government suspended the sale of firearms to the civilian population at the end of February 2019. However, after only a few months, the measure was lifted in June. In early 2020, the government took a reverse approach by creating the status of “Defence Volunteer”, therefore giving access to weapons to civilians and legitimizing their use of force to supplement the security forces.

However, in a country where intercommunal tensions and the multiplication of armed groups are already creating challenging conditions to the protection of civilians, there is a concern that the new measures could further foster the proliferation of weapons and heighten ethnic conflict. While intercommunal violence is a relatively new phenomenon in Burkina Faso, resentment and mistrust toward the Fulani communities, because of their perceived association with the Islamist groups, have increased as attacks led by armed groups have become more frequent.



2020 Elections

Burkina Faso is holding general Presidential and Parliamentary elections in November 2020. The country has a long history of coup d'état's which weakened the election and governance system, and with the current security situation, this might make for a turbulent election process. Current armed violence and terrorist attacks are predicated to halt the election process. This is mainly due to two reasons; Firstly, as a consequence of the increased violence and terrorist attacks in the country, entire villages have been displaced and regions in the north and eastern parts have lost their population. As a result, the electoral constituencies must be reviewed to reflect the change of inhabitants. Additional local and national candidates could be put forward in regions hosting most of the displaced persons. The government might also need to find a system allowing displaced persons to elect their local candidates outside of their own constituency. IDPs could also elect candidates in the regions where they currently are located. The solution is not perfect however and might result in an unbalance of candidates as entire villages in the norther and eastern parts of the country are emptied. This also implies to rewrite the number of constituencies in each region which is a long and complicated process due to the fluctuating security landscape.

A second challenge for the upcoming elections is the registration to vote which closed in January 2020. About 50 % of the population are eligible to vote, equalling 10 million, but only half are currently registered, leaving almost 5 million people, mainly youth, noneligible to take part in the democratic election process. This situation is particularly worrying as lack of representativity in the public institutions and the feeling of exclusion are key drivers of conflict in the region.

