

The Costs of United States' Post-9/11 "Security Assistance": How Counterterrorism Intensified Conflict in Burkina Faso and Around the World

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Summary

Since 9/11, President George W. Bush's "Global War on Terror" has morphed into many United States military operations and other government programs run out of civilian offices for military purposes around the world. The U.S. conducts a significant portion of the post-9/11 war effort in the name of offering "training and assistance in counterterrorism" to over 79 countries.²

Many governments use the U.S. narrative of terrorism and counterterrorism, along with the accompanying financial, political, and institutional resources given them by the U.S., to repress minority groups, justify authoritarianism, and facilitate illicit profiteering, all while failing to address poverty and other structural problems that lead to widespread frustration with the state. Thus, in a vicious cycle, what the U.S. calls security assistance actually accomplishes the opposite. Around the world, it has fed insecurity, bolstering the militants that react against the government injustices exacerbated by this aid.

This paper examines the effects of U.S. security assistance and the profound costs of "helping" other nations wage their own "wars on terror." The paper draws on the case of Burkina Faso, a landlocked country in the West African Sahel, to which the U.S. has been providing counterterrorism funding and training since 2009. It was only several years later, starting in 2016, that Burkina Faso began to confront militant violence linked to what local people call "jihadism." Today's conflict is rooted in complex regional dynamics, and several parties are responsible for committing violence, but the focus here is on the role of the U.S. Though the U.S. is not a primary actor on the ground, the larger U.S. understanding of — and dollars spent on — counterterrorism have intensified the spiraling conflict that now devastates Burkina Faso and the broader region.

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² Savell, S. (2021, Feb). U.S. Counterterrorism Operations, 2018-2020. *Costs of War*, Watson Institute, Brown University. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2021/USCounterterrorismOperations>.

Introduction

Burkina Faso, a country few Americans would associate with the United States' post-9/11 wars, offers a window into the costs of U.S. counterterrorism around the world. Since Burkina Faso entered the U.S. government's Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) more than a decade ago, the Burkinabe state has acted on the premise that waging a "war on terrorism" is the best, and indeed the only, way to respond to Islamist militant violence. It has carried out this war with U.S., European, and other foreign resources and based it around a U.S.-sponsored logic centered on capturing or killing those identified as "terrorists" and conducting military operations in spaces that could potentially harbor militants.³ This approach is not self-evident; militant violence need not be treated as a problem to be battled with a domestic war. In fact, historical research shows that governments have been more effective in curtailing such violence when they deal with the social and political sources of people's grievances.⁴ Sahel analysts argue the region's conflict is rooted in domestic political crisis, so identifying the problem as one of terrorism is a fundamentally flawed presumption.⁵ Yet Burkina Faso has adopted the framework of counterterrorism, and in doing so has targeted and abused a minority group, the Fulani, as well as justified undemocratic governance.⁶

The U.S. government pursues counterterrorism assistance through a substantial array of programs in what the Costs of War project has documented is over 79 countries.⁷ These include training foreign militaries and police forces; conducting intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions; offering logistical aid; commanding proxy forces; and assisting with border control measures and maritime operations.⁸ Since 9/11, the U.S. government has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on these programs. Between 2002 and 2016 alone, the U.S. spent \$125 billion on training and assistance in just 36

³ The terms "terrorist/ism" and "counterterrorism" are historically specific and often confounding categories. People in government, the media, and others use these words for political and budgetary reasons, but they are cultural constructs, not natural categories for a type of person or action. Each and every case involves a different and often complex mix of government action and insurgency that is best understood in local context. As many observers have noted, the label "War on Terror" is problematic for the ways that it focuses on a particular form of violence – so-called terrorism – without reference to the many different goals of that violence. This label is also problematic because of how governments have used it less to focus on the harm done to civilians and more to create a category of enemies who must be opposed with military force.

⁴ Evangelista, M. (2011). Coping with 9/11: Alternatives to the War Paradigm. *Costs of War*.

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2011/Coping%20with%20911.pdf>.

⁵ Reeve, R., Pelter, Z. (2014). From New Frontier to New Normal: Counter-terrorism Operations in the Sahel-Sahara. *Remote Control Project, Oxford Research Group*.

⁶ The Fulani are also called Fulbe, Fula, and Peul (in French). Their language is Fulfulde.

⁷ Savell 2021.

⁸ The Pentagon defines counterterrorism as "actions taken directly against terrorist networks and indirectly to influence and render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorist networks." Federation of American Scientists. (2010, November) Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp1_02.pdf; According to the State Department, "the term 'terrorism' means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents." Bureau of Counterterrorism. (2019, October). Country Reports on Terrorism 2018. *United States Department of State Publication*, 331. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2018-FINAL.pdf>.

countries.⁹ Training and assistance has opened the door to additional billions in sales of weapons and military equipment by U.S. companies to those governments. Worldwide, governments often use these funds, institutional and political supports, and equipment to enhance their ability to repress their people and to enrich small local elites.

This paper is based on first-hand interviews in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, of displaced people, journalists, activists, scholars, former government officials, staff of nonprofit groups, and others during an investigative trip in January 2020, as well as academic articles, analyses by think tanks and nonprofits, and media reports.¹⁰

In the early 2000s, U.S. strategists justified counterterrorism assistance in the relatively peaceful Sahel by warning that a radical group in Algeria with links to Al-Qaeda could spread throughout the region. Today, Burkina Faso is enveloped in an escalating conflict in which government forces, militant groups, and state-backed informal militias all terrorize civilians. In 2020, there were at least 1,000 attacks, massacres, and other violent incidents linked to militant Islamist groups across the portion of the Sahel that spans Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – a sevenfold increase since 2017.¹¹ Rather than addressing the root causes of this violence – including poverty, lack of development, and anger at government, corrupt elites and neocolonial activities by Western nations – Burkina Faso's government has militarily targeted the Fulani, whose members it accuses of being or supporting terrorists.¹² The Fulani are semi-nomadic herders who live across West and North Africa and who have, since long before the colonial era, practiced Islam and sent their children to Koranic schools.

Partially in response to government injustices, militant groups have mushroomed and strengthened; they now control territory across broad swaths of the country's north and east. The conflict has inflamed ethnic and intercommunal tensions to such an extent that it is hard to imagine how it might end. Thousands of Burkinabe have been killed and over one million displaced, most of them suffering extreme food shortages and made vulnerable to the ravages of disease, now including Covid-19.

Few people in Burkina Faso would identify the U.S. as having any involvement in the strife, as Americans are seldom on the front lines. Many actors in the region commit violence – among them federal governments, militants such as the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) coalition and the Islamic State in the Greater

⁹ See the Security Assistance Monitor's database: <https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/>; Goodman, C., Arabia, C. (2018). Corruption in the Defense Sector: Identifying Key Risks to U.S. Counterterrorism Aid. *Security Assistance Monitor, Center for International Policy*. <https://securityassistance.org/publications/corruption-in-the-defense-sector-identifying-key-risks-to-u-s-counterterrorism-aid/>.

¹⁰ The author built on a foundation of prior ethnographic research in west Africa as well as years of research on broad patterns of U.S. counterterrorism activities across the globe.

¹¹ Eizenga, D., Williams, W. (2020, December). The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel. *Africa Security Brief (38)*, *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*. <https://africacenter.org/publication/puzzle-jnim-militant-islamist-groups-sahel>.

¹² The Fulani are also called Fulbe, Fula, and Peul (in French). Their language is Fulfulde.

Sahara, and other armed militia groups – and most Burkinabe understand the conflict in terms of complex local and regional dynamics. France rather than the U.S. has taken the lead in the “war on terror” in the Sahel (and interviews with some Burkinabe who encountered French troops revealed that civilians may perceive them as respecting human rights more than local soldiers). Nonetheless, taking a step back to look at the larger picture reveals that the U.S. government is complicit in intensifying the conflict.

Were it not for the U.S.-led “war on terror,” Burkina Faso’s response to the current crisis would have been far less militarized. There would have been less funding for the Burkinabe military, whose budget in the past several years has skyrocketed in tandem with U.S. financial support. There would have been fewer Burkinabe soldiers and officers trained to wage war on those the government calls terrorists. There would have been fewer armored personnel carriers, machine guns, and other military equipment. On a larger level, the U.S. narrative of counterterrorism has enabled the Burkinabe government to justify attacking the Fulani and restricting freedom of the press. Behind the scenes, powerful individuals have likely profited from U.S. funds. All this, in turn, has fueled militant violence, as militants strike back against government repression, corruption, and inaction against poverty. The Algerian branch of Al-Qaeda has splintered, multiplied, and spread, just as U.S. officials feared – in no small part because of U.S. activities.

The first two sections of the paper cover the history and substance of, as well as funding for, U.S. counterterror efforts in Burkina Faso and the Sahel, and background of the current regional conflict. The paper then turns to the costs of Burkina Faso’s war on terror and shows how these have strengthened militant groups. Throughout, the paper draws comparisons to other countries, for the consequences of U.S. counterterrorism in Burkina Faso are evident in many other places as well.

Box 1: The Human Toll in Burkina Faso, in Numbers

Civilians killed (April 2015 – Dec. 2020): *Numbers are likely an underestimate
>2,144 – 2,735, of whom approx.

1,092 – 1,219 were killed by militants,

588 – 1,016 by government forces,

337 – 373 by government-backed militias such as the Koglweogo

(+ others by unidentified perpetrators).

Registered internally displaced people (as of September 2020): **1,034,609**

Over 60% of whom are children

Children lacking access to education (as of March 2020, before all schools closed due to the pandemic): **349,909**,

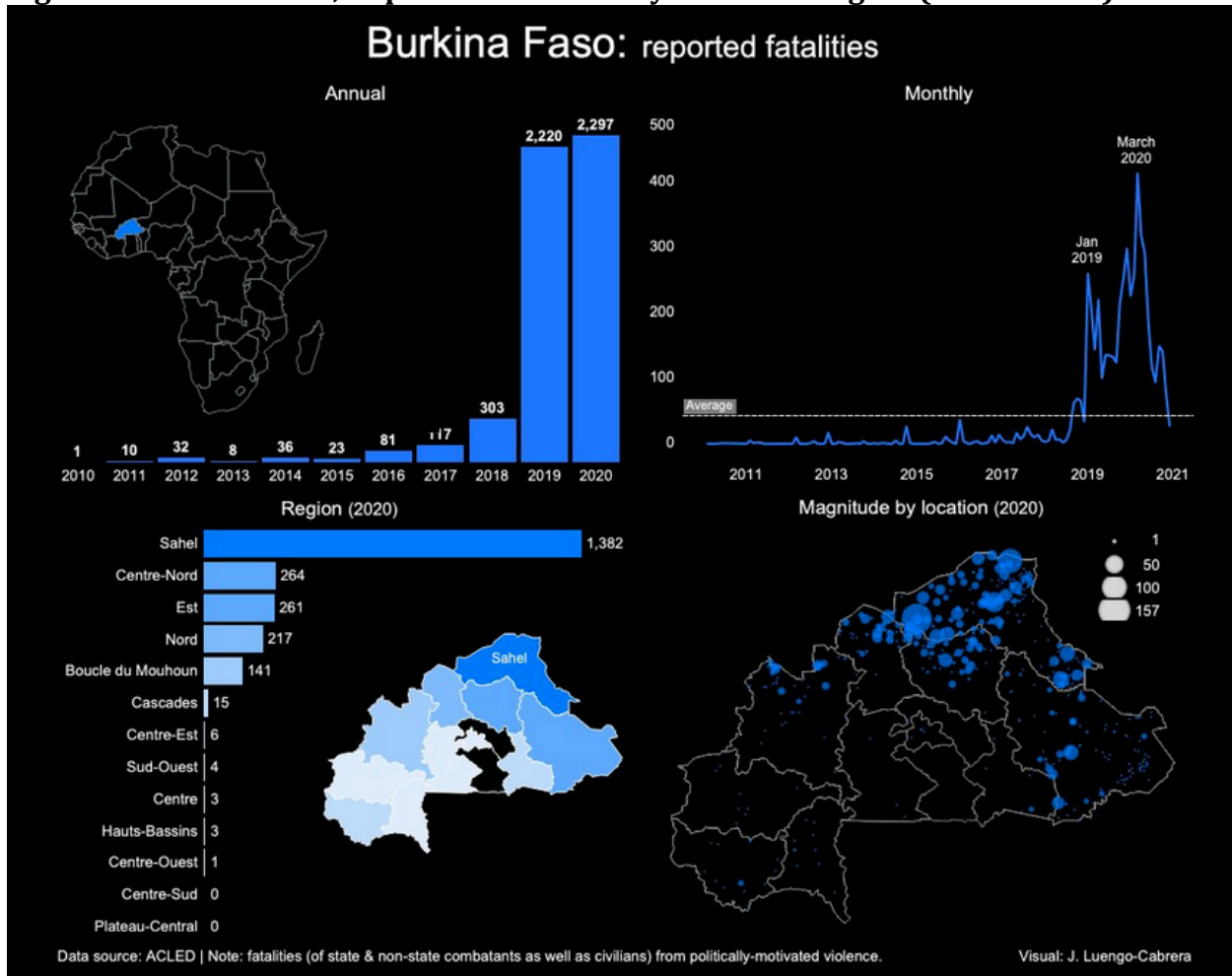
with over 2,512 schools closed due to attacks by armed groups.

People in need of humanitarian assistance (as of August 2020): **2,900,000**

Sources: L’Observatoire Pour La Démocratie et les Droits de l’Homme (ODDH). (2020, June). Burkina Faso: Risque d’un nouveau Rwanda? Bilan de la Violence au Burkina Faso, 04 avril 2015 – 31 mai 2020.

https://lefaso.net/IMG/pdf/burkina_faso_risque_d_un_nouveau_rwanda.pdf. ODDH documented each death with at least three sources (media reports, social media posts, army or government sources).; Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (2021). *Violence Against Civilians, Burkina Faso, 2015-Jan. 2021* [Data Set]. <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>; UNICEF. (2020, December). "Burkina Faso: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 8." <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/unicef-burkina-faso-humanitarian-situation-report-no-8-reporting-period-1-30>

Figure 1. Burkina Faso, Reported Fatalities by Year and Region (ACLED Data)



Visual produced by José Luengo-Cabrera using publicly-available data by ACLED (2021).

U.S. Counterterrorism in Burkina Faso and the Sahel

Shortly after 9/11, the U.S. military and State Department began to extend their focus to so-called fragile states which could potentially harbor Islamist militants and thus threaten the U.S. In Africa, U.S. military presence had been limited since the end of World War II; even humanitarian operations were largely halted after the 1993 “Black Hawk Down” incident in Somalia, when members of a militia shot down a U.S. helicopter. In the wake of 9/11, however, the U.S. began to return to the continent. Starting in 2002, the U.S. military began to build relationships across Africa, expanding a base in Djibouti and seeking access to informal bases in Kenya, Ethiopia, and the Seychelles, then dispersing

throughout the continent. Today, a wide variety of U.S. bases and “lily pads” include staging areas for quick reaction forces, small outposts where special operations teams can advise local troops, and places to accommodate cargo planes or surveillance aircraft.¹³

In 2007, the U.S. military created Africa Command (AFRICOM), signaling a commitment to expanding its African operations, which had previously operated out of other command centers. The Command was based in Germany, as no African country would agree to host it, seeing it as too redolent of Western colonialism and fearing it would create a target for militant strikes. Basing AFRICOM there also made it easier to coordinate with Europeans, who as a legacy of the colonial era had a greater presence on the continent. AFRICOM was charged with preventing war in countries “where violent conflict has not yet emerged, where crises have to be prevented.”¹⁴ This was reminiscent of the Cold-War era doctrine of “active defense,” under which the U.S. needed to be able to “strike the first blow” by “applying armed force at a distance.” After 9/11, officials articulated this same doctrine as “preemptive war,” holding that the U.S. could launch military interventions to remove a perceived threat “before the threat was imminent.”¹⁵

Over the past nearly two decades, the Pentagon has spent billions of dollars on its military presence in Africa. Today, there are an estimated 6,000 or more U.S. troops stationed in Africa, with potentially thousands more rotating in for shorter periods of time on temporary assignments.¹⁶ The U.S. military carries out its battle against “terrorists” on the continent through special ops missions, intelligence operations, drone strikes (in Somalia and Libya), the use of proxy forces under the 127e legal authority (see footnote), joint military exercises with other countries, humanitarian missions that serve hearts and minds functions, a growing reliance on military contracting companies to build infrastructure and perform other services, and above all, a broad set of financial support and operational activities characterized as training and assistance for other countries’ forces.¹⁷ In West Africa, the U.S. has provided the French military with critical intelligence and logistics support. It has also built a sprawling network of low-profile U.S. bases in the region, including at the Ouagadougou international airport in Burkina Faso. Between 2013 and 2018, eight countries in the Sahel region alone (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Tunisia) saw combat operations by U.S. forces.¹⁸

¹³ Vine, D. (2020). *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁴ Bachmann, J. (2010). Kick down the door, clean up the mess, and rebuild the house - The Africa command and transformation of the US military. *Geopolitics* 15(3): 564–585.

¹⁵ Vine 2020, pp. 298-299.

¹⁶ Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander, United States Africa Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee. January 30, 2020. https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Townsend_01-30-20.pdf.

¹⁷ Vine 2020; “Section 127e” is a U.S. legal authority that allows U.S. special operations forces to plan and control certain missions, remaining in charge of rather than at the side of the African counterparts they are ostensibly advising and assisting. See Morgan, W. (2018, July). Behind the secret U.S. war in Africa. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/02/secret-war-africa-pentagon-664005>.

¹⁸ Additionally, in 2019, the U.S. military used low-profile bases across the Sahel and West Africa, including in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Ghana, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. Turse, N. (2018, December). U.S. Military Says It Has a ‘Light Footprint’ in Africa. These Documents Show a Vast Network of

In the West African Sahel, such operations gained strength far before the emergence of militant Islamist violence, which expanded only after the 2012 destabilization of Mali (described below). (To clarify, the Sahel region does *not* include Nigeria, which has its own longer history of militant groups, primarily Boko Haram, and counterterrorism). Though U.S. strategists saw the main terrorist threat from Africa as emanating from the Horn and East Africa, the U.S. State Department established the Pan Sahel Initiative in 2003. It began to train rapid response military units from Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Quickly, U.S. personnel began to describe the initiative not as a training program but as a means of tracking down suspected terrorists, especially those affiliated with an Algerian group with links to Al-Qaeda (the predecessor of what would later become Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).¹⁹ In 2005, the Pan-Sahel Initiative became the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and was expanded to include Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. Yet as late as 2010, a regional expert estimated, “The threat of violent jihadi activity in the Mauritanian, Malian, Nigerian, and Chadian Sahel region is very small.”²⁰ Burkina Faso was added to the TSCTP in 2009, despite the fact that U.S. officials identified no terrorist threat there. A 2014 State Department report noted, “In 2013, there were no recorded terrorist incidents in Burkina Faso, which is not a source for violent extremist organization recruitment efforts or home to radical religious extremists.”²¹

To explain the U.S. government’s increasing military focus on Sahelian West Africa since 2002 despite the region’s relative peace and stability, some scholars highlight the region’s natural resources and the perceived importance of maintaining a geopolitical presence to counter the influence of China and Russia.²² Others call attention to racist, neocolonial U.S. discourses about the unknown and therefore threatening “blank spaces” on the map.²³ President Bush used centuries-old racialized language to claim he wanted the U.S. military to be “ready to strike at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world.”²⁴

In theory, the TSCTP had a holistic approach to counterterrorism, including development aid and public diplomacy. To that end, the program includes a loosely

Bases. *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2018/12/01/u-s-military-says-it-has-a-light-footprint-in-africa-these-documents-show-a-vast-network-of-bases/>; Turse, N., Naylor, S. (2019, April). Revealed: The U.S. military’s 36 code-named operations in Africa. *Yahoo News*. <https://news.yahoo.com/revealed-the-us-militarys-36-codenamed-operations-in-africa-090000841.html>.

¹⁹ Ellis, S. (2004). Briefing: The Pan-Sahel Initiative. *African Affairs* 103(412): 459–464.

²⁰ McGovern, M. (2010). Chasing shadows in the dunes: Islamist practice and counterterrorist policy in West Africa’s Sahara-Sahel zone. In *Securing Africa: Post-9/11 Discourses on Terrorism*, edited by Malina S. Smith, 79–98. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 81.

²¹ Report obtained by *The New York Times*. Turse, N. (2020, October). How One of the Most Stable Nations in West Africa Descended into Mayhem. *The New York Times Magazine*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/15/magazine/burkina-faso-terrorism-united-states.html>

²² Ellis 2004; Eizenga, D., Charbonneau, B. (2019, April). “Que fait l’armée américaine au Sahel?” *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*.

²³ Besteman, C., Savell, S. (2018, January). Where in the World is the US Military? Everywhere. *US News & World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2018-01-12/us-counterterrorism-forces-are-active-in-many-more-places-than-you-know>.; Turse, N. (2015, October). Target Africa: The US Military’s Expanding Footprint in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/target-africa/>.; Vine 2020.

²⁴ Vine 2020, p. 300.

coordinated set of initiatives run not just by the Pentagon but also by the State Department, USAID, and Department of Justice, including activities such as public messaging and vocational training. In practice, however, rather than attempting to address the fundamental structural challenges, like widespread poverty, that drive instability in the region, U.S. officials focus on training elite counterterrorism units as the most cost-effective way of conducting a “vital, albeit limited” effort to counter local Al-Qaeda affiliates.²⁵ Over the years, the Departments of Defense and State have disagreed as to whether it was best to work through partner nation militaries (the State Department position), or take direct, boots-on-the-ground action against “terrorists” (as the Pentagon advocated for). Ultimately, the agencies decided on both, agreeing to a sweeping goal to “contain, disrupt, degrade, counter, and ultimately defeat the threat posed by Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and associated VEOs [Violent Extremist Organizations] in the Trans-Sahara region.”²⁶ Either way, the TSTCP’s approach was skewed towards an emphasis on military operations. In the context of underdeveloped countries with fragile political and economic institutions, an internal critic called this approach akin to “throwing a band-aid on a chest wound.”²⁷

Though the TSTCP has long been accused of mismanagement and inadequate oversight, the U.S. has continued to fund it, spending over \$1 billion since 2005. Most recently, in September 2020, the State Department’s Office of the Inspector General released an audit of eight TSTCP efforts, concluding they were marked by waste and deficiencies. The report judged that at least six TSTCP contracts amounting to \$201.6 million were “potential wasteful spending.” More than half the invoices for these contracts lacked supporting documentation.²⁸ Over the years, watchdog groups have systematically highlighted similar problems in regards to the TSTCP.²⁹

Since 2009, when Burkina Faso entered the TSTCP, the U.S. government has donated weapons, ammunition, and vehicles to the Burkinabe government and provided training to Burkinabe forces through no less than 15 security assistance programs:

Year after year, U.S. tax dollars flowed into Burkina Faso in the form of armored personnel carriers and trucks, communications gear and generators, body armor and night-vision equipment, rifles and machine guns. It provided Burkinabe troops with training in surveillance, reconnaissance, detection of roadside bombs and the use of weapons, and helped them improve peacekeeping capabilities and border security. Burkinabe soldiers and police officers attended military intelligence courses and counterterrorism training; they learned leadership skills at Fort

²⁵ Warner, L. (2014). The Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership: Building Partner Capacity to Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism. *CNA Analysis and Solutions*. Pp. 66-67.

²⁶ Warner 2014, pp. 57-61.

²⁷ Warner 2014, p. 65.

²⁸ Office of the Inspector General, United States Department of State. (2020, September). “Audit of the Department of State Bureau of African Affairs Monitoring and Coordination of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership.” <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/aud-mero-20-42.pdf>

²⁹ Turse, N. (2020, December). US-Funded Counterterrorism Efforts in West Africa Aren’t Helping. *Vice*. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7a7be/us-funded-counterterrorism-efforts-in-west-africa-arent-helping>.

Leavenworth, Kan., the basics of commanding infantry troops at Fort Benning, Ga., and they took courses on defeating terrorism at bases in California and Florida.³⁰

As noted, the content of U.S. trainings for Burkinabe forces varies, as do the specific units trained. For instance, in 2018, among other courses, the Pentagon offered 45 “gendarmes” (members of a police force with military-style fighting units) a course in human rights and taught 16 soldiers “logistics management.” U.S.-based contractors gave unspecified trainings to at least 40 gendarmes and soldiers in battalions across Burkina Faso (such contractor courses are subject to little if any oversight).³¹ Other Burkinabe officers traveled to the U.S. or Europe for high-level strategy courses. Generally, research has shown how such training is a key mechanism in cementing ties between the U.S. military and foreign militaries and spreading U.S. military goals and worldviews. Even human rights courses can serve as the military’s attempt to justify continued training without accounting for past practices.³² No matter the intent of the trainers, there can be negative consequences.

Unsurprisingly, the budget for U.S. security assistance to Burkina Faso since 2009 has skyrocketed. Figure 2, below, shows a partial accounting of U.S. funding since 2001.³³ The figure does *not* show the \$100 million the U.S. gave to Burkina Faso in “security cooperation” funding in 2018 and 2019 (an amount uncovered by investigative journalist Nick Turse).³⁴ Figure 2 also does *not* include the almost \$3.4 million in total arms sales that the U.S. has delivered to Burkina Faso since 2010.³⁵ However incomplete, the graph shows annual rates of U.S. security funding in the \$200,000 range before 2009. In 2010, funding was over \$1.7 million, and by 2018, it was more than \$16 million. A relatively small portion of this security assistance goes to training. In 2018, for instance, the total cost of trainings was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, compared to \$16 million overall.³⁶ This indicates that the majority of U.S. security funding has been in the form of equipment and military operations, like surveillance, in support of counterterrorism.

³⁰ Turse, N. (2020, October). How One of the Most Stable Nations in West Africa Descended into Mayhem. *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/15/magazine/burkina-faso-terrorism-united-states.html>.

³¹ U.S. Departments of State and Defense. 2019. *Foreign Military Training in Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019, Volumes I and II*. <https://www.state.gov/reports/foreign-military-training-and-dod-engagement-activities-of-interest-2018-2019/>.

³² Gill, L. (2004). *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

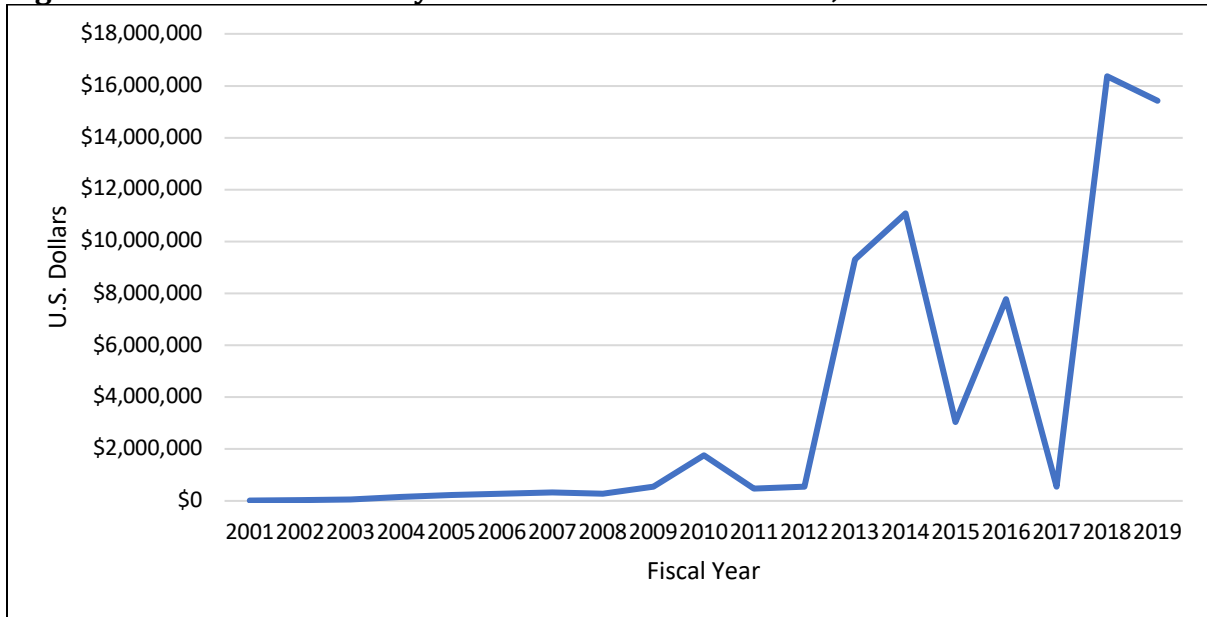
³³ The data is from Security Assistance Monitor at the Center for International Policy, a nonprofit think tank in Washington, DC which draws from publicly available information. See Security Aid Data, Burkina Faso, 2001-2019. <http://securityassistance.org/data/program/military/Burkina%20Faso/2001/2019/all/Global//>

³⁴ Turse 2020. How One of the Most Stable Nations in West Africa Descended into Mayhem.

³⁵ Security Assistance Monitor. Arms Sales, Burkina Faso, 2001-2019. [Data Set]. <http://securityassistance.org/data/program/arms/Burkina%20Faso/2001/2019//Global//all>

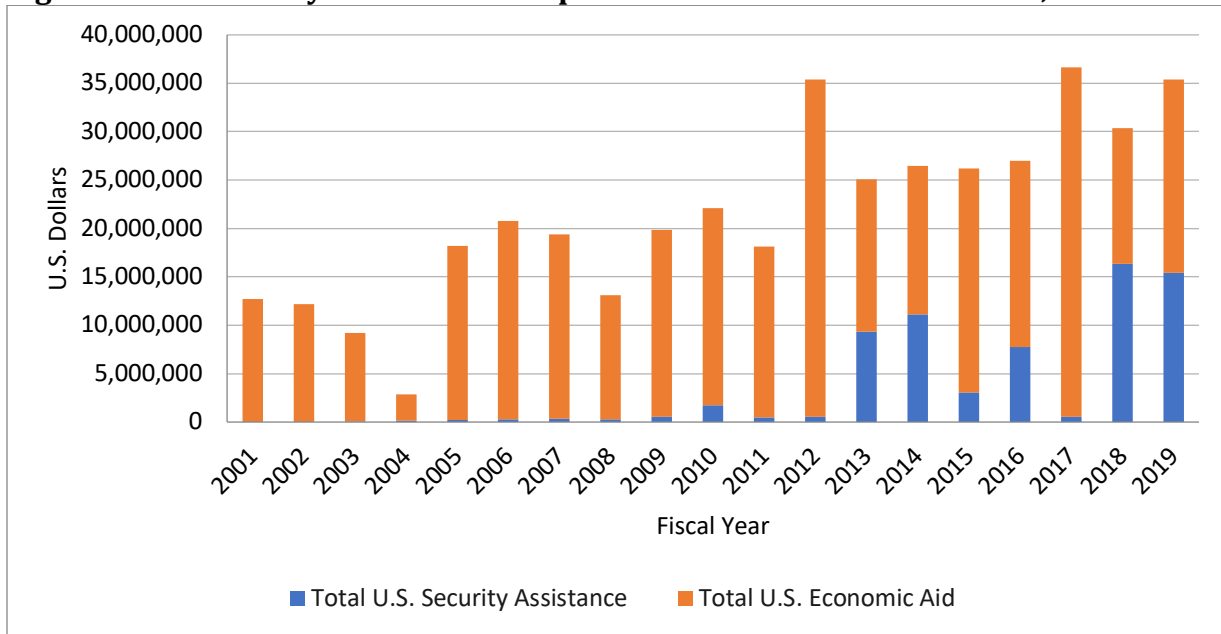
³⁶ U.S. Departments of State and Defense. (2019.) *Foreign Military Training in Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019, Volumes I and II*. <https://www.state.gov/reports/foreign-military-training-and-dod-engagement-activities-of-interest-2018-2019/>.

Figure 2. Partial U.S. Security Assistance to Burkina Faso, 2001-2019



Whereas before 2009, U.S. security assistance was small compared to other economic aid, that proportion has grown substantially, especially since 2012, when neighboring Mali was wracked by political upheaval (see Figure 3, below).³⁷

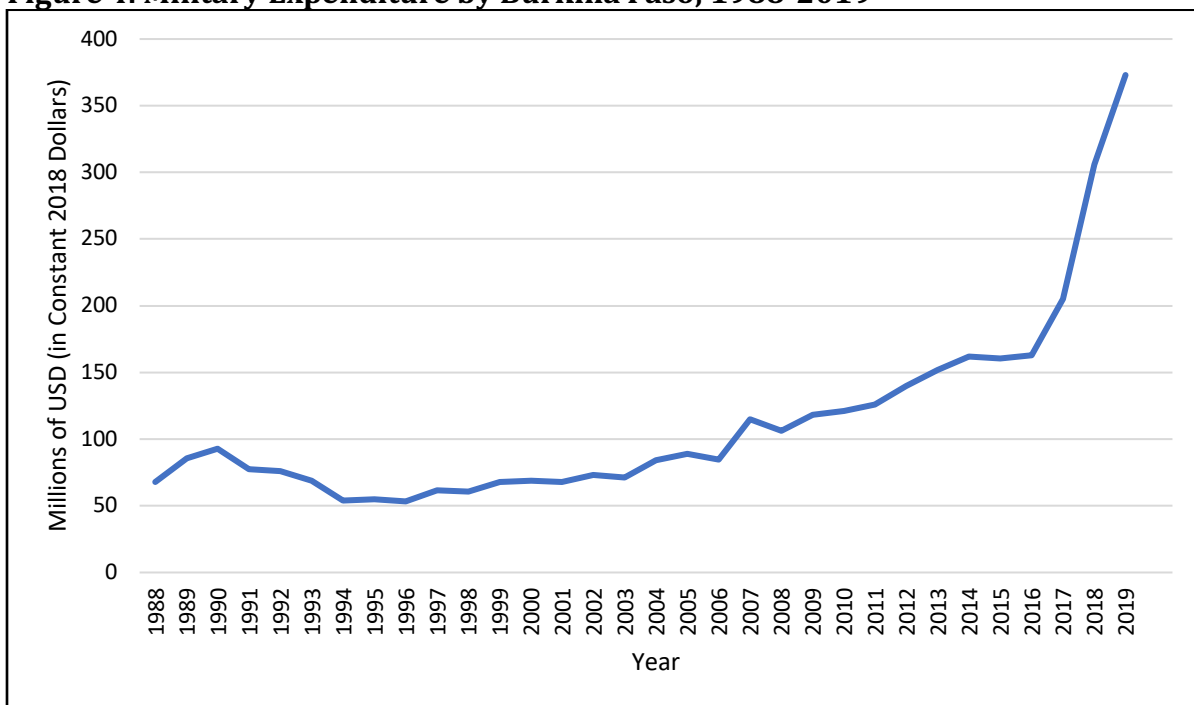
Figure 3. U.S. Security Assistance Compared to Other U.S. Economic Aid, 2001-2019



³⁷ Security Assistance Monitor. Economic Aid Data, Burkina Faso, 2001-2019. <http://securityassistance.org/data/country/economic/country/2001/2019/all/Global//>

The Burkinabe government’s military expenditures have risen in tandem. Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) show a marked increase beginning in 2009 (see Figure 4, below). In 2009, the Burkinabe government spent \$115 million on its military; that rose to \$373 million in 2019 – well over double in just 10 years (data in constant 2018 USD).³⁸ As militant violence continued to escalate, military spending in 2019 alone increased 22% over the prior year.³⁹ The SIPRI data does not specify how much of this spending was on arms from the U.S. or elsewhere, but in all likelihood some of it was. Note that this data does not reflect a total amount that the Burkinabe government has spent in battling militants, as it does not include, among other ledger items, the budget for gendarmes, the part of the police force that is heavily engaged in battles against suspected jihadists.

Figure 4. Military Expenditure by Burkina Faso, 1988-2019



Years before the outbreak of militant violence in Burkina Faso, U.S. security assistance set the stage for the Burkinabe government to address the problem of terrorism, when it arose, with military force. Beginning in 2009 and especially since 2013, the influx of U.S. funding for Burkina Faso’s military went in tandem with a dramatic rise in that country’s military expenditures. When militant groups eventually made inroads in northern and eastern Burkina Faso, the U.S. logic that pitted government forces in a battle against terrorist enemies seemed natural – indeed, inevitable.

³⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. SIPRI Military Expenditure Data Base, 1949-2019. [Data Set]. <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

³⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2020. Global military expenditure sees largest annual increase in a decade – says SIPRI – reaching \$1917 billion in 2019. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/global-military-expenditure-sees-largest-annual-increase-decade-says-sipri-reaching-1917-billion>.

Origins of the Current Conflict

The 2012 political destabilization of Mali precipitated today's cascading instability in the shared Sahelian border region between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Before 2012, Mali had a long history of ethnically-infused tension between the nomadic Tuareg in the far-flung northern part of the country and the central government, based in the south; several notable Tuareg rebellions since the 1960s have demanded independence. In 2009, the government and rebels came to a tentative peace agreement after the latest uprising. As the dust settled, rebels retreated to neighboring Libya, where they had close networks.

Then, in 2011, a U.S.- and NATO-backed revolution in Libya toppled longtime Libyan dictator Col. Muammar Qadhafi, and the regime's weapons arsenals were looted by various Libyan rebel groups with ties to nationalist Tuareg networks and the militant Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali. AQIM's roots were in Algeria, but the group had been in Mali for the past several years, along with splinter groups that had broken from it.⁴⁰ Both networks raced to stock up on Libyan arms.

Some of the Tuareg who had been fighting in Libya joined the Tuareg separatist movement in Mali, and in 2012 began to take over the northern part of the country, attacking and defeating the Malian army in several locations. Anger within the country's armed forces over the democratically elected government's ineffective response to the rebellion resulted in a military coup. Yet the military government proved even less effective in dealing with the turbulence in the north. There, Islamist militants soon gained the upper hand over Tuareg separatists, publicly discarding the separatist movement even as they took over large swaths of territory.

International actors were concerned that the violence would not only result in further lost territory in Mali but also might spill over to the rest of the region (as it eventually did). In 2012 and 2013, France deployed its military in Operation Serval to help the Malian government regain control of its territories. Chad sent troops to assist in the fighting. Later in 2013, the United Nations Security Council established the MINUSMA peacekeeping mission to help stabilize the country. In 2014, France began Operation Barkhane to continue Operation Serval and combat militant groups. Both the UN mission and Barkhane are still ongoing today, as are military interventions by regional coalitions and other European contingents. Today there are an estimated 20,000 soldiers from Europe, the UN, and the U.S. in Mali and the region.⁴¹ Throughout, the U.S. has provided critical support to France's combat operations by airlifting soldiers and supplies, flying refueling missions, and providing drone, signal, and satellite intelligence. "Without

⁴⁰ In the Sahara, the massive desert north of the Sahel that is home to the nomadic Tuareg as well as other groups, the rise of "political Islam with a Salafist orientation" dates to the arrival in the 1990s of the South Asian Islamist movement Tablighi Jama'at, the emergence in 2003 of AQIM's ancestor in Algeria, and the launching of the U.S. Pan-Sahel initiative in 2002. See Lecocq, B., et al. (2013). One hippopotamus and eight blind analysts: a multivocal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in the divided Republic of Mali. *Review of African Political Economy* 40(137): 343–357.

⁴¹ Eizenga, D. (2019). Long Term Trends across Security and Development in the Sahel. *West African Papers*, 25. OECD Publishing.

American surveillance operations,” a representative of the French embassy in Burkina Faso told the author, “Barkhane would not be able to operate. It is absolutely essential.”

These counterterrorism missions coupled with problematic government responses pushed militants into surrounding territories, effectively creating new zones of conflict. Operation Serval dispersed nimble armed jihadist groups from northern into central Mali and later to neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso.⁴² Continued military interventions by the French and international coalitions have also led to a growing number and strengthening of extremist groups in the tri-border region.⁴³ Amongst other tactics, militant groups recruit local followers with anti-French rhetoric, tapping into popular sentiments of rage against the reviled former colonizer. According to a Burkinabe historian, anti-Western sentiment plays an active role in militant recruitment, as “there is a feeling that the West controls national rulers all while acting with rank hypocrisy regarding democracy, accepting only outcomes that the West prefers.”⁴⁴

Until 2012, Sahelian Islamist militants were directed and composed mostly of Algerians and Mauritians, but since then they have successfully recruited more local followers, and are now directed at the intermediate level by individuals from the communities in which they have implanted themselves. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Sahel region, a herding zone, suffered severe droughts whose effects are still being felt today.⁴⁵ Tensions around natural resources have grown, as have tensions between different livelihood groups (farmers vs. herders), and between certain communities and the state. Militant groups focus their recruiting on impoverished rural areas with little government presence where locals are often receptive to anti-state messages. Militants claim they are coming to the rescue of a people oppressed by their own state, which in turn is being used by Western powers. Their attacks are largely on symbols of the state, especially security forces and state agents like forest rangers, but they also attack international targets such as the UN MINUSMA mission in Mali and local power holders such as traditional chiefs and teachers.⁴⁶ Because of these attacks, schools throughout the region have been forced to close. In Burkina Faso alone, the violence led to the closure of over 2,500 schools, leaving 350,000 students without access to an education even before the Covid-19 pandemic shut down schools across the country.⁴⁷

⁴² Reeve and Pelter 2014.

⁴³ Assanvo, W., Dakono B., Thérroux-Bénoni L., Maïga I. (2019). *Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma. Rapport Sur L’Afrique de L’Ouest* (Vol. 26). Institut d’Études de Sécurité.

⁴⁴ Thurston, A. (2019). *Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso*. RLS Research Papers on Peace and Conflict Studies in West and Central Africa. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. Pp. 30-31.

⁴⁵ Lindqvist, S., Tengberg, A. (2017). New Evidence of Desertification from Case Studies in Northern Burkina Faso. *Geografiska Annaler: Series A, Physical Geography* 75 (3): 127-135.

⁴⁶ Savadogo, M. (2019, September). Comment s’explique la prolifération des groupes extrémistes au Burkina Faso? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/comment-sexplique-la-prolifération-des-groupes-extremistes-au-burkina-faso-122566>.

⁴⁷ UNICEF. (2020, April). Burkina Faso: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 3.

https://www.unicef.org/appeals/files/UNICEF_Burkina_Faso_Humanitarian_Situation_Report_No_3_April_2020.pdf

Since 2015, violent events have increased and a generalized insecurity linked to Islamist militants, transnational organized crime, and the intensification of intercommunal conflicts has spread first in Mali then in Niger and finally in Burkina Faso. Illicit activities are at the heart of the implantation and expansion of militant groups - they are beneficiaries, service providers, and/or regulators of the trafficking of weapons, drugs, motorcycles, and gas, as well as cattle theft, artisanal gold mining, and poaching.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, community-based “self-defense” groups (often created or supported by governments) have arisen throughout the region as armed men take the fight against banditry and jihadists into their own hands. These militias are at the forefront of local conflicts, which have become increasingly complex as they become more localized.

In Burkina Faso, according to analyst Mahamoudou Savadogo, Sahelian militant groups are creating or co-opting trafficking corridors for drugs, gold, ivory, and other riches from Mali and the desert down to the west African coast. In an interview, Savadogo showed the author a map he had generated by tracking reports of various kinds of attacks and conflict events. The map revealed that militants had forged a wide corridor of territory stretching across the north of Burkina Faso along the Malian border, and turning perpendicular in the east, a north-south pathway stretching down towards the southern border with Benin on the West African coast. Illicit actors have taken on the mantle of “jihadism” in order to facilitate their illegal business activities. Their self-branding as Islamist jihadists allows them to earn support from disenfranchised populations through discourses of grievance and fighting back against the state, elites, and Western powers.

People in Burkina Faso often recount that jihadism in their country began with a high-profile 2016 attack by members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) on a bar, restaurant, and hotel often frequented by Westerners on the central Avenue Kwame N’krumah. Afterwards many Burkinabe identified the attackers as “Maliens,” “Tuaregs,” or “Beberes,” based on their physical characteristics.⁴⁹ The Burkinabe perception that jihadists were foreigners changed with the emergence of Burkina Faso’s first homegrown militant group, Ansaroul Islam, in the northern province of Soum, later in 2016. The group was founded by Ibrahim “Malam” Dicko and began as a movement by the Rimaïbé, a subgroup of the Fulani who had historically been their slaves, against the traditional hierarchies of Fulani society. Over time, Dicko became increasingly radicalized through his association with militant leaders in Mali and two years spent in a Malian prison. Dicko’s movement began targeting not just elite Fulani, but also government representatives. As Ansaroul Islam gained notoriety for its violent attacks, because it was led by Dicko, a Fulani, and recruited followers amongst disenfranchised Fulani, the Burkinabe public came to associate jihadism with “Peuls” (the French word for the Fulani). This association fit with a longstanding cultural prejudice that the Fulani are criminals.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Assanvo et al. 2019.

⁴⁹ Hagberg, S., Kibora, L., Barry, S., Cissao, Y., et al. (2019). *Sécurité par le bas: Perceptions et perspectives citoyennes des défis de sécurité au Burkina Faso*. Uppsala Papers in Africa Studies 5, edited by Sten Hagberg. Uppsala Universitet.

⁵⁰ Hagberg et al. 2019.

Many people, particularly those affiliated with or in support of the current administration of President Roch Kaboré, see the rise of militant violence in Burkina Faso as a result of the ouster of previous President Blaise Compaoré in 2014. Compaoré, who had been in power for 27 years, had alliances with Malian militant groups who therefore steered clear of the country during his administration. With Kaboré in power, these protections were no longer in place, opening the country to the militants' inroads.

Today, Burkina Faso is home to two primary militant groups and their affiliates. In the north, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) coalition (also called the "Group to Support Islam and Muslims"). It includes what is left of Ansaroul Islam, weakened since Dicko's death in 2017, as well as smaller illicit trafficking groups that JNIM protects and supports.⁵¹ Since 2018, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara has been taking territory in eastern Burkina Faso, south of the tri-border area where it, Mali and Niger meet.⁵² For militant groups fleeing international military pressure, the forests of eastern Burkina Faso are a perfect refuge. Militants have targeted government employees and taken over local opposition movements, recruiting fighters amongst all local ethnic groups, including Fulani, Gourmantche, and Mossi, as well as incorporating foreigners to the region. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara now controls almost all local artisanal gold mines and poaching in the region's nature reserves and has become the leader of local illicit groups in a longtime smuggling hub.⁵³ These groups terrorize communities of all ethnic groups and religions, including Christians and Muslims.

Box 2: Victims of Militant Violence

Seated in front of the abandoned school building on the outskirts of Ouagadougou where they had taken refuge for the past five months, a group of Muslim women from the northeast told the author how bands of unknown assailants on motorcycles had arrived in their hamlets to attack, kill, and abduct their men. The attackers "stole our wealth," said the women. This included their goats and cattle.

In the days following the attacks, local men who had survived by hiding in the fields fled for their lives. The women organized their children and what household goods they could, including any remaining livestock, to follow. Twice they attempted to travel south to the capital of the region, once with donkey carts carrying their goods and once by rented truck, and both times, groups of men attacked them and stole everything they had. The men abducted a handful of women and held them captive for a night in a wooded area, where they likely suffered sexual assault before they were released. The women eventually fled on foot, trudging for days through desert scrubland and carrying the children who were too young to walk. As the group marched, they passed human corpses and skeletons baking under the hot sun. One older woman said, "It would take days to tell you about all the horrors I saw on that walk."

The government has registered this group of displaced people, a small community which also includes children and some men, but, in an attempt to send a message and discourage other refugees from settling in the capital region, has given them no assistance. The group lives off the charity of nearby villagers, each person eating only a portion of millet or rice just once a day. The children are sick with colds and malaria. One young boy had recently died of malaria and anemia; though they had managed to get a donation to bring him to the doctor, they arrived too late to save him.

Repressing Minorities and Fueling Intercommunal Conflict

Burkina Faso is among many countries whose governments use the ideology and resources of U.S. counterterrorism as the latest justification for forcefully repressing minority ethnic groups at the periphery of the state. This has been a trend throughout the Muslim world in places to which the U.S. has extended its post-9/11 wars.⁵⁴ The Burkinabe government targets the ethnic Fulani as “jihadists”; other countries target their own minority groups. Understanding the heightened tensions the U.S.-led war on terror introduced into the historically complex and layered relations between the central Burkinabe government and the Fulani offers a window into how, in many parts of the world, counterterror narratives and funding can inflame intercommunal and ethnic tensions to the point of creating civil war-like conflicts.

In a sweeping investigation of the effects of U.S. counterterrorism in 40 countries throughout the Islamic world, anthropologist Akbar Ahmed shows that many governments have used U.S. training and assistance to consolidate power over marginalized tribal groups.⁵⁵ This has worsened domestic conflicts, many of which predated 9/11. For generations, central governments carried out harsh assimilation policies to “civilize” tribes, including massacre, forced relocation, systematic rape, and banning local languages in the press and in schools. For instance, the Malian government in the 1970s dealt with Tuareg rebellions by capturing and killing Tuareg leaders. It also targeted these herders by poisoning their wells, located in the middle of desolate stretches of the Sahara Desert, and implemented a deliberate policy of starvation.⁵⁶ After 9/11, according to Ahmed, “Central governments cynically manipulated the United States in their suppression of the Muslim tribes and communities.”⁵⁷ For instance, in return for Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s vow to support President Bush’s war on terror, the U.S. provided Saleh millions in military aid, including helicopters and weapons as well as training by Special Operation forces and targeted drone strikes on enemies of his regime. These resources allowed Saleh to fight two major domestic insurgencies: a southern independence movement and insurrection amongst the northern Houthis. (Saleh was eventually ousted amid popular protests and later allied with the Houthis but broke ties with and was killed by them.)

Such effects have not been limited to countries the U.S. directly targets with security assistance. Since 9/11, other global players like China and Russia have been quick to adopt the new counterterror paradigm, which at once legitimized their own harsh treatment of Muslim minorities and bolstered their credibility with the U.S. and its allies. China, for

⁵⁴ Ahmed, A. (2013). *The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s War on Terror Became A Global War on Tribal Islam*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

⁵⁵ A note that while Ahmed’s insights are important, his tone is sometimes objectionable, as when he writes admiringly of the British colonial system of indirect rule. Ahmed worked as a government administrator in Waziristan, Pakistan in the 1980s and is now a scholar at the Brookings Institution. He has advised the White House under Presidents George W. Bush and Barak Obama and he frames his book as advice on how the U.S. could and should wage the “war on terror” differently.

⁵⁶ Other examples include Algeria’s persecution of the Berbers after independence in the 1960s and Turkey’s repression of the Kurds since World War II. Ahmed 2013. On Mali see p. 191.

⁵⁷ Ahmed 2013, pp. 259-260

example, shifted its rhetoric against the minority Uyghurs. Before, Chinese officials described Uyghurs with words like "hooliganism" and "sabotage"; now it attacked them as "terrorists" with a campaign of cultural genocide, detaining thousands and counting.⁵⁸

Of Burkina Faso's approximately 19 million inhabitants, over 1,200,000 are Fulani, 6% of the population.⁵⁹ The central government is dominated by the Mossi, the country's majority ethnic group, and tension between the government and the Fulani minority is a reverberation of the colonial era in the late 19th - early 20th centuries. During that time, France instituted a *politique des races* in order to facilitate its system of "indirect rule." The French named certain ethnic groups "state" leaders while denigrating others as "tribes."⁶⁰ The Fulani, among other minority groups, have long felt discriminated against and marginalized by a government that does not feel their own.

"It's not that all *Peuls* [Fulani] are terrorists, it's that most terrorists are *Peuls*," explained an army communications officer in an interview with the author. His words unwittingly reinforced rather than dismantled the stereotype that guides government actions. The country's *Forces de Défense et de Sécurité*, which most Burkinabe refer to as "FDS," have extrajudicially executed at least 588 to 1,016 civilians, and likely many more, as it is difficult to confirm such cases, according to human rights groups.⁶¹ There are reportedly hundreds of Fulani who have been held without trial for years in an Ouagadougou prison, though these numbers have dropped since mid-2018; a witness interviewed by Human Rights Watch (HRW) said, "now they're just killing them."⁶²

Every day, Fulani people fear for their lives. As one man said, "The FDS do not allow us to have peace, they always suspect the *Peuls* [of jihadism]. We can't denounce them because they threaten us." Multiple interviewees told the story of how security forces at a roadside checkpoint in a Fulani-populated region stopped transport vans and demanded to see every passenger's government identification cards. The forces reportedly shot anyone who did not have a card – an action that would have killed many more Fulani than others, as the Fulani are known to be less subject to bureaucratic regulations and are often reluctant to adopt markers of Westernization. An interviewee said, "The other day, the FDS were checking papers, and they killed 30 people. Counterterrorism gives them a green light to kill anyone they want, without any consequences."

⁵⁸ Ahmed 2013, pp. 264, 269, 289; Roberts, S. (2020). *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*. Princeton University Press.

⁵⁹ Sangare, B. 2019, March. Fulani people and Jihadism in Sahel and West African countries. *Observatoire du Monde Arabo-Musulman et du Sahel, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*.; L'Observatoire Pour La Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme (ODDH). (2020, June). Burkina Faso: Risque d'un nouveau Rwanda? Bilan de la Violence au Burkina Faso, 04 avril 2015 – 31 mai 2020. https://lefaso.net/IMG/pdf/burkina_faso_risque_d_un_nouveau_rwanda.pdf.

⁶⁰ Mahir, S., Royer, P. (2001). *West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

⁶¹ Low estimate from ODDH 2020; High estimate from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Violence Against Civilians, Burkina Faso, 2015-2020 [Data Set]. <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>.

⁶² Human Rights Watch. (2019). 'We Found Their Bodies Later That Day': Atrocities by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso's Sahel Region. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/22/we-found-their-bodies-later-day/atrocities-armed-islamists-and-security-forces>.

Government security forces routinely arrest and disappear Fulani men who others accused of sympathizing with or helping terrorists. Several interviewees recounted how FDS forcibly removed a father, brother, or son from their homes or a public marketplace. Later, families found their relatives' bodies in the bush or along a roadside, in some cases blindfolded with their wrists tied behind their backs, a telltale sign of murder by government forces. In July 2020, HRW found mass graves near the town of Djibo containing the corpses of at least 180 people, most of them Fulani, all allegedly killed by state security forces.⁶³ Previously, another HRW report documented 116 unarmed Fulani men executed by Burkinabe forces between mid-2018 and February 2019.⁶⁴ A Burkina Faso-based human rights group, L'Observatoire Pour La Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme (ODDH), estimates that the FDS summarily executed 350 people in 2019 and warns that the government's widespread ethnic killing may soon make the country the "next Rwanda."⁶⁵

"We're not shouting this from the rooftops, but it's what we do," Simon Compaoré, a political leader, told the author in an interview when asked about the HRW allegations. Compaoré is president of the People's Movement for Progress, the ruling political party, and previously oversaw key components of the Burkinabe security forces as the administration's interior minister. "If the jihadists kill five to ten soldiers, the morale in the army is going to be very low. We need to make sure their morale doesn't get destroyed. If we discover there are spies, we need to neutralize them right away." By "spies," Compaoré meant people in the villages who were supposedly supporting the militants. Compaoré took the opportunity of being interviewed by an American to make a plea for deepening U.S. security assistance: "Intelligence is a very important weapon. Sometimes the Americans share intel – sometimes. But we have a saying: when you sleep on your neighbor's mat, he can take it away from you, and then you are sleeping on the floor! We want our own mat."

On January 1-3, 2019, a massacre of Fulani males, including boys and elderly men, occurred in and around the northern town of Yirgou. Local militia groups called Koglweogo, consisting largely of Mossi men, mobilized in retaliation for the murder of a Mossi chief by men they accused of being jihadists. Over the course of several days, in Yirgou and 17 surrounding hamlets, the Koglweogo killed up to 220 Fulani civilians. Burkinabe human rights groups denounced President Kaboré's administration for failing to condemn the atrocity. One interviewee who had fled Yirgou recounted how, after the attack, he learned that Kaboré congratulated the town's Koglweogo leaders. Government support for the Koglweogo has become so overt that in January 2020, the Burkinabe parliament voted to arm "local volunteers" across the country to fight jihadists.⁶⁶

Yirgou served as a marker for many Burkinabe interviewees of when the current crisis became serious – a telling indicator of how the involvement of the Koglweogo has escalated and expanded the violence. Since Yirgou, the conflict has taken root in many

⁶³ Human Rights Watch. (2020, September). Burkina Faso Executions Prompt Broad Call for Inquiry. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/16/burkina-faso-executions-prompt-broad-call-inquiry>.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch. 2019.

⁶⁵ ODDH 2020, p. 15.

⁶⁶ VOA News. (2020, January). Burkina Faso to Lightly Arm Citizens After Terrorists Kill 36. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/burkina-faso-lightly-arm-citizens-after-terrorists-kill-36>

places and formerly peaceful neighbors have begun to target one another. Government-backed Koglweogo militias are mobilizing in villages across the country, and though they are comprised of members of varying ethnic groups, they regularly target the Fulani. By some estimates, there are over 92,000 armed men in Koglweogo militias today.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Islamist militants target villages of all ethnic groups, including the Fulani, with violent attacks and attempts to assert control. Fulani interviewees claimed they feel caught “between two fires” – vulnerable to the attacks and targeted disappearances of both militants and government security forces, of which they include Koglweogo.

Many international media sources explain the conflict that has erupted in Burkina Faso as terrorists inflaming ethnic violence, yet it is not self-evident or natural that there would be conflict along ethnic lines. Though historically the Mossi and Fulani may have had some superficially conflictual relations, the interconnections of friendship, kinship, and religion have been far more important, and each group has had an interest in the well-being of the other.⁶⁸ Additionally, in some cases, militants have served not as instigators to intercommunal conflict, but as mediators.⁶⁹ Researchers have shown that a more convincing factor is the tension between different livelihood groups.⁷⁰ Several interviewees had narrowly escaped when a brother, husband, father, or son had been assassinated by either FDS or militant groups. They suspected their family was targeted out of revenge for or jealousy over material possessions. One interviewee recounted how, during a long drought, a Fulani man traveled with his herd for several years. As is often done, he allowed a man of a different ethnic group to borrow a plot of land to farm. When the herder finally returned, he found the farmer had taken over much more of his land than originally agreed on. Shortly afterwards, the herder was apprehended and later killed by the FDS. The interviewee suspected that the farmer had found an expedient way to take over the land he desired by accusing the herder of being a jihadist. Whether or not this was true, this perception speaks to a broader social context in which it is not just the government who uses counterterrorism as a pretext for accomplishing other goals – ordinary people do too.

Most Burkinabe experience the conflict through these local relational dynamics over the distribution of wealth and power. Such tensions have been further exacerbated by government and Western donor-led development interventions and incentives that have privileged sedentary modes of life (of the Mossi, among other groups) over nomadic ones (such as of the Fulani). Development interventions following Western economic models have sought to encourage nomadic peoples to settle through farming initiatives, or more

⁶⁷ ODDH 2020, p. 8.

⁶⁸ Breusers, M., Nederlof, S., & Van Rheenen, T. (1998). Conflict or Symbiosis? Disentangling Farmer-Herdsmen Relations: The Mossi and Fulani of the Central Plateau, Burkina Faso. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36(3), 370-371.

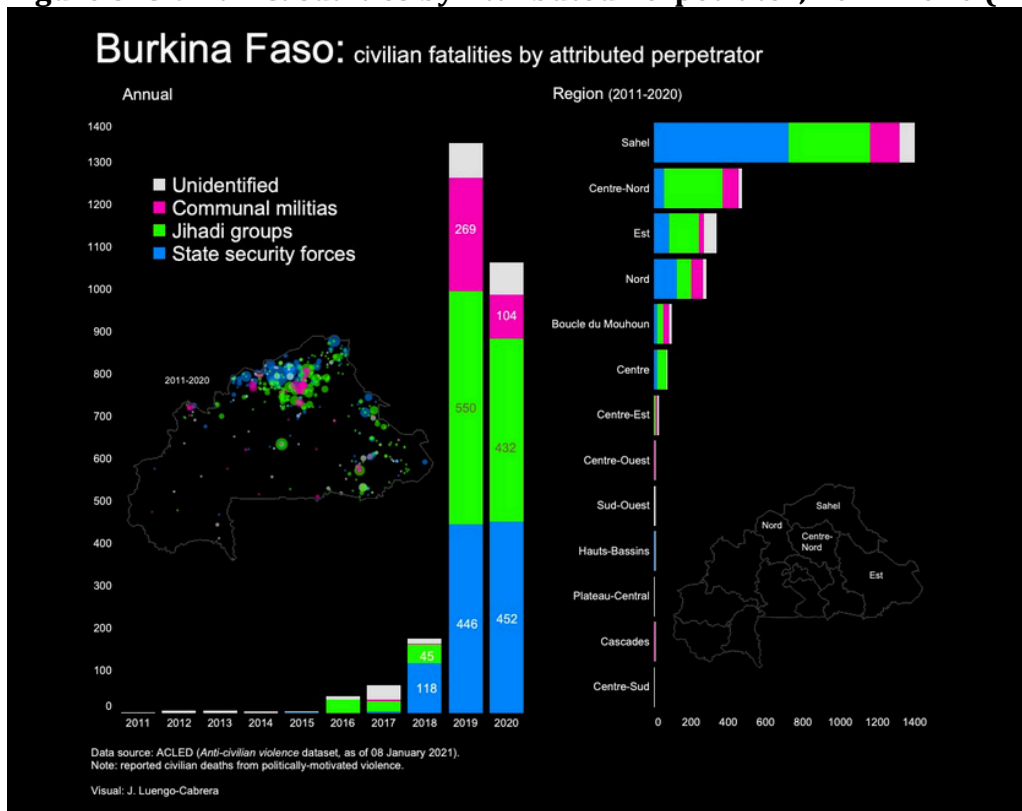
⁶⁹ Theroux-Benoni, L, Dakono, B. (2019). Are terrorist groups stoking local conflicts in the Sahel?. *Institute for Security Studies*. Pp. 6–11. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/are-terrorist-groups-stoking-local-conflicts-in-the-sahel>

⁷⁰ Assanvo et al. 2019.

implicitly, via entrepreneurship programs for young people.⁷¹ In recent decades, desertification and climate change have also increasingly threatened the livelihoods of pastoralist groups such as the Fulani, forcing them further afield in search of adequate grazing for their herds and raising tensions over land use.

It is into such intricate sets of historical, political, cultural, and environmental relations – between central governments and minority ethnic groups dating back to colonialism, between state-sanctioned “self-defense” militias and their targets, between livelihood groups, between Western development models and pastoralist lifestyles, between unequal neighbors, among others – that the U.S. inserts post-9/11 understandings and resources. The case of Burkina Faso and its treatment of the Fulani shows how local power dynamics are mobilized and enmeshed in counterterrorism. These dynamics are far more complex than a logic that categorically posits that a “good” state combats “evil” terrorists. Once introduced into local contexts – which vary by country but are uniformly complex – counterterrorism takes on a life of its own. Deployed by governments who use it to target and repress minority groups, it has enormous human and societal costs. U.S. security assistance thus exacerbates the government violations that can inflame intercommunal conflict on a massive scale.

Figure 5. Civilian Casualties by Attributed Perpetrator, 2011-2020 (ACLED Data)



Source: Visual produced by José Luengo-Cabrera using publicly-available data by ACLED.

⁷¹ Mark Breusers, Email to author, May 15, 2020: “Beyond interethnic and farmer-herder relations, it is crucial to look into the ways and the extent to which the current Sahelian crisis is perpetuated by a collapse of livelihood reproduction caused among others by the closure of mobile forms of livelihood pursuit.”

Undermining Democratic Governance

Governments frequently use the U.S. narrative of counterterrorism to justify repressing political opponents and clamping down on freedom of speech. In the Philippines, the government used this logic to prosecute anti-government activists and journalists as well as militants and civilians on the southern island of Mindanao, home to a longtime separatist movement.⁷² The Kenyan state's anti-terrorism police razed low-income urban neighborhoods populated largely by Somali refugees and disappeared young Muslim men across the country.⁷³ Cameroon's president Paul Biya uses foreign counterterrorism assistance to maintain power and militarily crush legitimate political opposition in the Anglophone regions, all while ignoring threats from Boko Haram and the local affiliate of the Islamic State.⁷⁴ At the same time, the U.S. military continues to train foreign military leaders who go on to lead coups and destabilize domestic politics. In Mali, the 2012 military coup was led by Amadou Sanogo, an officer who received extensive training in the U.S. between 2004 and 2010 as part of the Pan-Sahel Initiative and TSCTP. Last year, another U.S.-trained officer, Col. Assimi Goita, overthrew yet another government in Mali.⁷⁵ These are just a few of many examples of how U.S. counterterrorism assistance undermines democratic governance.

In Burkina Faso, U.S. military training plays a complicated role in national politics, contributing to unrest. Lt. Col. Isaac Zida, the army officer who seized power in a 2014 coup during the popular protests that ousted President Compaoré, had attended two U.S.-government sponsored counterterrorism trainings.⁷⁶ More generally, in the past U.S. forces focused on training two elite military units – the Presidential Guard and the 25th Parachute Regiment – both of which are popularly seen as loyal to Compaoré (rather than his opponent, current President Kaboré).⁷⁷ In 2016, the Kaboré government dismantled the Presidential Guard after its members led an attempted coup. Many of these highly skilled fighters are now rogue actors who some rumors suggest could be involved in militant violence against the current administration. Because of the perceived ties between the army and Compaoré, himself a former soldier, Kaboré's government has increasingly militarized the country's gendarmes to battle jihadists.⁷⁸ The U.S. has begun training gendarmes as well, even though they have been implicated in abuses. In one Human Rights

⁷² Woon, C. (2011). Undoing violence, unbounding precarity: Beyond the frames of terror in the Philippines. *Geoforum* 42(3): 285–296.

⁷³ Glück, Z. (2017). Security Urbanism and the Counterterror State in Kenya. *Anthropological Theory* 17(3): 297–321.

⁷⁴ Roberts, C., Burton, B. (2020, November). Cameroon's Government is Deceiving the West While Diverting Foreign Aid. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/22/camerouns-government-is-deceiving-the-west-while-diverting-foreign-aid/>.

⁷⁵ Paquette, D. (2020, August). Mali Coup Leader Was Trained By U.S. Military. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/mali-coup-leader-was-trained-by-us-special-operations-forces/2020/08/21/33153f8e-e31c-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca_story.html.

⁷⁶ Whitlock, C. (2014, November). Coup Leader in Burkina Faso Received U.S. Military Training. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/coup-leader-in-burkina-faso-received-us-military-training/2014/11/03/3e9acaf8-6392-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67_story.html.

⁷⁷ Warner 2014.

⁷⁸ ODDH 2020, pp. 6, 15.

Watch report, nearly all documented cases of atrocities against suspects and civilians were allegedly perpetrated by gendarmes.⁷⁹

The Kaboré administration has sought to cement its hold on power through undemocratic means, using counterterrorism to bolster authoritarian control. In June 2019, the government passed law N. 044-2019 criminalizing any journalism or public speech that could “demoralize defense forces” or “compromise an intervention by security forces in an act of terrorism” and thus “drown national security” [author’s translation]. In the author’s interviews with journalists, activists, and other residents of Ouagadougou, it was clear this law had a chilling effect. Many people were hesitant to speak openly about their views of the current conflict and several referenced the new law. The Burkinabe media now publishes little about the violence beyond bare-bones reports of attacks or battles. A local human rights group stopped tracking numbers of people killed because it could no longer accurately do so, as it had previously relied on media reports. One interviewee described how the government used the threat of the law to obscure incriminating details in the news. For instance, the media might report that government forces killed a number of jihadists in one encounter, but not that they also shot women and children.

In November 2020, after this law was passed, Kaboré was reelected for a second term in elections that international observers deemed mostly valid (though nearly 3,000 polling places did not open because of threats of violence in their regions, preventing up to 350,000 people from voting).⁸⁰ But the Kaboré administration has been very unwilling to disclose information. Despite repeated requests, only one government official, Chief Comptroller Luc Marcus Ibrica, granted the author a formal interview. Ibrica himself has been unable to obtain any accounting for recent defense spending from the Burkinabe military, which cites the need for operational secrecy in the name of national security. The armed forces did not respond to requests, but an army communications officer agreed to an informal interview on condition of anonymity. He at first denied that government security forces were committing extrajudicial killings of Fulani, but then walked back his statement. In what seemed like an absurd fabrication, he claimed that jihadists sometimes stole army uniforms and vehicles and impersonated state forces when they killed villagers. The government upholds its lack of governmental transparency and eradication of the free press in the name of counterterrorism.

Illicit Profiteering

U.S. counterterrorism funds, and insufficient scrutiny by U.S. and foreign authorities of how those funds are spent, are allowing political and military leaders around the world to enrich themselves. According to a 2018 report by the non-partisan Security Assistance Monitor, “corruption is one of the most significant stumbling blocks in U.S. efforts to tackle terrorism.” Of 36 countries to which the U.S. provided counterterrorism assistance since

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch 2019.

⁸⁰ France 24. (2020, November 26). Burkina Faso’s Kaboré wins re-election, according to full preliminary results. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20201126-burkina-s-kabor%C3%A9-wins-re-election-according-to-full-preliminary-results>.

2002, the Security Assistance Monitor documented 24, or two-thirds of the total sample, as engaging in significant levels of defense sector corruption. A 2017 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report described how Afghan security forces, which receive significant U.S. funding, participated “in the drug trade, extortion, pay-for-position schemes, bribery, land grabbing, and selling U.S. and NATO-supplied equipment, sometimes even to insurgents.” In 2013 to 2014, U.S.-supported Nigerian military officers withheld ammunition and fuel from government soldiers combatting Boko Haram. The lack of adequate supplies led the soldiers to flee their posts in fear. Yemen’s former President Saleh, while receiving millions in U.S. assistance, engaged certain Al-Qaeda members to eliminate political opponents and then protected them from U.S. targeting.⁸¹ There are many other such global examples.

According to Transparency International’s 2020 “Government Defense Integrity Index,” Burkina Faso is at critical risk of corruption across its defense institutions, with little or no transparency or controls in finances and weapons procurement.⁸² Researchers have documented evidence of key corruption indicators in the Burkinabe defense sector, including non-merit promotions, delayed salaries, widespread bribery, and illicit military business.⁸³ In 2011, junior personnel in the Burkinabe military led a mutiny, revolting against and accusing senior officers of illicit profiteering. Soldiers even set fire to the houses of some officers in protest of their lavish lifestyles, as these officers are among the wealthiest members of their societies. In the past decade, Burkina Faso was one of nine West African countries to experience military mutinies, signaling a pattern of corruption and extreme inequality between different ranks.⁸⁴

Burkinabe journalists and activists interviewed by the author spoke of widely circulating speculations that government officials personally profit off of foreign military assistance.⁸⁵ According to several interviewees, the equipment procured by the Burkinabe army has been woefully second-rate, such as “bullet proof” vests that fail to block bullets and guns whose parts melt after they are fired. Interviewees interpreted these malfunctions as indications that government officials are embezzling funds and cutting corners in weapons procurements.

Blowback

In a version of what the CIA calls “blowback,” or the inadvertent negative effects of covert operations, U.S.-supported governments’ militarized attacks on suspected militants

⁸¹ Goodman, C., Arabia, C. (2018, September). Corruption in the Defense Sector: Identifying Key Risks to U.S. Counterterrorism Aid. *Security Assistance Monitor, Center for International Policy*. Pp. 2-3.; The Security Assistance Monitor recommends that the U.S. strengthen its risk assessments of potential counterterrorism partners and provide aid and political support to encourage countries to better address corruption.

⁸² Government Defense Integrity Index. (2019). Burkina Faso. *Transparency International*. <https://ti-defence.org/gdi/countries/burkina-faso/>

⁸³ Goodman and Arabia 2018, p. 25.

⁸⁴ Goodman and Arabia. 2018, p. 27.

⁸⁵ The author heard similar accusations of embezzlement in the realm of humanitarian food aid. The Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs declined an interview request.

only strengthens these groups.⁸⁶ Militants often recruit members through their desire to seek revenge on state forces for targeting family members, friends, and neighbors. Moreover, the official focus on combat leads to an even deeper failure to address the underlying structural conditions that encourage many to overtly, or at least tacitly, support militant groups. People are deeply frustrated with systemic inequality, poverty and public neglect of many places, especially rural areas, and this anger feeds militant recruitment. In the Philippines, for instances, which has partnered with the U.S. to attack political opponents it calls terrorists on Mindanao since 2002, that government has done little to ameliorate the abysmal social conditions that underlie recruitment to the opposition.⁸⁷ Today the country is home to numerous extremist groups, some of which have affiliated with the Islamic State; for five months in 2017, militants successfully laid siege to the entire territory of Marawi, an indication of their strength.⁸⁸

In Burkina Faso, interviews suggest the government targeting of the Fulani has given militants a powerful recruiting device. An interviewee, for instance, described how Burkinabe security forces murdered a small town mayor, the father of a relatively well-to-do Fulani family. His children, a female nurse and a male college student, were so enraged they joined a militant group to seek revenge for their father's death. These young people were so motivated they spent their own money to buy the motorcycle they needed to join – a telling detail in such an impoverished country. According to Diallo Souaibou, president of the nonprofit Tabital Andal Association of Koranic Masters of the Sahel, which works with Fulani religious leaders to promote peace, “About 80% of those who join terrorist groups told us that it isn't because they support jihadism, it is because their father or mother or brother was killed by the security forces. So many people have been killed – assassinated – but there has been no justice.”

Militant groups in the Sahel also recruit followers by exploiting grievances among disaffected populations who see their governments as actively failing to improve quality of life. Across the region, impoverished young people – the area's largest demographic group and the most likely to be recruited – are seething with despair at their circumstances, rage at the state, and desire for social change.⁸⁹ An ethnographic study of Fulani youth in central Mali after the outbreak of the conflict in 2012 found these young people were angry at a state which did nothing to alleviate poverty and at local elites, who had long appropriated development funds and who they saw as part of the state. This anger converged with other important trends, including increasing cellphone connectivity and relatedly, globally circulating ideas about the right to a decent life, to facilitate their “radicalization.” When government forces retreated from central Mali, Islamist militant groups established their own forms of security as well as informal judicial systems, which helped them win confidence and gain legitimacy. Militant discourses played off local disappointment in elites

⁸⁶ For a discussion of blowback, see Vine 2020, p. 253.

⁸⁷ Woon 2011.

⁸⁸ Counter Extremism Project. The Philippines: Extremism and Counter-Extremism. Accessed on Dec 3, 2020. https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/philippines#major_extremist_and_terrorist_incidents.

⁸⁹ De Bruijn, M. (2019). Introduction: Biographies of radicalization-hidden messages of social change. In *Biographies of Radicalization: Hidden Messages of Social Change*, edited by Mirjam de Bruijn. De Gruyter Oldenbourg.

and the state as well as widespread resentment of French and foreign military interventions. In many people's eyes, state legitimacy was further undermined by the Malian government's use of the global war on terror as the latest "rent-seeking" opportunity. The government portrayed its enemies as radical Islamists and thereby recruited foreign financial, military and diplomatic support to fight them. In response to these many injustices, Fulani youth decided to go to militant training camps and learn violent resistance against the state.⁹⁰

A further reason people join militant groups is to earn a living, particularly in rural areas. In eastern Burkina Faso, Burkinabe who felt neglected by the state were nonetheless subject to strict regulations and taxes on artisanal gold mining, which they deeply resented. After militants took control of surrounding territories, they granted local people permission to mine for gold wherever and however they wanted. Similarly, militants did away with government prohibitions on hunting and fishing in the region's protected forests. According to one recent study, young people in eastern Burkina Faso have widely taken up arms, becoming "bandits" or joining militant groups or militias for the economic opportunities they offer. Many young people take up arms as a seasonal job, combining violence with agriculture and smuggling.⁹¹ As anthropological research has shown, people often join violent groups not because of identity politics or ethnic affiliations, as observers often argue, but because they see fighting as a form of labor and thus a much-needed income-generating opportunity.⁹²

Such ethnographic findings about how and why young people join and support militant groups reveal with particular poignancy how misguided Burkina Faso's militarized counterterrorism campaign is. Military attacks and raids on so-called terrorists do nothing to alleviate rural peoples' poverty or their despair at state corruption, abandonment, and violence. And U.S. counterterrorism assistance is complicit in promoting and sustaining this ill-advised strategy. In encouraging, supporting, and financing a military approach – indeed, in laying the groundwork for this long before the emergence of militant violence in the Sahel – the U.S. bears partial responsibility for intensifying the violence, death, and displacement in the region today.

Conclusion

The current military approach by local, regional, and international forces to militant violence in Burkina Faso and the broader Sahel has contributed to the very scenario the U.S. government feared after 9/11. A small group in Algeria, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has expanded into a considerable wave of fighters, including some affiliated with the Islamic State, across many borders – in part because of U.S. and other foreign interventions. Today a growing number of militant groups are killing thousands,

⁹⁰ De Bruijn, M., Both, J. (2017). Youth Between State and Rebel (Dis)Orders: Contesting Legitimacy from Below in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 28(4–5): 779–798.

⁹¹ Quidelleur 2020.

⁹² Hoffman, D. (2011). Violence, Just in Time: War and Work in Contemporary West Africa. *Cultural Anthropology* 26(1): 34–57.

displacing millions, and profiting from illicit enterprises across the Sahel. Many factors have contributed to their spread, but a global view cannot fail to note the central role of the U.S. counterterrorism narrative and the dollars and institutional support behind it. Governments such as Burkina Faso's use counterterrorism to serve their own ends – to prosecute minorities, to obscure the need to provide services to their people, to justify undemocratic behavior, and to enrich local elite. And these injustices have simply strengthened militant movements. This pattern is happening around the world, in many places to which the U.S. has stretched the long tentacles of its post-9/11 wars.

This paper has focused on the U.S. role in the crisis, but it is important to emphasize that Burkina Faso's government is a primary driver of the violence and must halt its abuses if peace is to be restored. In part as a response to Human Rights Watch reports documenting abuses by security forces in Burkina Faso and other Sahelian nations, the United States government has warned that if these violations do not stop, "U.S. security assistance may be at risk."⁹³ Senator Patrick Leahy (VT) issued a statement that U.S. officials are aware "extremism" in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger is fueled in part by public outrage about security forces' abuses, but that the U.S. must "demonstrate, not just talk about" its commitment to protecting civilians and combating impunity.⁹⁴ So far, however, the U.S. has done little beyond what Leahy calls "quiet diplomacy," as the State Department's U.S. Special Envoy to the Sahel and other officials urge Sahelian leaders to stop abuses. The U.S. must do more to hold these nations accountable for the violence, not only that perpetrated by state forces, but also by the informal militia groups they back.⁹⁵

This report's findings also have larger implications for the U.S. As many observers have noted, U.S. foreign policy in the Sahel and globally is overly skewed towards militarism. Even if U.S. officials speak of working towards development goals in the Sahel, the U.S. continues to fund these countries with millions in security assistance each year and provide institutional support for their domestic wars against militant groups. The U.S. military plays too large a role in foreign relations in Africa. Yet, as the evidence clearly shows in Burkina Faso, militarized U.S. counterterrorism assistance only shores up human rights abuses, corruption, and authoritarianism – and this is counterproductive. Post-9/11 security assistance must be completely reconceptualized, even and especially in places torn by Islamist militant violence.⁹⁶ The U.S. government must relinquish a racialized strategy of trying to extend authority to Africa's "dark corners." And Americans must work towards a different understanding of what it means to protect civilian life, both at home and abroad.

⁹³ U.S. Department of State. (2020, July). Allegations of Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the Sahel. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/allegations-of-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-in-the-sahel/index.html>.

⁹⁴ Leahy, P. (2020, August). Statement On U.S. Policy in the Sahel. <https://www.leahy.senate.gov/press/statement-on-us-policy-in-the-sahel>.

⁹⁵ Leahy's statement lists several means of doing so.

⁹⁶ This may mean prioritizing diplomacy over militarism through such policy changes as beefing up funding for USAID while cutting money for the Pentagon and increasing U.S. government transparency around military operations, as some have called for. See e.g. Center for American Progress. (2020, October). The First 100 Days: Rebuilding and Rebalancing Our National Security Tools and Institutions. https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/10/19051545/NSIP100-2-RebuildingNatSec1.pdf?_ga=2.183310630.103015824.1611592730-365735694.1611592730.