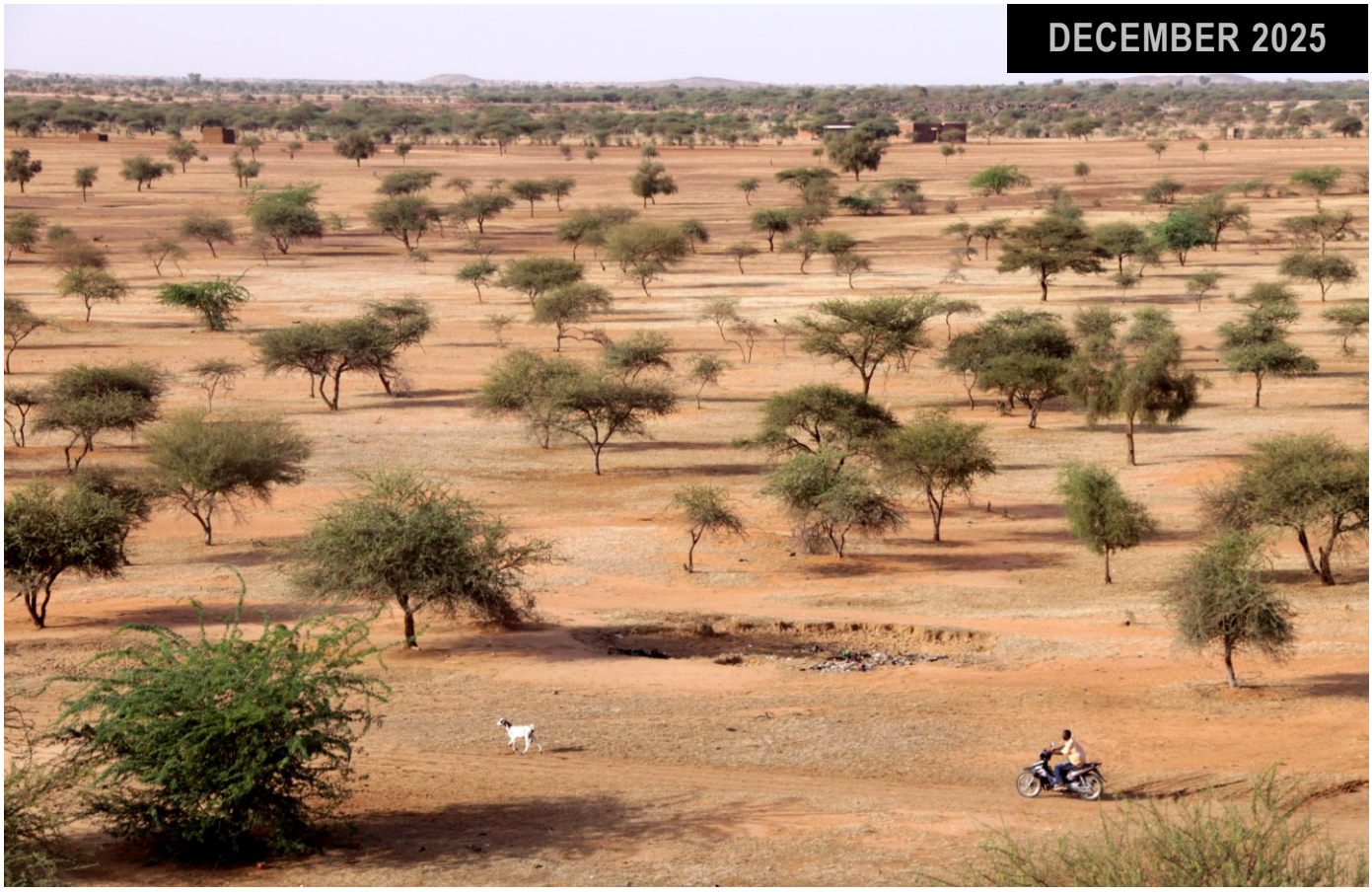
BETWEEN ARMED GROUPS AND MILITARY GOVERNMENTS

Escalating Violence Against Civilians in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

DECEMBER 2025



UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

SIMON-SKJODT CENTER FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum teaches that the Holocaust was preventable and that by heeding warning signs and taking early action, individuals and governments can save lives. The Founding Chairman of the Museum, Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, hoped the Museum would do for victims of genocide today what was not done for the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust. The **Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide** is dedicated to advancing research and education focused on understanding warning signs, analyzing lessons learned from past cases, and providing in-depth reports on countries where crimes are ongoing or at serious risk, and that are receiving insufficient governmental or public attention. Learn more at **ushmm.org/genocide-prevention.**

JON TEMIN, Consultant to the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide.

COVER: Landscape of the Sahel region near Gorom Gorom, Burkina Faso. *Pascal Mannaerts/ Alamy Stock*

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FOREWORD

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum teaches that the Holocaust was preventable and that by heeding warning signs and taking early action, individuals and governments can save lives. The Founding Chairman of the Museum, Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, hoped the Museum would do for victims of genocide today what was not done for the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust. The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide is dedicated to advancing research and education focused on understanding warning signs, analyzing lessons learned from past cases, and providing in-depth reports on countries where crimes are ongoing or at serious risk, and that are receiving insufficient governmental or public attention.

This report, *Between Armed Groups and Military Governments: Escalating Violence Against Civilians in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger*, sounds the alarm about mass atrocities in a mostly forgotten region. As author Jon Temin outlines, there is a remarkable gap between the severity of the harm facing civilians in the Central Sahel and the attention the world is paying to the situation. Pro-government forces and Islamist armed groups have brutally attacked civilians, killing tens of thousands and displacing millions. The Fulani, a marginalized ethnic group that lives across West Africa and beyond, is at particular risk of targeted attack. Destabilizing scenarios - like attacks on major cities or the geographic spread of Islamist armed group activity - are plausible. And yet, precious little global action is being taken to help protect civilians.

The Simon-Skjodt Center has previously published analysis of the risk of mass atrocities in Mali. Given the transnational nature of the threats across the Central Sahel, the Center wanted to put forward a regional - instead of country-specific - analysis. This report details the challenges and trends across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, as sustainable and effective responses will need to respond to the region as a whole.

To be clear, the mass atrocity crimes in the Central Sahel defy easy remedy. The report details the challenges facing those who want to protect civilians from systematic violence. Policy makers have limited tools to deter perpetrators, assist victims and survivors, and fight impunity in this region. But recognizing these challenges does not mean that nothing can be done. The options outlined in this report provide ideas for states, donors, and others that want to stem the tide of systematic, large-scale violence against civilians.

The Simon-Skjodt Center encourages readers to use this report to understand the latest violent events in the Central Sahel, the scenarios in which violence could deteriorate, and options to mitigate such extreme harm to civilians. By giving the scenarios and proposals described here serious consideration, and by refusing to look away, leaders around the world can help save lives.

Lawrence Woocher, research director
Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide
December 2025

List of Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
AES	Alliance des États du Sahel (Alliance of Sahelian States)
BIR	Rapid Intervention Brigade
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAMA	Malian Armed Forces
FLA	Azawad Liberation Front
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IED	Improvised Explosive Devices
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISSP	Islamic State Sahel Province
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAS	Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad
JNIM	Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VDP	Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland)

Terminology Used in this Report

CENTRAL SAHEL: The region that includes the three countries that are the focus of this report – Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

SECUIRTY FORCES: Armed forces directly controlled by the state – this includes militaries as well as police forces and intelligence agencies, but does not include auxiliary forces

ISLAMIST ARMED GROUPS: Includes the two groups most active in the Central Sahel, *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)

AUXILORY FORCES: Armed groups that were initiated at a community level and are now aligned with the state to varying degrees, including the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* in Burkina Faso and self-defense forces in Mali

RUSSIA-BACKED FORCES: The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company, and the Africa Corps, which is directly controlled by the Russian government

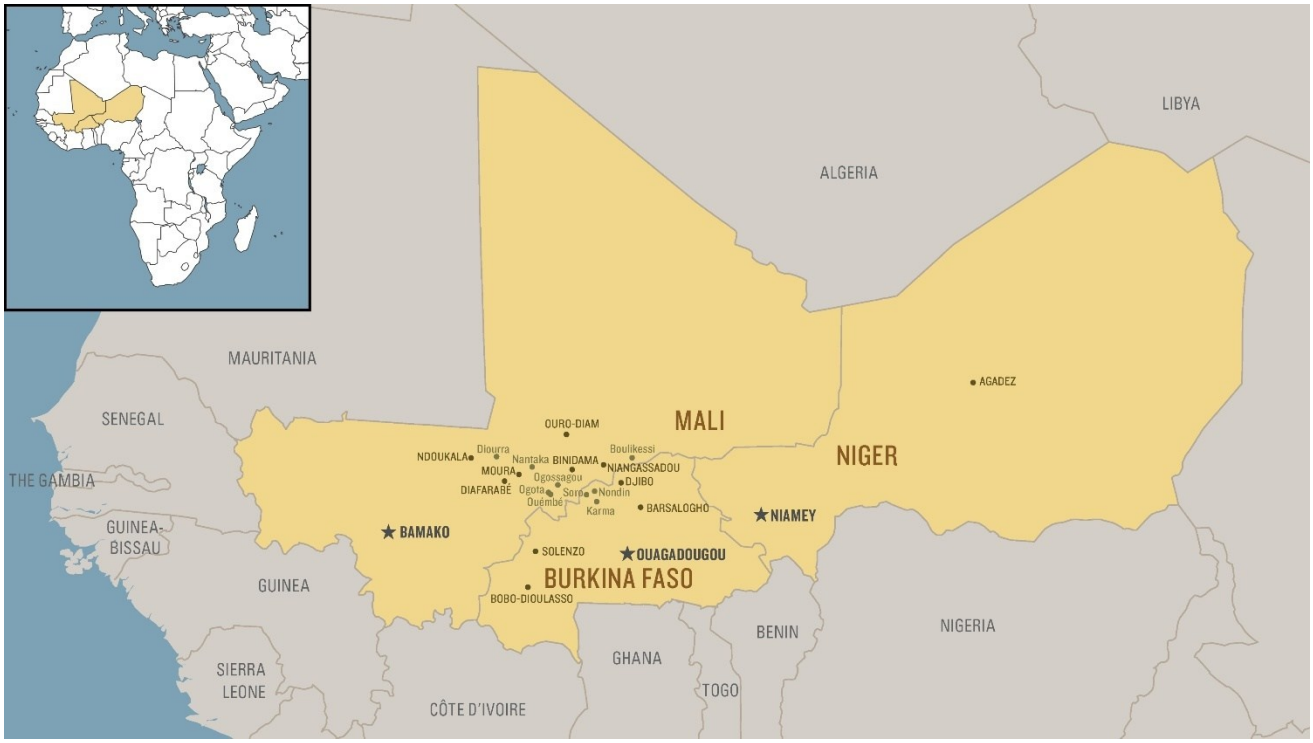
PRO-GOVERNMENT FORCES: Includes security forces, auxiliary forces, and Russia-backed forces

INTRODUCTION

Of any region of the world, the Central Sahel in West Africa, comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, arguably presents the largest gap between the scale of the ongoing humanitarian, human rights, and security crisis, and the limited amount of attention it receives. Since the early 2010s, both Islamist armed groups and pro-government forces have committed mass atrocities – defined as "large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations."[1] Civilians have been executed, burned alive in their villages, beheaded, dragged out of vehicles and shot, and blown up by improvised explosive devices. Beyond killings, Islamist armed groups and pro-government forces have decimated communities' agrarian and pastoral livelihoods, immiserating many people who have little safety net.

Atrocities have worsened over time, and civilians could face even greater risks in the future. Some government officials in the region have advocated for collective punishment, and Islamist armed groups are expanding their presence within the Central Sahel and into neighboring states. A common thread is a crisis of impunity, with the perpetrators of atrocities rarely held to account. The region is increasingly isolated from the West, as leaders of the three countries have cut ties, traditional Western partners including France and the United States have reduced their military presence and foreign assistance, and global attention is focused on other conflicts.

Figure 1. Map of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

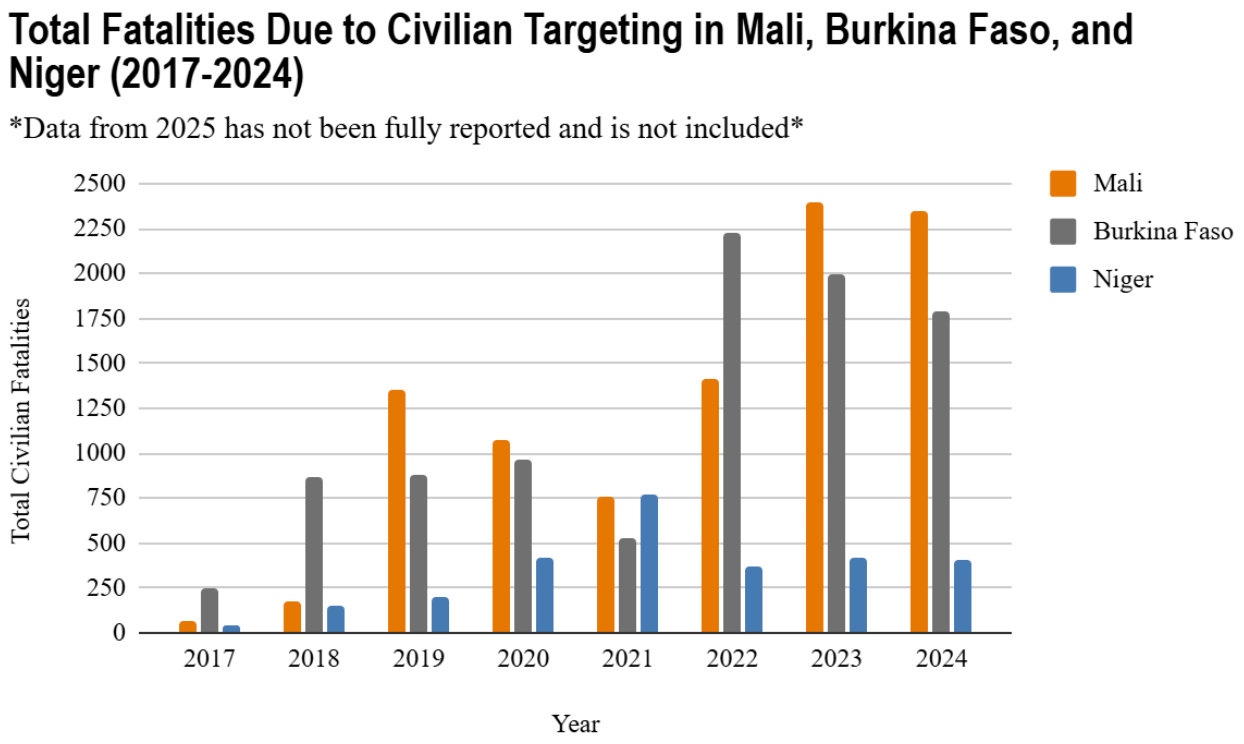


Statistics tell part of the story of the devastating toll:

- Since 2017, more than 24,000 civilians have lost their lives to violence in the Central Sahel[2]
- Two-thirds of civilians killed by Islamist armed groups in Africa in 2024 were in the Sahel[3]
- Approximately 2.7[4] million people are internally displaced in the three countries (likely a conservative count), mostly due to violence, and another 387,000 are refugees fleeing from one of the three countries to another[5]

The pace of civilian fatalities due to violence has accelerated since 2022, as depicted in Figure 2 below: [6]

Figure 2.



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

Any figures, though, should be considered in a context of highly limited information: the military governments leading the three countries have cracked down on individuals and organizations positioned to document and report on atrocities, and Islamist armed groups have restricted access for independent media and rights monitoring groups, making any data informed estimates at best.

Islamist armed groups and pro-government forces are responsible for the vast majority of the violence. The franchises united under the umbrella of *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, hereafter JNIM), and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), employ brutal tactics to subjugate communities, and now effectively control large swaths of territory across the three countries (the military government in Burkina Faso now controls only an estimated 40% of its territory).[7] JNIM, in particular, has made substantial territorial gains, and is adapting its tactics to changing circumstances and pushing into coastal West Africa.

Pro-government forces – including security services (militaries, police, and intelligence agencies), auxiliary forces, and Russia-backed forces – employ unlawful, harsh, and ultimately counterproductive tactics in response. Among the auxiliary forces, the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, hereafter VDP) in Burkina Faso are especially violent toward civilians and responsible for some of the most serious atrocities. In Mali, ethnically-aligned self-defense groups have committed atrocities, as have Russian forces affiliated with the Wagner Group and, more recently, Africa Corps. A growing narcotics trade and the easy availability of arms and drones add fuel to the fire.

The Central Sahel has long endured a security crisis as a result of separatist rebellions, political instability, and the growing strength of Islamist armed groups. State and non-state armed groups have committed atrocities under both democratically elected and military regimes. But the region is now in the grip of a governance crisis as well: over the last five years, regional militaries conducted five coups, sweeping aside elected governments. The military governments now in control have shown surprising durability and well-honed propaganda skills, but little regard for civilian protection, scant evidence of a strategy for containing insurgencies beyond scorched earth tactics, and no intent to return to democratic rule. Fueled by a narrative of reclaiming sovereignty, they have rejected long-standing Western partners and broken with the West Africa regional organization, known as ECOWAS, to form their own *Alliance des États du Sahel* (Alliance of Sahelian States, hereafter AES). Like almost all military regimes, self-preservation is the priority, and repression is the tool most easily within reach. Pro-government forces, especially in Burkina Faso and Mali, have singled out civilians from the Fulani ethnic group for collective punishment (the Fulani are traditional nomadic pastoralists often targeted for recruitment by Islamist armed groups).

This report begins with a summary of the political context in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It then analyzes the primary actors involved in atrocities, mass atrocity risk factors (cross-cutting forces and trends that increase the probability of atrocities), and sources of resilience present in Central Sahelian societies. The report explores a series of plausible scenarios that could trigger new episodes of mass atrocities or significantly expand existing patterns of violence, and concludes with recommendations for policymakers in the region, multilateral organizations, and the United States aimed at mass atrocity prevention and response. The report takes a regional, rather than country-specific, perspective. While each country has unique characteristics, many of the underlying forces at play are similar across the three countries, the major Islamist armed groups operate across all three, and the three governments have made common cause and share authoritarian characteristics. Effective responses to violence against civilians, by both domestic and external entities, will also share common traits throughout the region.

METHODOLOGY & DATA LIMITATIONS

Research for this report was conducted in June, July, and August of 2025 and consisted primarily of in-depth conversations with more than twenty experts on the Central Sahel based in West Africa, Europe, and the United States, who work in research, civil society, and advocacy organizations, in academia, as well as formerly in government. The author supplemented those conversations with a detailed literature review. All conversations were conducted on background, given the sensitive nature of the subject, especially for individuals who hail from the region.

As noted above, reliable information is limited and inconsistent, especially compared to the relative openness of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in the past. This is largely due to instability caused by conflict and repression by the military governments. They have intimidated and in many cases shut down local organizations that traditionally raise warning of and document atrocities. The military governments have cracked down on media,

suspending or closing down foreign outlets including the BBC, VOA, RFI, and France 24,[8] and intimidating local journalists. This pressure has led to an understandable degree of self-censorship by some local journalists, with others going into exile. In Burkina Faso, journalists and critics of the military government have been sent to the frontlines to fight as punishment for their work.[9] As a result, the region is now one of the most closed media environments in Africa.

Further limiting international eyes and ears following the coups, Mali expelled a UN peacekeeping mission (whose human rights section did regular reporting), Niger forced out American troops and the International Committee of the Red Cross,[10] Burkina Faso expelled two successive UN resident coordinators,[11] and all three governments expelled French armed forces. International human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, continue detailed documentation and reporting of atrocities, but with limited resources and little direct access to the three countries. For many in the region, state-run media outlets are the only formal source of information, though their reporting can be biased and heavy on propaganda. Social media provides a steady stream of information for citizens and for analysts working from afar, but as with social media everywhere, the reliability of the information varies.

Access to affected areas is extremely limited. The lines between civilians and those directly participating in hostilities are blurred in some instances, with people maintaining multiple identities depending on the context. Given these limitations, collecting accurate data, including on civilian fatalities and mass atrocities, is fraught. This report uses data on civilian fatalities from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) Project, a frequently cited and respected source, but any casualty data should be treated with caution.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger share common characteristics. All three are former French colonies that, following independence, were characterized by relatively peaceful management of ethnic diversity, rich communal traditions, and, until recently, close integration with their other West African neighbors. But in recent years, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have endured rapid political and security declines – each along its own path, though ending in similar volatile, authoritarian states.

A multiplicity of interrelated factors undermine governments' ability to manage territory and deliver services in the Central Sahel, making them vulnerable to challenges by armed groups. These include high fertility rates, which strain state institutions' capacity to keep pace with population growth; challenging geography that leaves vast swaths of land with minimal state presence; weak rule of law; endemic poverty; a rapidly changing climate; and negligent, predatory, and corrupt behavior by elites.

MALI was the first of the three countries to grapple with the current wave of insurgent violence, and remains the epicenter of much of the present-day instability. In the early 2000s, Mali was regarded as a democratic success story in a volatile region; in retrospect, the roots of democracy in Mali were shallow and didn't extend far beyond the capital, Bamako. Beginning in 2012, armed separatists from the Tuareg ethnic group, based in northern Mali, went on the offensive and, helped by a brief alliance with groups linked to al-Qaeda, captured several northern cities. Those developments prompted peacekeeping and military interventions by the UN and France. Simultaneously, a coup in 2012 led to a spectacular collapse of the state and an overlapping security, humanitarian, and political crisis. This was followed by a relatively rapid return to civilian rule and the election, in 2013, of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, whose government engaged in a series of negotiations and agreements with the separatists, while partnering with France to fight Islamist insurgents (who nonetheless expanded southward). In 2020, mass protests against Keïta's government over corruption, insecurity (both

persistent Islamist armed group attacks and atrocities committed by security forces), and electoral disputes were followed by a military coup, and in 2021 Colonel Assimi Goïta staged a second coup. He remains the military head of state, has resisted regional and international pressure to facilitate a return to civilian governance, and has indefinitely postponed elections. Goïta's regime has reshaped Mali, including by expelling French forces and the UN peacekeeping mission, and banning all political parties.[12] Limited available data suggests its actions have been popular, at least in its stronghold of Bamako: in a 2024 survey, 69% of Malians approved of the government's performance in reducing violent conflict.[13]

For a time, as Mali was wracked by violence, **BURKINA FASO** seemed relatively unscathed. President Blaise Compaoré ruled the country for 27 years, and was rumored to have cut deals with Islamist armed groups to prevent attacks on Burkinabe territory. But citizens and the political opposition grew increasingly impatient with Compaoré's personalistic and autocratic rule. In 2014, prompted by Compaoré's efforts to amend the constitution to extend his tenure, citizens revolted, eventually forcing Compaoré to resign. A coup attempt against an interim government in 2015 again brought protestors to the streets; later that year, Marc Christian Kaboré was elected and sworn in as president. In the ensuing years, Burkina Faso enjoyed "the most democratic period in [its] history,"[14] and Kaboré was reelected in 2020. But on his watch, beginning in 2015, instability in Mali increasingly spilled into Burkina Faso, and Kaboré struggled to mount an effective response. In January 2022, ostensibly in response to mounting security force casualties, the military staged a coup, followed by a second coup in September 2022, this one led by junior officers and spearheaded by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. He declared himself president and brushed aside calls for elections and a return to civilian rule;[15] instead, Traoré has governed with increasing repression and brutality, expelled French forces, and extended his mandate to 2029.

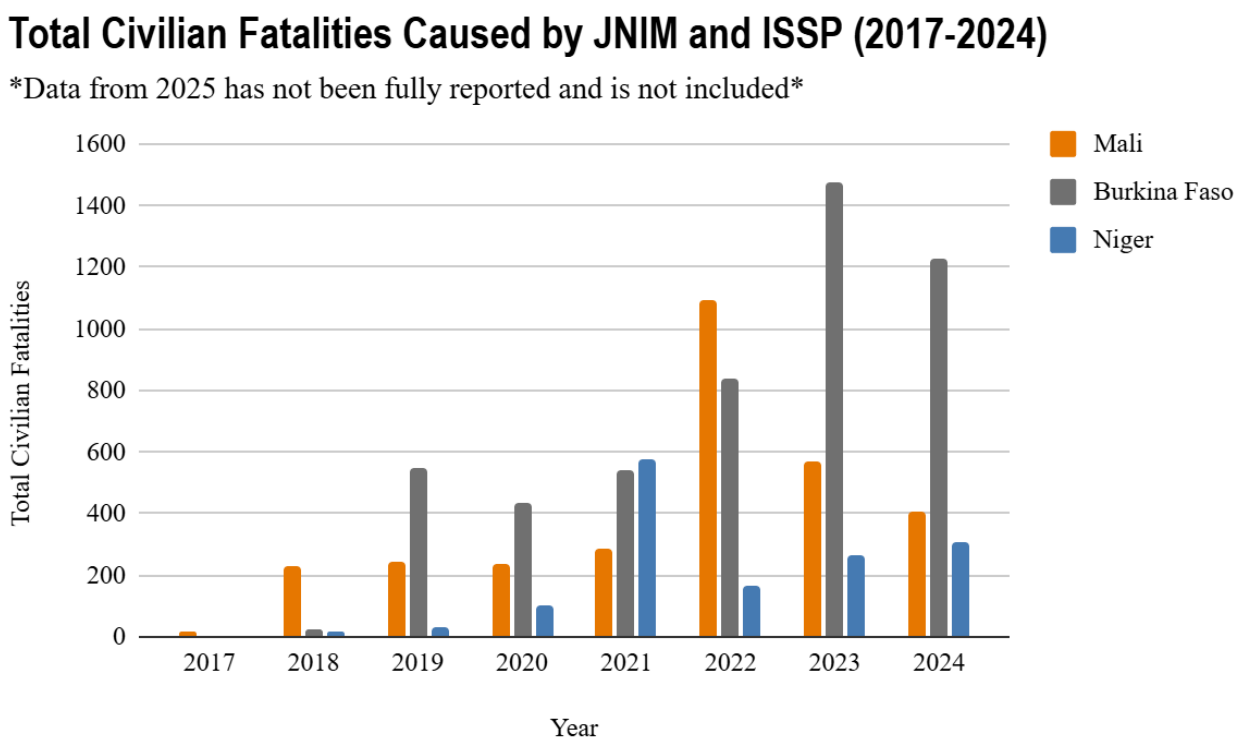
Similar to Burkina Faso, **NIGER** enjoyed a recent phase of democratic progress, and for a time was able to maintain relative security in the face of armed Islamist attacks. Following a coup in 2010, elections in 2011 brought Mahamadou Issoufou to power, and he was reelected in 2016. Issoufou made some progress on economic development and strengthening institutions and, bucking regional trends, resisted the temptation to seek a third term. He welcomed external partners in the fight against extremists: Niger hosted French counterterrorism forces and allowed the United States to build a military base in the remote city of Agadez. Mohamed Bazoum was elected president in 2021, marking Niger's first transfer of power between elected leaders, and maintained the Western military presence in the country as neighboring countries were expelling those forces. But tensions were growing between Bazoum and the head of his Presidential Guard, Abdourahamane Tchiani (who was appointed by Issoufou), and in July 2023 Tchiani's forces detained Bazoum. Tchiani took power, and in March 2025 was formally sworn in as president for a five-year term. He expelled French and American forces – a significant setback for the US military given its substantial investments in Niger – and despite an international outcry, has kept Bazoum under house arrest.

PRIMARY ACTORS: ISLAMIST ARMED GROUPS

The two Islamist armed groups most active in the Central Sahel are defined, in part, by allegiance to competing global networks: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Both networks aim to establish what they characterize as Sunni Islamic governance in majority-Muslim areas. In general, relative to each other, al-Qaeda is a more decentralized organization, and its affiliates are more inclined to work with traditional leaders to implement policies, place more emphasis on governing territory, and take a more gradual approach to achieve their aims. The Islamic State is less disciplined and more brutal and authoritarian, but important nuances are present in each country where they operate.

Together, JNIM (aligned with al-Qaeda) and ISSP (aligned with the Islamic State) are responsible for approximately 2,000 or more civilian casualties in each of 2022, 2023, and 2024, as depicted in Figure 3 below: [16]

Figure 3.



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM)

JNIM was formed in 2017 through the merger of four al-Qaeda-aligned groups active in Mali: Ansar al-Din, the southern wing of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Mourabitoun, and Katiba Macina. The heads of two of those founding members, Iyad ag Ghali (a Tuareg from northern Mali) and Amadou Koufa (a Fulani from central Mali), now lead JNIM. The group has quickly grown into the strongest militant force in West Africa, boasting an estimated 6,000 fighters.[17] But it is also a fluid organization that operates a franchise model, with the founding organizations maintaining their identities and operating with varying degrees of autonomy.

JNIM maintains allegiance to al-Qaeda, but there's little evidence that al-Qaeda influences day-to-day operations beyond providing broad strategic guidance. JNIM's core ambition, as summarized in a recent UN report, is "the creation of an emirate that could challenge the legitimacy of military regimes, force them to cede authority and implement sharia [law]."[18] JNIM's recruits, which include children, are largely local, from the regions where JNIM operates; excessive force and indiscriminate targeting by pro-government forces serve as a powerful recruiting tool. The group has demonstrated its savvy in absorbing the grievances of local communities and using those grievances to its advantage. It also creates and exacerbates communal tensions, compelling community members to capitulate to JNIM and the rules they impose.

Beginning around 2015, JNIM and its component groups expanded beyond their strongholds in central and northern Mali. Their operations in Burkina Faso, where JNIM is estimated to control 40% of the territory,[19] have widened at an especially rapid clip. Since 2012, ACLED data indicates that attacks by JNIM and its component groups (including prior to JNIM's formation) have killed more than 1,900 civilians in Mali, more than 3,500 civilians in Burkina Faso, and over one hundred civilians in Niger.[20] Some of their most destructive attacks against civilian populations include:

- **BURKINA FASO:** June 2021 attack on Solhan that killed over 135 civilians[21]
- **MALI:** September 2023 attack on a passenger boat traveling on the Niger River in the Timbuktu region that killed over 120 people[22]
- **MALI:** January 2024 attack in the villages of Ogota and Ouémbé that killed at least 32 people and forced more than 2,000 people to flee their homes[23]
- **BURKINA FASO:** August 2024 attack on Barsalogho that killed at least 133 civilians forced by the military to build a trench near one of its bases[24]
- **BURKINA FASO:** March 2025 attack in Sourou province that killed at least 100 civilians. These killings by JNIM were in retaliation for a massacre of over 130 civilians by the Burkinabe military[25]

Over time, JNIM has adapted its operations, doing more to entrench itself within communities and implement a civilian engagement strategy.[26] While its capacity for extreme brutality is unquestioned, at times JNIM positions itself as a protector of communities, and in particular of the Fulani, against state-backed aggression. The group takes advantage of state dysfunction and absence by providing some limited local services, including operating a complex Sharia court system and facilitating rudimentary medical care. It collects taxes, known as Zakat, to support operations, using force when necessary. JNIM has shown a willingness to strike deals with communities, promising not to attack if communities agree not to cooperate with pro-government forces and to adhere to JNIM diktats grounded in their strict interpretation of Islam. Scattered reports suggest that, in recent months, JNIM is seeking to distance itself from al-Qaeda, curtail the lethality of its actions, and pursue negotiations with the Malian government. Compared to ISSP, JNIM has tended to be more targeted in its violence, attacking state officials and security forces, and traditional leaders and others they believe are collaborating with the state, rather than civilians en masse. That said, JNIM and its franchises, especially those operating in Burkina Faso, have proven their capacity for perpetrating large-scale atrocities against civilians.

Beyond asserting itself in rural communities, JNIM's broader political aspirations are a point of intense speculation. Recent developments in Syria – where leaders of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate, now find themselves heading the government and being courted by the West – add an intriguing element to the debate. Analysts speculate that JNIM's recent shifts, including "toward attacks on key urban population centers and economic infrastructure critical to the Malian regime,"[27] telegraph a similar aspiration to either pressure governments to negotiate, or to supplant the military governments, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso. Another analyst noted that "JNIM's recent calls for Malians to mobilize against Bamako and its Russian supporters suggests that the group may be trying to encourage the regime's collapse from within."[28]

But others push back on the argument that JNIM seeks to emulate HTS: skeptics point out that JNIM appears to have little interest in formal politics; such a pivot would require breaking with al-Qaeda; JNIM's predecessors' previous experience attempting to hold urban territory backfired;[29] its leaders recognize that the

group is composed of fighters largely from remote rural areas and still has a modest headcount overall, making it ill-equipped for state governance; and the fundamental societal differences between Syria and Sahelian states makes for a less welcoming environment for JNIM in regional capitals. Rather than controlling states, JNIM's objective may be to demonstrate the weakness of the three states, while carving out growing portions of those states to run by their Salafist rules and use as a base for illicit activities.

Which path JNIM chooses to emphasize has implications for the risk of mass atrocities. If it is looking to supplant governments, it may moderate its tactics, recognizing that governing requires a level of popular support incompatible with regularly instigating violence. If expanding its control over rural areas is the goal, the tactics it has employed to broaden its territorial control and fill its coffers – tactics that include committing atrocities to ensure compliance – are likely to endure.

Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)

The predecessor to ISSP, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), was founded in 2015 as a result of a split within al-Qaeda-aligned al-Mourabitoun. ISGS claimed its first attacks in Burkina Faso in 2016, and was elevated to provincial status in the broader Islamic State network in 2022 and renamed Islamic State Sahel Province. Its activities are concentrated in the Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger tri-border area (known as Liptako-Gourma), where JNIM also has operations, and particularly along the Mali-Niger border, with more limited attacks in other locations. Compared to JNIM, ISSP currently has only a limited foothold in Burkina Faso, but has made greater inroads in Niger, including activities close to the capital Niamey.

ISSP has an estimated 2,000-3,000 fighters,[30] with its foot soldiers largely hailing from local Fulani and Daosahak communities.[31] Compared to JNIM, more of its leaders come from outside the Central Sahel. Like JNIM, ISSP employs child soldiers. ISSP is perceived to be even more brutal and violent than JNIM, often making little distinction between soldiers and civilians, with an emphasis on violently crushing any opposition to its rule and extortion for strategic and financial gain.[32] Even so, as it competes with JNIM for recruits and territory, ISSP has shown some signs of a "shift away from mass violence to more structured governance and expanded territorial control,"[33] including reopening local markets in areas they control.

ISSP has been responsible for more than 1,300 civilian fatalities in Mali, more than 1,500 in Burkina Faso, and over 1,800 in Niger.[34] It has frequently clashed with JNIM, especially in the Liptako-Gourma area, resulting in hundreds of fighter fatalities during some years.[35] Major ISSP attacks against civilians include:

- **NIGER:** January to March 2021 attacks killed over 270 civilians, including 102 in twin attacks in the Tillaberi Region, and 170 in an attack in the Tahoua region[36]
- **MALI:** March to June 2022 attacks on communities in the Meneka and Gao regions, resulting in more than 400 civilian deaths[37]
- **NIGER:** March and June 2025 attacks on villages in the Tillabéri region that killed over 127 civilians[38]

Other Armed Groups

The Islamist armed group Boko Haram, with roots in Nigeria, expanded into southeast Niger in the mid-2010s, took control of a modest portion of territory, and in 2015 pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Internal divisions have plagued the group for years, and now two factions, Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), compete for influence and mount significant

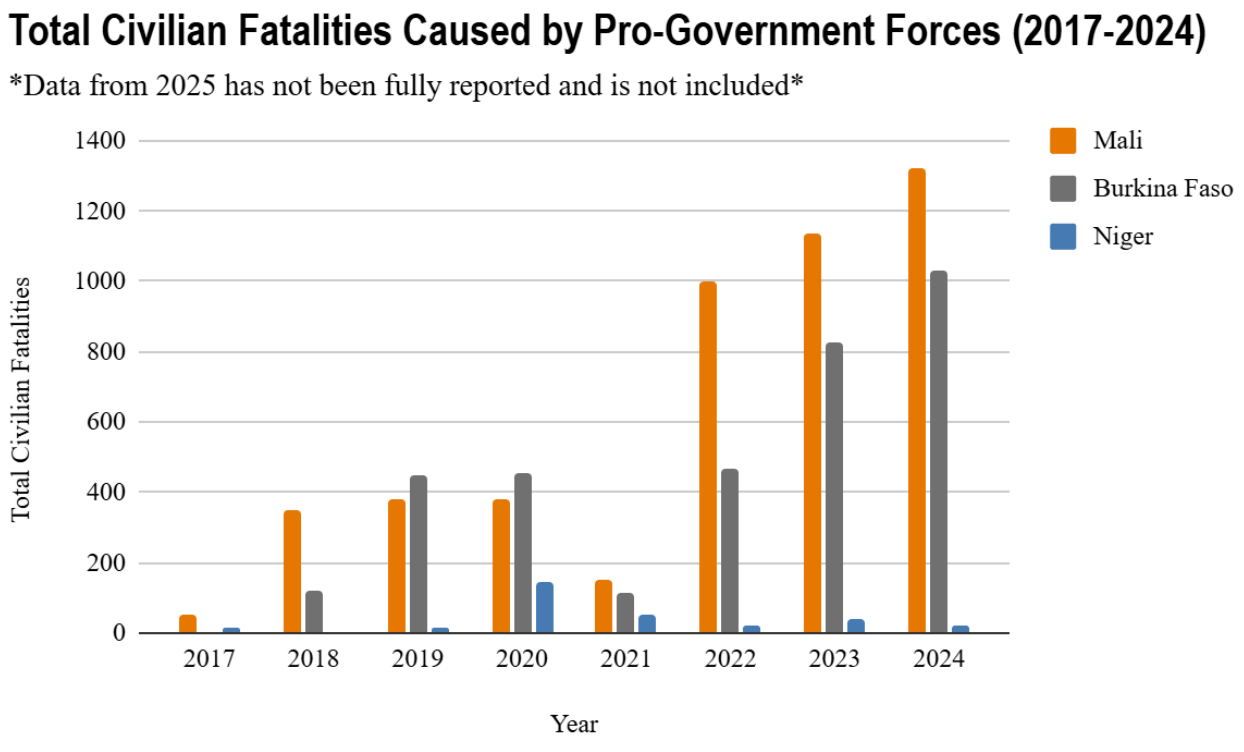
attacks against each other. Recent activity has been concentrated more in Nigeria and Cameroon than in Niger. Since 2012, Boko Haram and multiple factions of ISWAP have been responsible for over 600 civilian fatalities in Niger.[39]

Other armed groups have long operated in remote northern Mali, often seeking greater autonomy from the state or full independence. Since the 1960s, ethnic Tuareg armed groups have staged a series of rebellions in Mali and Niger, including a significant push in Mali in 2012, followed by a peace agreement with Bamako in 2015, which lasted (though was only selectively implemented) until the military government cancelled it in 2024. Later in 2024, the Tuareg groups coalesced into the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA).[40] Clashes with Malian security forces intensified starting in 2023, including a significant July 2024 battle with the army and Russian forces in the far northeast.[41] JNIM also engaged in that fight, and in general, JNIM and Tuareg armed groups have formed periodic opportunistic alliances, but officially keep their distance. While Tuareg armed groups don't operate at the same scale as JNIM or ISSP, they are a factor on the battlefield and have demonstrated a fierce commitment to their cause.

PRIMARY ACTORS: PRO-GOVERNMENT FORCES

The pro-government forces across the three countries – including security forces, auxiliary forces, and Russia-backed forces – are responsible for a staggering, and accelerating, level of civilian casualties, depicted in Figure 4 below: [42]

Figure 4.



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

Security Forces

With the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger led by soldiers, the armed forces are at the center of each state. Since the early 2010s, under both quasi-democratic regimes and the military-led governments, security forces (including militaries, police, and intelligence agencies) have been responsible for mass atrocities. They employ a pattern of operations that punishes entire communities for their real or perceived support to Islamist armed groups.

The **Malian Armed Forces (FAMa)** are composed of the National Guard, National Gendarmerie, National Police, National Air Force, and other units (including special forces brigades, which include members of several of these entities). The FAMa has substantial experience fighting Islamist armed groups and separatists. It has long been accused of committing atrocities during counterterrorism operations, at times operating alongside ethnic militias (described in further detail below) and, since 2022, Russia-backed forces. This brutality was on display during a massacre in Moura, in central Mali, in March 2022 that heralded a new level of violence and changing dynamics. According to the UN, FAMa and foreign personnel (presumed to be Russian) executed 500 men,[43] whom the military government accused of having ties to Islamist armed groups but included many civilians.[44] It was a shocking development, the largest number of people killed in a single event in Mali in at least a decade, that showed that pro-government forces were willing to escalate to new levels of brutality.

All told, the FAMa is responsible for more than 4,200 civilian fatalities since 2012.[45] In July 2025, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies estimated that "Malian and allied security forces were responsible for 82 percent of all civilian fatalities [in the country] over the past year."[46] As with almost all recent atrocities in the region, no one has been held accountable for mass atrocities committed by security forces. In addition to the massacre in Moura, atrocities committed by the FAMa (some alongside Russia-backed forces) include:

- **2018:** Almost 50 civilians, detailed by the security forces, were killed in the villages of Diourra, Boulikessi, and Nantaka in central Mali[47]
- **2019:** Soldiers allegedly executed 88 civilians in several incidents including 26 civilians in Ndoukala; 14 civilians in Niangassadou; 29 civilians in Binidama, and 19 civilians in Ouro-Diam[48]
- **2022**: In or around March, security forces killed 35 men and 33 men in two separate incidents in the Ségou region (the latter involving Russia-backed forces)[49]
- **2022**: In April and September, security forces and foreign soldiers killed 50 and 35 people, respectively, in the Mopti region[50]
- **2024**: Security forces killed 25 civilians, including children, in the village of Ouro Fero[51]
- **2025**: Security forces killed at least 22 men who had been taken into military custody in Diafarabé[52]

Many of the worst attacks on civilians have directly followed Islamist armed group attacks on government positions in which the FAMa endured heavy losses. In many of its massacres, the FAMa appears to make little distinction between civilians and fighters. It justifies its actions by alleging that its targets have ties to Islamist armed groups, but the practice of indiscriminately rounding up men in a community and slaughtering them casts doubt on this claim.

The **Burkina Faso Armed Forces'** counterterrorism response has, since at least 2018, been punctuated by atrocities against civilians, which have grown in intensity, notably as a result of collaboration with the auxiliary VDPs (described in further detail below). With junior military officers orchestrating the 2022 coup and now leading the government, senior officers have been pushed aside, generating discontent within the forces. Transitional President Traoré has shaken up the military by welcoming back to the fold elite troops from the reign of former President Compaoré, who were marginalized (and some tried for their actions) during Kabore's presidency, and by heavily investing in the Rapid Intervention Brigade (BIR).[53] There are approximately 12 BIR brigades, commanded directly from the presidency and implicated in atrocities. Like their counterparts in Mali, the Burkinabe security forces exert strong control over public narratives, with a particular emphasis on demonizing and targeting Fulani. Burkinabe armed forces are responsible for more than 3,500 civilian fatalities since 2012.[54] In July 2025, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies estimated that the Burkinabe security forces and VDPs were responsible for 41 percent of all civilian fatalities in the country over the past year.[55] Significant atrocities committed by Burkinabe security forces (sometimes operating alongside VDPs) include:

- **2019/2020:** The remains of over 180 men, presumed to have been killed by security forces, were found in Djibo, many of them found blindfolded and bound[56]
- **2023:** Soldiers killed at least 147 civilians in Karma[57]
- **2024:** A combination of soldiers and VDPs killed approximately 220 civilians, including at least 56 children, in Soro and Nondin[58]
- **2025:** Security forces massacred more than 130 people near Solenzo[59]

Niger's military has mostly avoided relying on external or auxiliary forces such as Russia-backed forces or civilian or ethnic militias. It is structured around three components – the core forces, a National Guard, and a Gendarmerie, each with a different command structure and reporting chain – with the National Guard at the forefront of the fight against Islamist armed groups, and suffering more casualties than the other components. In general, Niger's military is seen as more professional and disciplined than its Malian and Burkinabe counterparts. Even so, it is responsible for more than 300 civilian fatalities since 2012,[60] including through a January 2024 drone strike that reportedly killed 50 civilians.[61] There are signs of growing discontent within the military ranks over promotions and lack of support for front-line troops, including mutinies[62] and other signs of insubordination.

Auxiliary Forces

In Burkina Faso, former President Kaboré signed legislation creating the **Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie** (VDPs) in 2020, following a JNIM attack on a convoy connected to a Canadian-owned gold mine.[63] The VDPs are a state-backed self-defense militia, which is not a new phenomenon in Burkina Faso; groups such as the Koglweogo and Dozo, many of whose members joined the VDPs, also fit that description. But in a new twist, the legislation placed the VDPs officially under state control. After he seized power, Transitional President Traoré kicked the program into high gear with a recruiting drive, heavy on patriotic appeal, that sought to increase the VDP ranks by 50,000 personnel – and reportedly elicited more than 90,000 applications. Voluntary recruitment was paired with forced conscription, with political opponents, journalists, and others seen to be opposed to the regime compelled into the VDP ranks. VDP personnel are well armed by the state and receive just a few weeks of training, a far cry from the preparation that members of the military receive.

They are deployed throughout the country, though concentrated in the north and east, where Islamist armed groups are most active.

Despite minimal preparation or oversight, Traoré thrust the VDPs onto the frontlines of the fight with Islamist armed groups, often in joint operations with the military. This is advantageous to his government in a number of ways. As one academic notes, describing such informal forces in general:

> [They] provide the government with enormous benefits: because they emerge from within their communities, they are familiar with local customs, language and networks. They provide the government with crucial information about the identity and location of insurgents. Local knowledge is essential in irregular warfare, but usually inaccessible for centralized and formal security forces…Additionally, they are a cheap force multiplier and highly mobile because they are not constrained by long chains of command.[64]

Employing VDPs on the frontlines also insulates the military and makes for less blowback on the state, and provides some plausible deniability, when VDPs commit atrocities. Those atrocities are substantial: since its creation, VDPs are responsible for close to 300 civilian fatalities in Burkina Faso[65] (a figure that may be an undercount since it can be difficult to distinguish between deaths attributable to the VDPs and to the formal security forces). VDPs have also suffered heavy casualties among their ranks.

People from the Mossi ethnic group, the largest in Burkina Faso, compose a sizable portion of the VDPs. Consistent with the state-led campaign to scapegoat and dehumanize Fulani, VDPs are accused of disproportionately targeting Fulani individuals and communities, and it is telling that there are very few Fulani among the VDPs. At times, the VDPs have exceeded their mandate by exacerbating communal tensions and settling local scores, including around land issues.[66] Their mere presence puts communities at risk, as Islamist armed groups have explicitly targeted civilians in areas where VDPs operate. As a result, communities are effectively forced to choose sides between the state, often represented by VDPs, and the Islamist armed groups.

In Mali, some ethnic groups have formed their own **self-defense forces** in response to increasing violence perpetrated by Islamist armed groups and security forces' inability to provide adequate protection. While initially created to protect communities, these forces are themselves responsible for atrocities against civilians.

The most prominent of these groups are the **Dozo** and **Dan Na Ambassagou**. The Dozo are traditional hunting societies that have long existed across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast, but since the mid-2010s have become increasingly militarized in Mali. Dozo fighters hail primarily from the Bambara, Mali's largest ethnic group. Meanwhile, the Dan Na Ambassagou draws largely from the Dogon ethnic group (the name roughly translates to "those who put their trust in God" in Dogon) and was launched in 2016, following the murder of a prominent Dogon leader. A Dan Na Ambassagou leader claimed in 2019 that the force comprised more than 5,000 fighters.[67] There is some evidence to suggest that both groups coordinate their activities with Malian security forces; at a minimum, the state turns a blind eye to their activities, and makes little effort to hold perpetrators of atrocities to account (unlike the VDPs in Burkina Faso, neither group is formally written into law in Mali).

Among the most deadly attacks on civilians by these groups was a massacre carried out by the Dan Na Ambassagou in Ogossagou in March 2019 that killed over 150 civilians;[68] and another in the same village in 2020 that killed at least 35 civilians;[69] a Dan Na Ambassagou attack in 2019 in Koulogon that killed 39

civilians;[70] a Dozo attack in 2018 in Koumaga that killed 25 civilians;[71] and more recently, a January 2024 Dozo attack in Kalala that killed 13 civilians.[72] All told, the Dan Na Ambassagou are estimated to have killed over 450 civilians, and the Dozo over 500[73] – but as with the VDPs and Burkina Faso security forces, when the Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo operate in coordination with the FAMa, it can be difficult to precisely attribute responsibility for civilian fatalities.

Russia-backed Forces

After they staged a coup and as they pressured French troops and a UN peacekeeping mission to depart, the new military government in Mali invited the **Wagner Group**, a Russian paramilitary organization with links to the Kremlin but officially independent, to join the fight against Islamist armed groups. Wagner initially deployed in December 2021 with 1,000-2,000 personnel, who wasted little time joining the fray and demonstrating their capacity for violence, including in the March 2022 massacre in Moura. Wagner forces have frequently operated in tandem with the FAMa; at times it has been difficult to discern which entity is in the lead. What's beyond doubt is that Wagner's arrival accelerated state-sponsored violence and abetted some of the worst instincts of the Malian security forces. Shocking images of atrocities committed by Wagner personnel, including torture and mutilation of corpses, circulated online in June 2025.[74] Available data suggests that Wagner forces have killed more than 350 civilians in Mali[75] (here, too, it can be difficult to attribute responsibility between Wagner and FAMa troops).

Relations between the Malian government and Wagner eventually soured, in part due to the cost to Bamako of the deployment,[76] and in June 2025 Wagner declared that it had accomplished its mission in Mali and would depart.[77] That doesn't signal the end of the Russian presence, however, as Wagner has been replaced by **Africa Corps**, a paramilitary group directly controlled by the Russian government that first appeared in Mali in 2023. Current estimates are that Africa Corps has about 2,000 personnel in Mali, many of whom were previously affiliated with Wagner.[78] Expanding beyond Mali, in 2024 Africa Corps signed agreements with the military governments in Burkina Faso and Niger, but in those countries their footprint is smaller and their role is more focused on training and information operations (and in Burkina Faso, providing protection for high-ranking officials). In all three countries, the presence of Russia-backed forces creates a new target and rallying cry for Islamist armed groups, a convenient replacement for the departed French. Russia-backed media outlets and influencers have also done an effective job of reading the mood in the region and shaping debates by amplifying disinformation and military government messaging.[79]

AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

Communities across the Central Sahel have been significantly harmed not only by Islamist armed group attacks but also by assaults, some retaliatory in nature, by security forces, aligned militia, and Russia-backed forces. Areas that historically have avoided violence, such as western Mali, are now increasingly volatile. The death toll, sizable as it is, only tells part of the story: Islamist armed groups and pro-government forces are also responsible for brutality, torture, enforced disappearance, and destruction and looting of villages, all undermining lives and livelihoods. For communities dependent on agriculture, displacement or prohibition from accessing farmland – a common tactic used by Islamist armed groups[80] – can be highly destabilizing. Meanwhile, pro-government forces set up checkpoints to intercept the movement of livestock that nomadic people depend on. Forces from both sides limit access to pasture land and steal livestock, further undermining livelihoods and imperiling communities that have little safety net.[81]

Islamist armed groups have placed entire communities under siege, limiting their food and water supply, and enforcing taxation. In Burkina Faso, Amnesty International has documented:

> Many residents of besieged localities have had no choice but to flee, sometimes with the bare minimum, to escape the hard living conditions created by the siege. Food insecurity has been effectively used by Ansaroul Islam [an Islamist armed group with close ties to JNIM] to coerce populations into submission, to exert pressure on the military, and to force the departure of civilian residents.[82]

For their part, the governments' use of ethnic-based self-defense forces in counterterrorism operations has deeply strained communal relations, pitting ethnic groups against one another, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso. To its credit, Niger has resisted subcontracting defense and security responsibilities to these groups, and Mali, unlike Burkina Faso, has not formally institutionalized them.

While virtually every ethnic and demographic group in the region has been affected by violence, members of the Fulani ethnic group have been a particular target of pro-government forces, and have suffered immensely. The Fulani (also referred to as the Peul or Fulbe) are spread across West Africa, numbering approximately 30 million in total, are predominantly Muslim, and by most counts are the second largest ethnic group in both Burkina Faso and Mali. Many Fulani are semi-nomadic herders, frequently moving large distances with their cattle, which periodically brings them into conflict with sedentary farmers, sometimes leading to clashes. Although Fulani individuals have served in prominent government posts, across the Central Sahel Fulani have been marginalized by governments, in which they have disproportionately low representation, and which tend to provide greater support and more services to farmers.

JNIM and ISSP, and their predecessor organizations, have recruited heavily from Fulani populations, leaning on those populations' religiosity, high levels of mobility, and marginalization by the state. While the majority of fighters and most commanders in JNIM are believed to be Fulani, it is essential to emphasize that the overwhelming majority of Fulani are not associated with Islamist armed groups, and those who do join sometimes do so out of fear or desperation. The military governments exploit this dynamic; the Burkinabe government, in particular, advances a narrative that closely associates Fulani communities as a whole with Islamist armed groups, and employs allies in the media and on social media to amplify the message.

Fulani communities find themselves in an almost impossible position. They are stigmatized as terrorists and shunned by large segments of society. Pro-government forces clearly target regions and communities where Fulanis are prevalent (they also target prominent Fulani activists in cities), whether or not there is evidence of collusion with Islamist armed groups. The International Crisis Group previously accused Malian forces of ethnic cleansing of Fulani,[83] and Malian ethnic self-defense forces and Burkinabe VDPs are notorious for targeting Fulani communities. If Fulani communities try to cooperate with the state, including (in Burkina Faso) by accepting a VDP presence, they are targeted by Islamist armed groups. Their mobility, essential to their traditional livelihoods, is constrained by having to navigate risks from Islamist armed groups and pro-government forces, making subsistence even more difficult. They're caught in a cycle of being ostracized and attacked, which drives some into the arms of Islamist armed groups for both protection and for revenge, which then perpetuates the narrative that they are responsible for violence.

MASS ATROCITY RISK FACTORS

In *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*,[84] Scott Straus identifies four macro-level risk factors commonly associated with mass atrocities. Each is present in the Central Sahel:

- **LARGE-SCALE INSTABILITY:** The region is enduring substantial instability, punctuated by coups, with central governments unable to exert control over significant portions of their territory
- **ARMED CONFLICT:** Islamist armed groups frequently clash with pro-government forces, and periodically attack each other
- **TRANSFORMATIVE OR EXCLUSIONARY IDEOLOGY:** Islamist armed groups seek to change the nature of the state and society to align with their ideology, while governments use authoritarian tactics to quash any opposition that could check their power, and marginalize groups (primarily the Fulani) for their perceived support of Islamist armed groups
- **PRIOR DISCRIMINATION OR VIOLENCE AGAINST A PARTICULAR GROUP:** Fulani have historically been marginalized and subject to discrimination

The prerequisites for mass atrocities are present, and indeed, mass atrocities are already occurring. Still, several factors exacerbate the already volatile circumstances and increase the risk of conflict, which heightens the risk of mass atrocities. Those factors are detailed below.

Toxic Information Environment

The information environment in all three countries creates an enabling environment for atrocities. Having come to power on the back of declining popularity of prior governments, leaders in each country know that the public perception of their performance is a major factor in their fate, especially as they deny the public the opportunity to express their views through civil society activity, political party activity, and elections. So they invest heavily in manipulating public sentiment. They allegedly have outside help, especially from Russian disinformation machinery,[85] but much of the information environment is shaped locally. In Mali, for instance, the International Crisis Group has documented how:

> Local social media influencers specialised in political communication, known as *videomans*, have become a go-to source for many people…Young, urban-dwelling and often self-taught, the videomans comment on local and international news in Bamanakan, the most widely spoken language in Mali, reaching an audience far larger than traditional French-language media. Their content is widely shared by millions of users, particularly on TikTok and WhatsApp.[86]

The problems are especially acute in Burkina Faso. There, the government and content producers it supports go to great lengths to glorify Transitional President Traoré, building up a cult of personality centered around a Pan-African identity, in the mold of Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso's revered former president. It's exceedingly dangerous for Burkinabes to counter that narrative; even individuals who have contested it online have been the target of state-sponsored intimidation. The exalted image of Traoré has gained traction with audiences domestically, in the region, across the continent, and internationally, even as it becomes increasingly difficult to square with the insecurity gripping the nation and atrocities perpetrated by forces under his control.

All three regimes heavily promote a sovereigntist narrative,[87] emphasizing their independence and calling out France and other Western nations for past exploitation (at times they also claim that France supports Islamist

armed groups). State-sponsored content, and content produced by government supporters, glorifies the militaries, their leaders, and broader AES, marginalizes defeats, conflates criticism of the government with support for violence, and demonizes anyone suspected of supporting Islamist armed groups. In Burkina Faso, state-affiliated content implicitly and at times explicitly calls out Fulani. Making matters worse, the closure and expulsion of independent and international media outlets means there are few sources to counter state-sponsored content. The result is that, especially in Burkina Faso, citizens receive a steady diet of information that creates a national security justification for, and may compel them to participate in, attacks on perceived opponents – often Fulani and other communities living under effective control of Islamist armed groups. Those attacks have the potential to escalate to mass atrocities.

Climate & Demographic Pressures

Climate change makes an already challenging environment in which to sustain livelihoods even more difficult. Temperatures in the Sahel are rising 1.5 times faster than global averages, agricultural yields are facing significant declines,[88] and desertification is claiming land: in Niger, for example, soil erosion and desertification are estimated to claim 100,000 to 120,000 hectares of arable land every year.[89] Droughts and floods have alternately devastated the region. The traditional migration corridors through which pastoralists move their herds are shrinking, and herders are being compelled to change the timing of their movements.

Meanwhile, populations are booming. Each of the three Central Sahel countries is home to one of the 25 fastest growing populations in the world (at roughly 3.7%, Niger has the world's second fastest growth rate).[90] Cities are rapidly expanding, due to birthrates and internal migration; by 2050, each of the three capital cities is projected to hold between 6.7 and 7.6 million people.[91] Sahelian populations are skewed exceedingly young: Niger has a median age of 15.2 (youngest in the world), Mali's is 16.4, and Burkina Faso's is 18.7 – placing all three among the top 12 youngest countries.[92]

Climate and population pressures are not drivers of mass atrocities on their own; rather, they tax governments' ability to provide services and exacerbate existing structural vulnerabilities and tensions, which in turn can contribute to mass atrocities.[93] Climate change is also associated with large-scale instability, one of the common mass atrocity risk factors.[94] For instance, shrinking arable land means that conflicts between herders and farmers grow more frequent and intense, and Islamist armed groups have proven their expertise in exploiting these community-level fissures. Insecurity wrought by Islamist armed groups also limits mobility, a traditional coping mechanism for adapting to climate variability. Meanwhile, demographics and limited economic opportunity combine to produce high youth unemployment, creating a target group of recruits for Islamist armed groups, auxiliary forces, or anyone offering the promise of a better future.

Arms Flows

Both pro-government forces and Islamist armed groups enjoy relatively easy access to small arms, which enables them to be more destructive when they conduct offensive operations, and allows subsequent retaliation to be more fierce.[95] Islamist armed groups procure almost all of their arms locally, including through illicit networks and through confiscation of security forces' assets during confrontations. Conflict Armament Research, which tracks arms flows, has found that "at least one-fifth of the weapons seized in relation to Salafi jihadist activity in the central Sahel were diverted from the state custody of eight countries in North and West Africa (Burkina Faso, Chad, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria),"[96] and that "almost one-third of the ammunition [recovered from Islamist armed groups] is most likely to have originated in state

custody."[97] The researchers found no evidence of Islamist armed groups acquiring weapons from beyond the immediate region.

A relatively new development is the increasing use of drones on the battlefield by security forces and non-state armed groups.[98] For security forces, the acquisition of potentially lethal armed drones adds a powerful new tool to their arsenal.[99] JNIM has reportedly made use of drones too, including more than a dozen drone attacks employing improvised explosive devices (IEDs).[100] Every group using drones increases its capacity to kill, while keeping its forces further from harm's way. One development to watch is the advances in drone technology pioneered by Ukraine in its war with Russia; those advances could migrate to battlefields in the Sahel, especially considering reported links between Ukrainian forces and Tuareg armed groups.[101] Though drone attacks by security forces have generally targeted armed groups, there have been civilian casualties, including at least 60 civilians killed in three drone attacks by the Burkina Faso security services in the second half of 2023.[102]

Drug Smuggling & Illicit Activity

Islamist armed groups engage in an array of illicit activities to generate revenue, including human trafficking, poaching, illegal logging, cattle and livestock rustling, artisanal gold mining, drug trafficking, and kidnapping for ransom.[103] Artisanal gold mining is especially lucrative; data is hard to come by given the nature of the activity, but it's clear that a large portion of gold in all three countries is smuggled through unofficial channels.[104]

Participation in drug smuggling and other illicit activity is not limited to Islamist armed groups and organized crime syndicates. Elements of the state, including in the security forces, are complicit, as are politicians and community leaders.[105] The security forces' participation in illicit activities distracts from their core civilian protection mandate and raises questions about their incentives.

An increase in drug trafficking is especially concerning. The United Nations has called attention to the trend, noting the sharp increase in seizures of cocaine in the region and highlighting the damaging consequences:

> The drug economy and instability in the Sahel are linked through a vicious cycle…in which the weak rule of law is facilitating the expansion of the drug economy, which can, in turn, provide financial resources for maintaining or expanding conflicts, which then continues to weaken the rule of law.[106]

In the past, Islamist armed groups have facilitated and taxed the drug trade; the question now is whether they will become more direct participants. A worst-case scenario, the Atlantic Council notes, is

> the emergence of narco-terrorism on a scale hitherto unheard of and the entrenchment of partnerships between drug smugglers and increasingly well-funded terrorist groups, armed with cash and boasting access to international connections and smuggling routes.[107]

If this scenario plays out, the Islamist armed groups that have already demonstrated their willingness and ability to commit mass atrocities will grow stronger, and there will be greater – and almost surely violent – competition between these groups or other armed actors over control of the drug trade, with the potential for civilians to be caught in the middle.

Shifting External Engagement

All three military governments have made opposition to the West central to their political identity. They've followed through on the rhetoric, expelling Western military forces and media outlets, and a UN peacekeeping mission. France is the primary target (French embassies have been closed and disrupted), but the United States isn't far behind.

Separate from the pressure from the military governments, by closing the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and reducing some State Department operations, the United States has curtailed several strands of its engagement in the region. Prior to those actions, the United States provided substantial support to all three countries, especially in humanitarian assistance, food security, and health.[108] Closing USAID decreased some of that engagement, though the State Department is continuing some humanitarian and health programming. Closing the State Department's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations removes some of the US government's specialized expertise in conflict monitoring, analysis, and resolution. In general, the current US administration has not yet placed an emphasis on Africa – for instance, to date it has not put forward a nominee to be the State Department's senior official for African Affairs.[109]

While African leaders rightly point out that they should take primary responsibility for resolving the most pressing problems on the continent, when Western countries like France and the United States step back, their absence is keenly felt. Fewer eyes are watching and documenting atrocities,[110] including local organizations that receive Western funds. Conflict mediation at a high diplomatic level suffers, especially if influential African countries do not increase their involvement. At the United Nations, especially on the Security Council, Western attention gravitating elsewhere means there can be less of a push to raise awareness of and mobilize a response to crises.[111] All of this can lead to a more permissive environment for mass atrocities and greater impunity for perpetrators.

As the West pulls back, other countries are increasing their presence and influence in the region. Turkey is deepening its relationships with the military governments, through accelerated arms sales (including drones) and the rumored presence of a Turkish private military company, and by expanding diplomatic, humanitarian, and economic endeavors.[112] The United Arab Emirates has security partnerships in the Sahel, and has proven to be a destabilizing force in multiple regions in Africa, especially when its competition with rivals (including Saudi Arabia and Qatar) plays out among proxies.[113] Russia is steadily ramping up its multifaceted engagement in the Sahel, not only on security cooperation but also through economic investment, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic expansion. Developments in the Russia-Ukraine war could have implications for the Sahel: if it ends, or is paused through a meaningful ceasefire, there may be excess arms that can be transferred to other forces, and a large number of soldiers available for mercenary activities abroad, which could amplify the existing Russian (and reportedly Ukrainian)[114] presence.

MITIGATING FACTORS

In even the most dire situations, societies have ingrained characteristics that help them decrease the risk of discord or violence, and the Central Sahel is no exception. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are well known for cultures of tolerance, fraternity, and communitarian solidarity. The practice of "joking cousins" found in the region, in which people playfully tease one another, sometimes across ethnic groups, is just one example, and itself a form of conflict mediation.[115] Many Sahelian communities include residents from different ethnic groups who work, socialize, celebrate, and suffer together. Their diversified livelihoods provide mutually dependent goods and services, underscoring social cohesion. Sahelian societies are, almost by definition, resilient, surviving and thriving in difficult conditions that include drought, floods, and famine, which are

exacerbated by climate change. They boast strong traditions of reconciliation, and at the community level, respected traditional and religious leaders effectively manage most misunderstandings and prevent conflict escalation, even with Islamist armed groups operating nearby. Experts consulted almost universally acknowledge the social harmony to which local communities traditionally aspire – but also recognize that escalating violence, aggressive state-sponsored rhetoric, the presence of ethnic-based militias, and accumulating grievances are weakening the social fabric.

Notably, religious co-existence remains largely intact. Burkina Faso has the greatest religious diversity of the three countries; in Afrobarometer polling there, 60% of respondents identified as Muslim and 35% as Christian.[116] Transitional President Traoré, in fact, is only the second Muslim head of state in the country's history (though he is not known to be especially religious), and the Catholic Church has long held political sway. One might expect Islamist armed groups to seek to create and exploit religious fault lines – and they surely have tried – but the history of religious tolerance has stood in the way. As one anecdotal example, on religious holidays that call for fasting, people from other religions are known to join the fast as an act of solidarity.[117]

A strong sense of patriotism runs through Sahelian societies, which the military governments exploit to shield themselves from criticism, boost their popularity, and call out perceived enemies. But patriotism has also been an asset, for example, when Burkinabes took to the streets to topple the Compaoré regime, and then faced down a coup attempt against civilian transitional authorities the following year. It can be again if citizens are able to return their countries to a democratic dispensation, in which they work together to build the nation, rather than being pitted against one another.

MASS ATROCITY ESCALATION SCENARIOS

While the pace of atrocities is already of grave concern, a combustible mix of armed groups, unaccountable governments, impunity for violence, and other risk factors means there are myriad ways that security can deteriorate further, placing civilians at greater risk of atrocities. This section details several of the most concerning scenarios, and explores the potential implications of each for civilian populations.

Attacks on Cities

Islamist armed groups have already mounted significant attacks on major cities, including in Bamako in 2015, 2022, and 2024 (when an attack by JNIM, which included the international airport among the targets, shook the city),[118] and in Ouagadougou in 2016, 2017, and 2018, as well as attacks a few miles outside of Niamey. In May 2025, JNIM attacked a Burkinabe military base in Djibo, a provincial capital with a population of roughly 200,000, and in July attacked the city of Kayes in western Mali.[119] They've previewed more to come: one senior JNIM official declared, "We are now entering the second phase of the war. We will go and get you in the big cities in your last refuges,"[120] and the group posted online a photo of Ouagadougou that could suggest it is again a target.[121] In Mali, in September and October 2025, JNIM imposed a crippling fuel blockade on Bamako by preventing fuel tankers from accessing the city,[122] prompting retaliatory air strikes.[123]

Islamist armed groups may not be well positioned to hold and govern urban territory, having learned hard lessons from previous experience, but they've proven an ability to reach those areas and may do so again on a larger scale, to bring the fight closer to the military governments' centers of power and further demonstrate each governments' vulnerabilities. With Wagner forces that played a major role in protecting Bamako now

departed, and Africa Corps' scope of operations uncertain, the city may be vulnerable. JNIM's advances in Burkina Faso put both Ouagadougou and the second city of Bobo-Dioulasso at risk.

IMPLICATIONS: An attack on a major city could extend violence into areas that have generally been peaceful, and could be devastating for civilians, due to the initial damage, economic impact, and the fierce military response that would surely follow. Bamako and Ouagadougou have estimated populations over 3 million people, and Niamey around 1.5 million people and growing fast. All three cities are home to displaced people fleeing violence in rural areas. Any sustained combat would inevitably trap many civilians, with options to flee limited given instability elsewhere. Security forces may accuse some residents of collaborating with Islamist armed groups and target them for retaliation. Civilians who support the government could do the same, possibly in coordination with the security forces. Elsewhere in the country, pro-government forces could use an attack on a city as a pretext for indiscriminate attacks and collective punishment meted out on groups, like the Fulani, for their perceived affiliation with Islamist armed groups. Violence could quickly spiral, even if the assailants make a relatively rapid retreat.

Public Uprising & Government Response

Africans are increasingly taking to the streets to demand change.[124] The 2014 popular uprising in Burkina Faso was revelatory, ultimately ousting a president who seemed destined to be among Africa's leaders for life. Burkinabes mobilized again in 2015 to protest an attempted coup, and in 2021 to protest Islamist armed group violence. In Mali, thousands gathered in 2020 to protest the incumbent president and a Constitution Court decision to overturn some local election results (protests that were followed by a coup), and in May 2025 protestors returned to the streets to demand the restoration of democratic rule, despite the threat of state repression.[125] Nearby, protests in Senegal in 2023 and 2024 built pressure for a peaceful leadership transition, and Nigerians have mobilized repeatedly against corruption, insecurity, and governance failures.

Since consolidating control, the military governments have cracked down on dissent such that anyone choosing to protest in the closed and dangerous political environments is taking a substantial risk. The governments preempt protests by intimidating and jailing political leaders, and Malian authorities have made a point of keeping the main workers' union (the *Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali*) from striking, while weathering other strikes. Nonetheless, when people see their livelihoods and security in jeopardy, or their communities under siege, some are willing to take on additional risk (demonstrated by the protests in Bamako in May 2025). Few political analysts anticipated the 2014 Burkina Faso uprising, but citizens had reached a breaking point in their relationship with the Compaoré regime, and the protests quickly gained momentum. It's possible to envision a specific event sparking a citizen uprising, which factions of the security forces may join. Triggers could include a massacre in a city (either in a capital city or in another city, spurring solidarity protests in the capital), a blockade by Islamist armed groups of a capital city that creates significant hardships, or a government's inability to pay civil servants or security forces.

IMPLICATIONS: This scenario could result in substantial civilian casualties. Academic research shows that major anti-government protests are a common trigger for mass atrocities.[126] The military governments have demonstrated a willingness to respond to threats to their survival with both targeted pressure[127] and indiscriminate force. Recent history tells them that, as much as the Islamist armed groups can wreak havoc, it's pressure from citizens that can topple regimes, and they would likely respond aggressively to an uprising. Security forces could decide to target a large group of civilians for their actual or perceived support for a protest; the risk of this kind of systematic and large-scale targeting of civilians would be greater if security

forces try to suppress protests using less extreme means, but fail. A key variable will be whether factions within the security forces choose to comply with orders to use force, stand aside, or even join with protesters.

Additional Coups

Considering the recent trend, new coups in the three countries can't be ruled out. There have been recent attempts: Burkinabe authorities claim to have repulsed coup attempts in September 2023,[128] November 2024, and April 2025,[129] and Mali's government said it rebuffed a coup attempt in August 2025.[130] Burkina Faso may have the greatest likelihood of a coup, considering the recent attempts, scale of ongoing violence, large number of casualties suffered by the security forces and VDPs, and precedent for junior officers challenging the incumbent regime.

Coups could produce a range of successor regimes. If the pretext for a coup is insecurity, that suggests a new regime may take an even harder line against Islamist armed groups and their real or perceived collaborators, though it's difficult to envision how much more of a securitized stance any new regime could take compared to the current military governments. Alternatively, new regimes may be more inclined toward negotiation with Islamist armed groups, and potentially a return to the democratic rule that many citizens demand.

IMPLICATIONS: Academic research shows that coups are a common trigger for state-led mass killing.[131] At the very least, any coup attempt could intensify the patterns of violence already present and place civilians at heightened risk. Islamist armed groups could see an opening and increase their tempo of attacks to test the government, whether it survives the coup or is newly installed. In the event of a successful coup, a new regime could seek to prove its security bonafides and be even more aggressive in targeting people perceived to be associated with Islamist armed groups. If a coup attempt fails, the incumbent government is likely to lash out and target individuals they perceive to be behind the attempt, potentially ushering in even more brazen repression of civil society and the political class, as well as purges within the security forces.

Shifting Loyalties of the Auxiliary Forces

There are multiple examples, in Africa and elsewhere, of auxiliary forces aligned with and armed by the state that initially carry out the state's bidding but then choose to operate on their own – and at times turn on the state. Among the more prominent is the group initially known as the Janjaweed in Sudan, which the Sudanese government employed in the 2000s to wage a genocidal scorched earth campaign in Darfur, and later morphed into the Rapid Support Forces, which were central to overthrowing the Sudanese government and are now one of the main protagonists in a brutal civil war.

The same trajectory is plausible for the VDPs in Burkina Faso or the self-defense forces in Mali. The VDPs are presently largely responsive to and dependent on the military government in Ouagadougou, but that could change if, for instance, a coup or popular uprising forces a change in government; VDP leaders don't feel that they are receiving sufficient support from the state; or casualties among the VDP, or damage to their communities, become intolerable. The ethnic self-defense forces in Mali are currently aligned with but less dependent on the government, perhaps making them even more of a wild card. A challenge with such auxiliary forces, as one academic notes, is that "their members usually have limited alternatives to secure a living, while their link to the government and possession of weapons give them status and power they are unlikely to find outside the armed group,"[132] which makes for a difficult transition away from fighting.

IMPLICATIONS: If auxiliary forces exhibit more independent agency, they could pose an even greater threat to civilians. They are well armed and have a recent history of violence that makes additional violence more

likely. If they turn on the state, because of a sense of abandonment or for other reasons, that could lead to a devastating clash with the security forces – civilians may not be the immediate target, but the violence would be hard to escape. But paradoxically, these auxiliary forces are also a threat if there is progress in the fight against the Islamist armed groups. If they are no longer on the frontlines of that fight, they will still be armed and hardened by battle, may have scores to settle, and will feel they deserve some of the spoils of victory. Some members may return to their communities, but others may have grown into more dedicated fighters. That could make the VDPs or self-defense forces dangerous free agents that can be mobilized to support a range of causes, including criminal endeavors.

Armed Group Expansion into Coastal States

Islamist armed groups have shown a clear interest in, and ability to, mount attacks in coastal West African states. Their areas of operations have moved steadily south; in the last several years they have been increasingly active in Benin and Togo, and along Burkina Faso's border with Ivory Coast, with more than 160 civilian fatalities attributed to JNIM in Benin and close to 100 in Togo.[133] More recently, JNIM announced its first attack in Nigeria,[134] and is pushing further west toward Guinea and Senegal. Several factors explain the expansion, including a desire to destabilize secular, (largely) democratic governments; securing supply routes for arms and other goods into areas they hold; discouraging coastal states from supporting Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's counterterrorism efforts; new opportunities for illicit revenue generating activities; and new recruits from coastal states pulling the groups into local conflicts to gain an advantage.

The coastal states to the south (Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, and Benin) all have similar demographic characteristics. In general, the northern areas bordering the Sahel are predominantly Muslim and politically and economically marginalized, while the southern portions are majority Christian and home to the capital cities and greater concentrations of wealth and political power. This gives Islamist armed groups northern populations that they can seek to mobilize, and grievances to exploit. But it also means that movement further south, toward the central and southern regions of coastal countries, gets increasingly difficult – populations in those areas are likely to be quite hostile to the groups. As in the Central Sahel states, security forces in Benin, Ghana, and Togo have responded to the threat from Islamist armed groups with excessive force and have stigmatized Fulanis,[135] while being accused of forced return of refugees,[136] further exacerbating the growing crisis and garnering new recruits for JNIM.

While Togo and Benin have been attacked, Ghana and Ivory Coast have avoided the worst of the violence. Ghana has what is generally considered to be a more professional security service compared to neighboring states; there is also speculation that the Ghanaian government has a *de facto* nonaggression pact with Islamist armed groups, allowing them access to the country and for goods to flow to the groups in exchange for not staging attacks on Ghanaian soil[137] (such an agreement would be similar to deals allegedly made in Mauritania and by former President Compaoré in Burkina Faso). Experts consulted are split on the credibility of such speculation.

Further to the west, Guinea and Senegal could, in the medium-term, find themselves targeted. In neighboring western Mali, an area previously relatively unaffected by violence, JNIM is accelerating its operations, including through attacks in July 2025 on border posts with Senegal and Mauritania.[138] Senegal has a well-regarded military that has been proactive in addressing threats, though Islamist armed groups likely already have a quiet presence there. Guinea is notable because it has a majority Muslim population, many of them Fulani, who have long been excluded from positions of power. JNIM might draw on recruits from not only the disgruntled Fulani population in Guinea, but also from Malinke communities near the Guinea-Mali border,

many of whom have long practiced conservative versions of Islam that align with JNIM. Guinea is also run by a government that came to power through a coup, another factor that could compel JNIM to push in its direction.

IMPLICATIONS: These expansion scenarios mean that some communities in coastal countries would be at heightened risk of attack, and liable to be caught in the cycle of heavy-handed state responses that exacerbate grievances and contribute to armed group recruiting. The populations at risk are likely to mirror those living under threat in the Central Sahel: Islamist armed groups will seek to create fear and subservience among civilians through a combination of coercion, cohabitation, and violence, and security forces will target communities perceived to support the groups. It's difficult to envision Islamist armed groups controlling territory far beyond the Central Sahelian borderlands, but targeted attacks in other areas, including cities, are possible. Notably, the US government recognized this threat, making coastal West African countries a focus of implementation of the Global Fragility Act – but the current US administration has not prioritized implementation of the Act.

Closer Collaboration Between Armed Groups

The Islamist armed groups' expansion south and east opens possibilities for them to collaborate with groups in and around Nigeria, including either of the Boko Haram factions present in northeast Nigeria around Lake Chad, or the Lakurawa, an armed group active in northwest Nigeria. Evidence of past coordination is limited, even though ISSP and one Boko Haram faction operate under the same Islamic State umbrella. But the increasing tempo of attacks by the Lakurawa is a new factor. The group was originally established for self-defense by communities targeted by bandits, but has since taken on a more extremist orientation, primarily in Nigeria's northeastern Sokoto and Kebbi states. Some fighters reportedly have roots in the Central Sahel and may already be affiliated with ISSP.[139] Nigerian security forces have tried to contain the group, but are hindered by tense relations with Niger following the coup; General Tchiani, in fact, has accused Nigeria (and France) of supporting the Lakurawa.[140]

IMPLICATIONS: Growing linkages between Central Sahel- and Nigeria-based groups could lead to sharing of personnel, logistics, arms, and local knowledge, which can make each group involved more sophisticated and more deadly. In densely populated Nigeria, which has many local tensions for Islamist armed groups to exploit, that type of collaboration could be especially dangerous for civilians. Moreover, with JNIM and ISSP expanding operations and the Lakurawa increasingly active, it's possible to envision a corridor of extremist activity stretching from western Mali to northeastern Nigeria. In this scenario, regional governments may perceive a heightened threat, prompting them to intensify their crackdown on civilians who are assumed to support armed groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Influential countries and institutions can take several steps to lower the likelihood of the mass atrocity escalation scenarios playing out, and bring the crisis closer to resolution.

Don't Look Away

It's tempting for countries outside the region to turn away from what's happening in the Central Sahel. The military governments are hostile to the West, and the Islamist armed groups, especially ISSP, even more so. The information flow from the region is inconsistent, and Western countries lack the presence and capacity to

react rapidly to political developments, much less atrocities. There seem to be few policy options available, and traditional pressure tactics such as sanctions have only modest impact because the belligerents are not deeply enmeshed in international financial systems. These limitations have contributed to a recent policy approach from Western countries that seems to prioritize containment of the threat from Islamist armed groups, and preventing their advances beyond the Central Sahel, rather than addressing underlying causes of instability.

But simple acts of documenting atrocities to obtain credible information and publicly expressing concern have value. They show the belligerents that they do not have an entirely free hand to act, and that at least some sections of the wider world are watching, which maintains in the back of belligerents' minds the possibility that they could one day be held accountable for their actions. It shows local peacebuilders, civil society, journalists, and civilians that they are not alone, and that people are watching and support their work, even if outsiders' ability to provide direct assistance is limited.

The Sahel has genuine strategic implications for US national security. As the Islamist armed groups, JNIM especially, bring more territory under their control, they expand the space for illicit groups to operate, from drug smugglers to human traffickers to arms dealers. It's a stretch to say that the Islamist armed groups pose a direct threat to the United States itself, but mass atrocities in the region have reverberating effects that can implicate the United States. Look no further than Niger, where instability contributed to a coup, and the new military government expelled US forces after they made a sizable investment in the country. There's little question that Islamist armed groups aspire to expand into coastal countries, likely not to hold large swaths of territory but at least to disrupt, and in those countries the United States has more direct economic and security interests. There's also a risk of coup contagion in the region, especially given propagandists' success in building a cult of personality around Burkina Faso's Transitional President Traoré, and to a lesser extent Mali's leaders.

For these reasons, it is critical that the US government and other countries with the capacity to do so maintain embassies, intelligence collection, internal reporting channels, and policy processes that keep eyes on the Central Sahel. The US government should appoint a special envoy to be a point person on all issues concerning instability in the Sahel. Sometimes appointing a special envoy is more show than substance, intended to respond to public pressure to increase an administration's commitment to an issue or region. But an envoy can add real value when a problem set cuts across multiple borders, involves state and non-state actors, and attracts attention from influential countries outside the region. The crisis in the Central Sahel meets all those criteria, and a senior US official empowered to talk to all parties involved, who can coordinate and leverage US tools and influence (even if diminished), can have a notable impact. That official should also help the US government, and broader international community, prepare for the potential scenarios outlined above.

There are indications that the US is increasing security and intelligence cooperation with the military governments.[141] As it does, American interlocutors should convey to the security forces that their use of excessive force costs them popular support from citizens (which makes collecting intelligence more difficult) and turbocharges recruitment for Islamist armed groups (leading to loss of territory and more casualties in the security forces). More principled appeals, such as citing international humanitarian law, are unlikely to succeed; this more practical argument stands a better chance.

Sound Alarms on Targeting of Fulani Civilians

All ethnic groups in the Central Sahel have endured tremendous suffering and hardship resulting from the current crisis. That said, it's clear that the Fulani are specifically targeted for violence by pro-government

forces. Officials and others affiliated with the military governments, especially in Burkina Faso, use rhetoric that is at times thinly-veiled, but ultimately unmistakable, in demonizing and dehumanizing Fulanis, and associating all Fulani with Islamist armed groups. Pro-government forces use this pretext to justify indiscriminate attacks and engage in collective punishment targeting Fulani communities.

This type of rhetorical targeting is sadly quite familiar, a tactic commonly used by authoritarian regimes to rally support and rationalize violence against marginalized groups. It's a clear warning sign of more atrocities to come. But there has been little outcry, in the region or beyond. There's scant international advocacy to draw attention to attacks against Fulanis, as there has been, to varying degrees, for groups like the Yazidis in Iraq, Rohingya in Burma, or Tigrayans in Ethiopia.

That absence is significant, and an indictment of international inaction. Several experts consulted noted that the United Nations, in particular, has been largely silent on atrocities in the region. The United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel has a regional mandate, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has a presence in Burkina Faso and Niger and an Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali. But these various operations rarely speak up. They may justify muting criticism by arguing that they need to stay in the good graces of the military governments to maintain a presence on the ground. But whatever it is that inhibits them and others, an individual ethnic group is clearly being targeted, and other populations are at heightened risk. It's past time to raise greater alarm.

African leaders can also draw attention to the risks to civilians. The African Union Special Envoy on the Prevention of Genocide and Other Mass Atrocities, Adama Dieng, is a respected practitioner with strong connections in capitals. The African Union Chairperson recently appointed the president of Burundi as Special Envoy for the Sahel Region.[142] Sierra Leone, located not far from the Central Sahel, currently serves on the UN Security Council and thus has a platform from which to draw attention. Neighboring Liberia will join the Council in 2026.

Improve Information Flow

The restrictions on information enforced by the military governments – including silencing media outlets, civil society, and other independent voices – combined with the misinformation they and their supporters pump out, means that both local communities and the outside world only receive limited credible reporting on atrocities, alongside many falsehoods. Collecting and disseminating accurate information is difficult and dangerous, but brave individuals are trying and deserve support. Donors can fund journalists operating in exile, testimony collection from refugees who have fled the three countries, and monitoring through tools like satellite imagery. They should support two parallel strands of information collection: data that supports investigative journalism and advocacy by credible civil society groups, and evidence that may eventually be used to hold perpetrators of atrocities to account.

The United States, European countries, and others can do more to counter government disinformation, including through more sophisticated messaging that appeals to younger audiences, on platforms those audiences use. The European Union is making modest progress in this space, which the United States and others can imitate.[143] Some of the misinformation and hate speech contributing to tensions originates from outside the Central Sahel; in countries where laws prohibit hate speech by residents, prosecutors should prioritize cases involving the Central Sahel and investigate potential breaches of those laws.

To counter misinformation, donors should consider supporting independent, professional radio stations – several exist in the region – or the distribution of unbiased news through WhatsApp, which citizens frequently

use (JNIM also distributes its propaganda through the platform). Critically, any of these types of services must involve journalists from all relevant ethnic groups.

Encourage Negotiations

Almost any scenario in which levels of violence come down is likely to involve negotiations that include the governments and armed groups. Outright victory for either is unlikely. There's plenty of precedent for negotiations; what's new is the example from Syria, where the international community has quickly changed its tune on a group with jihadi roots, welcomed it into government, and loosened pressure on it. That type of pivot and legitimization has rarely happened so fast, and suggests there may be more leeway for engaging Islamist armed groups than in the past.[144]

To decrease threats to civilians, the United States and broader international community should encourage negotiations in each country that involve the government, representatives of civil society and communities affected by violence, and Islamist armed groups. While negotiating with Islamist armed groups may be controversial, and the tactics those groups employ are deplorable, they have tapped into citizens' underlying grievances, are increasingly providing a modicum of governance and service delivery, and at least some of the support they receive reflects legitimate concerns felt by the broader population. The inclusion of representatives of civil society and affected communities is critical: they provide a genuine voice for citizens, and a counterweight to armed belligerents. Mediators will need to ensure that their views are carefully considered and not easily brushed aside.

Issues which could be negotiated may include local ceasefires, reopening and managing schools and health clinics, local livelihood improvements, and the presence of foreign fighters. JNIM is more likely than ISSP to be open to negotiations, which they may be signaling through recent changes in their tactics. For the three governments, negotiations would be a major about-face, a direct contradiction to much of their rhetoric. But as much as their security forces claim to be making progress against the armed groups, on the whole they are not, and citizens will increasingly see that reality. Government officials are unlikely to negotiate directly with armed groups, so the services of intermediaries, or Track II negotiations that eventually become more formal, will be required.

Negotiations may yield outcomes that are far from Western liberal norms. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are conservative religious societies, and forms of Sharia law, which resonate deeply with many citizens, will be part of any dialogue. Western countries have often, for good reason, opposed the restrictions Sharia law places on individual liberties; they will need to balance those concerns with deference to the preferences of local populations, while doing what they can to ensure those preferences can be freely expressed. Conservative norms and failure to respect international human rights standards predate the current crisis. Negotiating an end to fighting can save lives and stave off catastrophic levels of violence. Expanding individual rights is a longer-term endeavor, which should not be abandoned, but needs to be balanced against other imperatives.

The United States and other powers should encourage reconciliation between ECOWAS, the West African regional organization, and the AES as a regional entity. The three military governments have legitimate grievances about receiving inadequate support from the region in their fight with armed groups, even if they have been unnecessarily confrontational toward other ECOWAS members. Islamist armed groups are making inroads into ECOWAS member states, and the distrust and lack of coordination between ECOWAS and the AES hinders the ability of Togo, Benin, Nigeria, and other states to mount an effective response.

Finally, in an effort to mitigate future violence, regional leaders should consider off-ramps for the military governments, scenarios in which the military heads of state leave their posts and maintain a degree of credibility and stature. For people and communities who have suffered under the military governments' rule, that's a difficult proposition to accept, and will at a minimum delay the accountability initiatives that some survivors of violence demand. But considering how they've dug themselves in, it's hard to envision any of the military government leaders participating in the restoration of democratic rule or backing off their aggressive tactics, which are one cause of mass atrocities and likely to contribute to many more.

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