

Viewpoint

THE CYCLES OF VIOLENCE THAT HAVE FUELLED BURKINA FASO'S INSECURITY

Burkina Faso, once among Africa's most peaceful states, has become the world's most terrorism-impacted country, driven by cyclical violence between jihadists, state forces, and self-defense militias. This paper examines how indiscriminate and ethnically targeted violence, particularly against the Fulani, has fuelled al-Qaeda's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) expansion. Under Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP) have become central to counterterrorism efforts, yet their rapid expansion has coincided with escalating atrocities. The March 2025 "Solenzo massacre" triggered JNIM's "revenge" campaign, showcasing the group's capacity to attack and temporarily occupy urban centres. Traoré's domestically focused but repressive strategy has deepened insecurity, enabling JNIM to advance its governance ambitions. By analysing the role of persecuted communities, militia centrality, and state violence, this study argues that Burkina Faso's counterproductive tactics have entrenched insurgency and offer critical lessons for regional and international actors confronting extremism in the Sahel and Gulf of Guinea.

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Burkina Faso has been the world's most impacted country by terrorism for the past two years¹, despite recording its first ever attack less than ten years ago. Among the root causes of the country's worsening security crisis is the state's response to militant expansion. As jihadist activity in the country grew, the Burkinabé armed forces and self-defense militias increasingly resorted to indiscriminate and often ethnically motivated violence against civilians, fueling cycles of violence that have intensified dramatically in recent months. This violence - primarily impacting pastoralist groups such as the Fulani - has been leveraged by al-Qaeda's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), enabling it to consolidate control over swathes of the country.

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organisation”³.

Throughout his rule, the young leader has frequently levelled blame for his country's growing insecurity on external actors, a move ostensibly motivated by a desire to divert attention away from his fundamentally flawed counterterrorism strategy. Under his two predecessors, the Burkinabè armed forces had been receiving significant amounts of funding, training, arms, intelligence, advisors, air support, and ground support from Western partners such as France, the US, among others⁴. After seizing power in September 2022, Traoré quickly

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This paper argues that the role of violence against civilians by state-affiliated forces is central to understanding Burkina Faso's acute levels of extremist violence. Although these dynamics pre-date Traoré's rule, his domestically focused counterterrorism strategy has accelerated cyclical conflict. By examining the role of persecuted communities, the increasing centrality of self-defense militias, and a sequence of events that began in March 2025, this essay will demonstrate that Traoré has played a far more direct role in worsening his country's security landscape than his predecessors - enabling JNIM to advance its aims of conquering and administering territory.

The Fulani's Outsized Role in Burkina Faso's Crisis

In late 2016, Ansaroul Islam - a JNIM affiliate founded by the Fulani preacher Malam Dicko - publicly emerged in Burkina Faso. Since then, Dicko's group, along with Katiba Macina, a JNIM branch from central Mali led by another Fulani preacher, have expanded across Burkina Faso by exploiting the social, political, and economic exclusion primarily experienced by rural communities⁵. Their rhetoric has strongly appealed to young men throughout the country - particularly amongst those from the lower castes of long-excluded communities such as the Fulani, a semi-nomadic pastoralist group⁶. Consequently, despite constituting a small portion of Burkina Faso's population, the Fulani have become overrepresented in the ranks of jihadist groups⁷.

While the overrepresentation of the Fulani shows that some do join, or at least cooperate, with extremists, deep-set grievances with the state and fellow communities provide only a fraction of the explanation. As jihadist violence grew, soldiers and self-defense militiamen increasingly resorted to indiscriminate violence against local communities perceived to be complicit - to eliminate perceived threats, get revenge for fallen comrades, or a combination of both. With security forces - particularly community self-defense groups - primarily composed of men from sedentary communities, the Fulani and other pastoralist communities were the main recipients of these atrocities⁸.

Many of the civilians targeted by this violence were not involved with jihadists, and those who were often did so out of fear of being attacked. Caught between two armed groups - one claiming to be their protector, the other threatening their existence - it is little surprise that some have sided with jihadists. By 2021 - the last full year before Traoré took power - Burkina Faso's state security personnel and self-defense militias were responsible for almost half of the victims killed that year by all violent actors in the country - many of whom were civilians⁹.

Throughout the course of Burkina Faso's enduring security crisis, neither the state nor its Western partners at the time were willing - or able - to rein in these counterproductive tactics¹⁰. However, while Traoré's break from Western partners is often cited for exacerbating the crisis, it is his doubling down on these self-defeating tactics which began during their involvement that has pushed Burkina Faso deeper into chaos.

Violence Accelerates in Tandem with The VDP's Growing Importance

With the armed forces struggling to contain the mounting threat, despite their support from Western partners, local self-defense groups - who the state had outsourced the provision of security to for decades - became increasingly central to the country's battle against terrorism. In January 2020, then-President Roch Kaboré expanded the size of these groups and integrated them into the national counterterrorism strategy by recognising them as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (or Les Volontaires pour la défense de la Patrie or VDP). Despite their burgeoning importance, VDP personnel would still only receive two or three weeks of basic training before being sent to the frontlines¹¹.

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Unsurprisingly, the expansion and formalisation of these groups did little to arrest the deterioration of Burkina Faso's security landscape. Within two years of the VDP's official recognition, Kaboré was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba via a coup d'état. Damiba recognised the multifaceted drivers behind his country's issues and attempted to remedy insecurity through a broad spectrum of violent and non-violent initiatives. The former leader quickly accused the VDP of carrying out abuses; however, faced with dire circumstances on the ground, he was able only to try and implement improved oversight rather than disband these groups entirely¹².

Damiba was overthrown by Captain Traoré just eight months into his reign, following a series of damaging attacks in quick succession.¹³ The VDP quickly became a cornerstone of Traoré's strategy, with the new leader almost immediately expanding the civilian force by an additional 50,000 personnel - double the number of the army - through public donations. Compensating for his lack of electoral legitimacy, deep connections, and political experience enjoyed by his predecessors, the decision to empower civilians played a key role in solidifying Traoré's rule¹⁴. Yet despite these net positives, the VDP's expansion led to a dramatic rise in attacks on civilians across the country¹⁵. The hazardous byproduct of this policy was exposed again this March, with VDP atrocities against civilians legitimising a wave of JNIM violence that has rocked the country.

JNIM's 'Revenge for Solenzo' Offensive

Experiencing a 38 percent increase in fatalities in 2024 on the year prior - the most of any region in Burkina Faso - the Boucle du Mouhoun region has become an epicenter of violence over the past 18 months. This uptick has been caused by a large-scale, deadly offensive led by the Katiba Macina battalion¹⁶, as well as the response of the Burkinabé armed forces.

Beginning in late February, Operation *Green Whirlwind 2* was initiated by hundreds of VDP and led by several Rapid Battalion Units (BIR), which, like the civilian auxiliary force, have undergone a major expansion as part of Traoré's homegrown response. On 10 and 11 March, reports surfaced that security forces had successfully reclaimed territory around the city of Solenzo. Pro-government accounts online were quick to praise the operation, claiming militants had suffered devastating losses. However, evidence quickly emerged online showing dozens of dead men, women, and children, alongside many others alive, some visibly wounded and tied up. Pictured around them were men wearing VDP uniforms. One piece of footage saw a man exclaim, "You, the Fulani people, do you think you can take over Burkina Faso? You will never! What is left for you to do here is to disappear. Where are those holding weapons?"¹⁷.

The barbarity of this event quickly garnered international attention, even though Burkinabè security forces have been carrying out similar acts of violence for almost a decade. The government doubled down on its support for its forces, claiming that a disinformation campaign had misrepresented the events to incite communal violence and destabilise the country. Indeed, acknowledging the failures of his security forces, particularly the VDP, is not an option for Traoré, for they are a core pillar of his support. *Human Rights Watch* later reported that the armed forces had directed atrocities and human rights abuses, indicating that the systematic targeting of civilians has become more entrenched under Traoré's rule¹⁸.

As it has done so consistently since its arrival in Burkina Faso, JNIM quickly moved to exploit the acts of violence. Shortly after the reports emerged, Ousmane Dicko - brother of Jaafar Dicko, leader of the Ansarul Islam - gave a several minute-long speeches in which he pledged to get revenge for the government's persistent killings of civilians, regardless of their identity. JNIM's retributive campaign began almost immediately¹⁹. Between 13-16 March alone, over 100 soldiers and VDP personnel were killed in 13 attacks across the country²⁰,

according to conflict analysis group WAMAPS. Then on 28 March, an attack on a base in Diapaga killed 60 others²¹. Less than a week later, JNIM attacked villages in Sourou, slaughtering around 100 men and boys who were allegedly seeking to join the VDP²².

JNIM Showcases New Offensive Capabilities

JNIM's self-named revenge for Solenzo campaign continued well into May and June 2025 but escalated significantly in terms of lethality and devastation via attacks on two provincial capitals. On 11 May 2025, JNIM launched an unprecedented assault on the besieged city of Djibo, which was one of eight attacks across the country on that day alone. The results were devastating; conservative estimates suggest that at least 100 civilians, soldiers, and soldiers were killed in Djibo. Compounding the devastating effect of the attack in Djibo were humiliating images of JNIM members posing in front of a portrait of Captain Traoré in an administrative office, which stood as a visual demonstration of the country's decline under his rule²³.

Days later, JNIM struck Diapaga, an urban centre in the country's east. Although the group did not inflict the same levels of bloodshed as were seen in Djibo, the results were nonetheless highly damaging for the military regime, with militants once again able to roam freely around the city and pose symbolically in front of landmarks. The message of these two attacks was clear: JNIM, a once largely rural group, now holds the capacity to attack and temporarily occupy Burkina Faso's urban areas.

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JNIM's evolution has been fuelled by acts of violence against civilians such as those witnessed near Solenzo this year, without them, JNIM's current position would likely be far less advantageous, as they have fuelled civilian support for the group at the expense of the state. By claiming its latest campaign was launched in revenge for the atrocities, JNIM not only justified its acts of violence to a domestic audience, but also the wider international community - showcasing the group's growth from a small local actor to one powerful enough to legitimise its violence to the wider international community. The motivations for JNIM's framing are clear. Having gathered momentum over the past decade, the group is now advancing toward its grandiose political, religious, and social aims and is capable of directly challenging the Sahel's military governments.

Conclusion

One of the primary drivers of Burkina Faso's deteriorating security landscape is a self-perpetuating conflict involving state-affiliated forces, civilians, and jihadists. Playing a role in three successful coup d'états - the latest of which prompted the country's geopolitical realignment - the repercussions of these dynamics have reverberated far beyond the country's borders. Domestically, JNIM's major offensive this year - framed as retaliation for atrocities committed by government-aligned forces - coincided with yet another plot to depose Captain Traoré. As the Traoré government's attempts to maintain control over the country are faltering,

the al-Qaeda branch is attempting to lay the foundations for social, political, and religious governance - casting an ominous shadow over the country.

Burkina Faso was once considered one of Africa's most peaceful nations, yet within the space of a decade, it has descended to become the most impacted country in the world by terrorism. The country's demise illustrates how jihadist groups leverage deep-rooted grievances and exploit state violence to advance their expansionist aims. These patterns of behaviour are not unique. They are fuelling insurgencies across the region. As JNIM proliferates through the Sahel, it now has the Gulf of Guinea states firmly in its crosshairs - some of whom are continuing to make similar mistakes in their approach to combatting extremism.

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For Western governments engaging with the Gulf of Guinea states and beyond, Burkina Faso provides a critical lesson: support for security forces carrying out indiscriminate, extrajudicial violence can be as damaging as no support altogether. Indeed, the Western community's failed counterterrorism intervention in Burkina Faso and the central Sahel has provided JNIM the opportunity to join the Taliban and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in transitioning from a terrorist group into a governing authority. While JNIM's state-building ambitions remain ongoing, Burkina Faso's enduring cycles of violence in the country suggest this outcome is by no means implausible.

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