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## Arming Civilians in Burkina Faso

The State, the War on Terror and the Militarisation of Society

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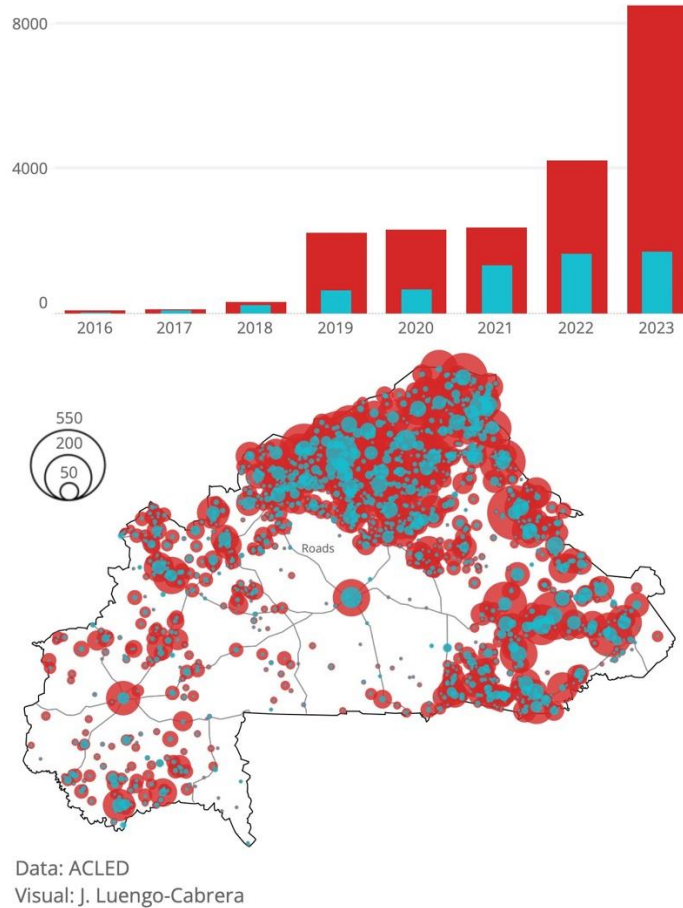
In 2016, jihadist groups established a presence in northern Burkina Faso and gradually extended their influence across the entire country. This nebula of armed actors fighting the Burkinabè state that claims allegiance either to be Al-Qaeda Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) or Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).<sup>1</sup> Their sustained and incremental infiltration into rural areas was based on violence, but they also distributed resources, provide order, justice and protection to marginalized populations.<sup>2</sup> This situation led to the gradual expulsion of state representatives in a context marked by criminality and vendettas against civilians, fuelled by the proliferation of armed groups. Throughout the country, the spread of violence resuscitated historical communal rivalries and political competition that are driven by issues of representation and access to local resources (land, water, gold, etc.). A broad spectrum of conflict dynamics emerged, coupled with the routinisation of armed mobilisations, as the use of weapons increasingly became a commonplace social practice. The spiral of violence has pushed Burkina Faso to the precipice, resulting in thousands of deaths across the country (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

Facing Burkina Faso's downward spiral, Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew President Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba in September 2022, who himself had come to power through a coup d'état in January 2022. Since Burkina Faso's independence in 1960, the central role of the military in politics has been intricately tied to recurrent coups d'état orchestrated by military elites. This modality of "alternation through a coup" has established the use or threat of armed violence as a political option in the country.

<sup>1</sup> Héni Nsaibia, "The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On", Commentary, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 15 February 2021, accessed 04/01/2024.

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group, "The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North", Report N°254/Africa, 12 October 2017, accessed 04/01/2024.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Siegle and Wendy Williams, "Militant Islamist violence in Africa surges – deaths up nearly 50%, events up 22% in a year", *The Conversation*, 07 March 2023, accessed 04/01/2024.



**Figure 1:** Estimated frequency and deadliness of political in Burkina Faso according to ACLED data (June 2016 to Dec 2023). © J. Luengo-Cabrera

Focusing on the prevalence of violence in Burkinabè politics is important for several reasons. This perspective provides a means of discussing the state itself. In 1966, just a few years after gaining independence, a popular uprising resulted in the military seizing power. The same pattern happened again in 1983 with Captain Thomas Sankara taking control of the country. Sankara in turn was overthrown in 1987 by his comrade-in-arms, Captain Blaise Compaoré, in a bloody coup. The “Beautiful Blaise” as he was called, then established a semi-authoritarian regime, ostensibly civilian and based on elections, but relying on support of the military and the suppression of the opposition. In 2014, protest movements ousted Compaoré. The ensuing political transition was also marked by a military coup attempt in 2015 led by Compaoré’s former special chief of staff, General Gilbert Diendéré.

The military as an institution has thus dominated the country for over 40 years, with the exception of the term of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré (2015 - 2020). It has played a significant role in shaping the state, governance structures and politics. Significantly, the presence of the military in power interacts with various forms of violent governance of populations, notably that of the “citizen in arms”. The current “Captain IB” regime has continued this practice. Upon assuming power, Captain Traoré declared a general mobilization and initiated a massive recruitment drive among the population to establish paramilitary forces to combat jihadist groups that gained control over large portions of the territory. According to the authorities, 90,000 individuals have already enlisted as “Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland” (Les Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie, VDP),

an organisation instituted by a law passed in 2020 under President Kaboré. The VDP are Burkinabè citizens trained, equipped and funded by the military to assist in operations against “terrorists”.

This policy brief explores the mass recruitment and arming of civilian populations for the purpose of counterterrorism and its effects on security and politics in Burkina Faso. In doing so, this paper traces the rapid political and social changes that have taken place in Burkina Faso since the coup d'état in September 2022, grounding them in the wider historical context of ongoing violent processes in the country. The regime of Captain Traoré has repositioned the country on the international level, while arming civilians against “terrorists” has helped him to generate domestic support based on appeals to “patriotism”. Amid the collapse of traditional political parties, his regime increasingly relies on an ill-defined mix of pan-Africanist, nationalist, and religious elements that embrace increasingly conservative discourses.

## The “New Old” Strategy of Arming Civilians

By mobilizing citizens on a massive scale to combat jihadist groups, Traoré has pursued and expanded initiatives that were already deployed by his predecessors Kaboré and Damiba. Why does arming civilians appear to be a commonplace practice in Burkina Faso?

The historical perspective can be of help here. When Captain Thomas Sankara assumed power at the helm of the National Council for the Revolution (CNR) in 1983, the state sought to place the military as an institution within society. This was notably articulated by the assertion that civilians are essentially military personnel on leave and vice versa, with the aim to establish the concept of the “citizen in arms”. Since then, the Burkinabè state has been characterized by extensive and institutionalized attempts to involve citizens in security-related activities. Sankara embarked on a profound restructuring of the country's institutions and introduced the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), inspired by foreign socialist models, particularly Cuba. Their primary purpose was to mobilize the population, both ideologically and through the organization of collective events aimed at providing public services, such as forest conservation and road repair, conducting village surveillance missions, and promoting popular education, among others. The idealized Sankarist revolution continues to be a source of pride in the Burkinabè patriotic imagination and a significant political resource used by power holders. However, the CDR regime was more than that. Beyond the politics of ideology, it also enabled social upward mobility of “social cadets” to positions of local power related to security: abuses and violence were perpetrated in the name of the Sankarist revolution.

Attempts at vigilant mobilizations that follow Sankara's legacy have resurfaced more recently. The rise of insecurity since the mid-2010s, following the fall of President Blaise Compaoré, provided the political context in which armed mobilizations were initiated. Indeed, self-defense groups re-used old vigilant practices, mainly carrying out local policing activities. The best-known example is a group calling themselves Koglweogo, or Dozo hunters. These local initiatives take inspiration from attempts by the administration in the 2000s to establish decentralized and citizen-participation-focused public security policies: the “police de proximité”, a sort of community policing. This policy aimed to integrate community participation into the operational mandate of internal security forces in managing law and order through the prevention of insecurity and crime. The purpose was to find reliable individuals within the population, capable of collaborating with authorities in exchange for

financial compensation. Like previous episodes under the CDR, these practices were quickly abandoned due to arbitrary behaviour by some members and overall poor results.

The community policing concept was recently revived under a different form. With the rise of violence, Burkina Faso and its partners (for example Denmark, France, European Union, UNDP, USA) worked together on “Security Sector Reform” (SSR) programmes. Some of them import the model of community policing, a police doctrine aiming to bring citizens closer to local security forces such as police and gendarmery. In 2016, the Burkinabè authorities and their partners reactivated community policing under the new name of “Initiatives locales de sécurité” (ILS). It was supported by various donors and aims to regulate citizen participation in police work. This experience had some unintended consequences, and the ILS turned into arenas of political and identity competition, sometimes between different vigilante groups.

However, these concepts and policies proved utterly inappropriate in the face of armed conflict. The mobilized citizen groups under arms found themselves gradually confronted with a level of war-like violence exceeding their prior experiences. What is more, the violence perpetrated by jihadists gradually shifted towards the vigilante groups themselves, considering them as allies of state forces due to past collaboration and proximity. In some instances, these groups participated in initial counter-insurgency operations, often contributing to intelligence efforts or guiding patrols during sweep operations by the national army, particularly in forested areas.

## The VDP: “We have our own Wagners”

At the end of 2019, following an ambush against employees of a gold mine in eastern Burkina Faso that resulted in dozens of deaths, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré called for “the people to mobilize against terrorism” and for the “recruitment of volunteers” to defend areas threatened by the jihadists. This decision presented a true turning point in the discourse of the Burkinabè government, accelerating the militarization of society in the fight against jihadist groups.

Following Kaboré’s announcement, the National Assembly (21 January 2020) unanimously passed a law creating the “Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland”, now commonly referred to as VDP. The decree stipulates that their supervision is to be ensured by the Defense and Security Forces (FDS). The groups are to receive monthly financial assistance, and volunteers should benefit from material and medical support in case of injury, disability, or death. A 14-day training programme is slated for the volunteers, conducted by the military and mainly focused on weapon handling and tactics.

The VDP find themselves on the front lines alongside the military. Their cost-effective mobilization helps alleviate the burden on regular troops that have been heavily affected by years of war, are inadequately equipped, infrequently relieved, and poorly trained. It also serves to minimize casualty figures during operations. Indeed, the Burkinabè army has limited personnel: it totals between 15,000 and 20,000 soldiers and 8,000 gendarmes.<sup>4</sup> In February 2023, the Burkinabè army announced an “exceptional recruitment” of 5,000 soldiers and officers.

Furthermore, the establishment of the VDP solidifies the hegemony of the Burkinabè military in the national security domain. Previously, self-defense groups were supervised by the

<sup>4</sup>Rinaldo Depagne and Mathieu Pellerin, “Premier bilan pour le pouvoir de transition au Burkina Faso”, Q&A/Africa, International Crisis Group, 14 September 2023, accessed 4 January 2024.

Ministry of Security (Interior) and mobilized as part of a “community policing” policy. Now, VDPs answer solely to the military hierarchy for operations on national territory, without necessarily consulting police units beforehand. Command is overseen by the Brigade for Vigilance and Patriotic Defense (BVDP) which is composed of military personnel, thus accelerating the militarization of volunteer groups.

By the end of 2022, the current government announced the recruitment of 50,000 VDP, suggesting that there would be more militiamen on its territory than men in its regular army.<sup>5</sup> This semi-private paramilitary force is openly acknowledged, as Captain Traoré stated in February 2023: “We have our own Wagners, and they are the VDP we recruit. They are our Wagners.”<sup>6</sup>

In exchange for their services, VDP units placed directly under military authority benefit from de facto impunity. Testimonies gathered highlight the sense of helplessness among populations that do not know where to turn to for justice following VDP misconduct.<sup>7</sup> VDP units do not hesitate to use their “counter-terrorism” mandate to violently assault or assassinate individuals with whom they have personal conflicts. Complaints often remain futile, as judicial impunity tends to be the norm. Being a member of the VDP does provide elevated social status and modest financial support from the state. However, it is also associated with extorting money from local populations. In nomadic areas for example, the VDP are thus reproducing old practices of predation on herders and capturing resources from cross-border trade. The VDP has increased pressure on herders who, in response, sometimes align with jihadists to protect themselves or seek revenge. The joint counter-insurgency policies of VDP and security forces has fuelled violence, including violence with ethnic connotations. The proliferation of pro-government armed mobilizations has contributed to an escalation of violence, rather than limiting it.

Indeed, pro-government forces, including military personnel and militiamen from the VDP are reported to have unlawfully killed or carried out forced disappearances of dozens of suspects during counterterrorism operations, sometimes in joint operations. There are almost no investigations about atrocities committed by security forces, such as the 2018 murders of dozens of suspects in the Burkinabè Sahel region or the recent massacre in Tougouri (Central-North region) in August 2023.<sup>8</sup> The military justice department, responsible for investigating incidents involving security forces, has continued to suffer from a lack of resources and political obstacles. There has been little progress in fulfilling the government’s promise to investigate several of these incidents, leaving the VDP in a situation of near-total impunity.

The dynamics related to the VDP affected also the social cohesion. Recruitment into the VDP has never respected local community balances and has almost systematically excluded pastoral communities, especially the Fulani. This poses a problem in areas where they are in the majority. Like other countries in the region<sup>9</sup>, the exclusion of the Fulani has accelerated because they have been accused of constituting most of the jihadist groups, leading politicians, the military, Koglweogos and the VDP to contest their membership to the national community. This lack of inclusivity has never been corrected by the authorities.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Roger, “Quand Castel finance les VDP du capitaine Ibrahim Traoré”, *Jeune Afrique*, 26 October 2023, accessed 4 January 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso: Armed Islamists Kill, Rape Civilians”, 16 May 2022, accessed 8 February 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2023”, Country Chapter Burkina Faso, accessed 8 February 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde & Boubacar Ba (2022): “Jihadist Ideological Conflict and Local Governance in Mali”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

In summary, the widespread militarization and banalization of violence has affected Burkina Faso’s long-term stability and social cohesion. The “war against terrorism” creates a binary interpretation of order and security, crafting a narrative that focuses on “internal enemies”: migrants, Tuaregs, Fulani, or more widely, every political opponent. In parallel, the promotion and dissemination of the military profession and the political power of the military have created hopes for social advancement among segments of the population. It has also changed the rules of the political game.

## Power to the “Patriots”

The Traoré regime has radicalized Burkinabè politics. Indeed, the professionals of violence are not external actors to the political arena and its rules. The co-production of violence by the VDP and Burkinabè state must indeed be analysed as a public policy. Moreover, the transversality of security devices, especially militias, shows that networks around armed mobilizations cannot be reduced to a binary analysis that neatly separates state and society. The political system and armed mobilizations are interconnected.

In addition to the VDP in the countryside, the regime has also aligned itself with new political movements in urban areas, mostly the capital, Ouagadougou, and Bobo Dioulasso, the country’s second largest town. Indeed, the dynamics of armed conflict and the mobilization of patriotism have failed to establish a stable political bloc around the regime. Instead, an ill-defined galaxy of nebulous factions has emerged that gravitates around the regime: new pan-Africanists, pro-Russians, nationalists and Wahhabi militants express support for the new president. With the collapse of “traditional” political actors (parties and unions), the conflict in Burkina Faso, like other conflicts in African countries, has provided a space for violent organizations claiming to be part of “civil society”: they may employ violent actions during street protests and even organize vigilant practices. For instance, some protesters have erected barricades on major boulevards and roundabouts in the capital to control vehicles and attacked the French embassy.

In this period of rapid political reconfigurations, these different patriotic mobilizations claim to be defending the nation, notably by claiming and emphasizing their “indigenous” identity. The strength of the political resources of a “local” identity then articulates itself as “patriotism,” which becomes a central narrative. As in other contexts of internal war, citizens must prove their love for the nation by serving and/or fighting. These discourses fuel a duality between, on the one hand, the “patriots”, who are seen as politically unassailable and indigenous (or at least having an identity of geographically and culturally close populations), and on the other hand, all those whose origins raise suspicion, such as nomadic populations (Fulani for example) or supposed migrants. Counter-insurgency discourse is directed towards “internal enemies” according to a communitarian logic that seeks to expulse these from the national community.

There is then a convergence between the discourses mobilized in the political field and those who fight with guns. This mimicry in semantic shift is part of a restructuring of discourses that justify violence against “terrorists”. “Captain IB” has ultimately developed a rhetoric that is essentially nationalist, based on patriotic values and criminalizing dissenting voices. In January 2023, during a visit to one of the VDP training camps, Traoré reportedly told new recruits:

You will not be alone, you will fight with us in the ranks of the army, and we will liberate our lands, we will give hope to these battered populations [...]. You are the hope, and do not let yourselves be demoralized by stateless individuals who are here to discourage this patriotic spirit [...]. You will go, and you will come back very often to tell us about your battles, to tell us about your deeds, and at a certain moment in history, you will be able to tell your children that at such a time, there was this, and we rose and defended the lands on which you live today.”<sup>10</sup>

Moving away from a previous vision of VDP as a mere supplementary force, Traoré elevates the new recruits to the rank of future heroes of the nation. More broadly, this discourse has been adopted by a host of political movements that support the new junta and do not hesitate to physically threaten opponents or dissenting voices. Those dynamics have gradually initiated an authoritarian turn in the country: arrests of journalists, intimidation of opponents and the disappearance of individuals suspected of “treason” have become common. Above all, the new junta has gone on to forcibly conscript political opponents into the army so that they can go “to the front”.

## Conclusion: What’s Next?

The spread of violence has profoundly altered the governance of populations and significantly disrupted dynamics of political regulation. Violence and private coercive practices are gradually spreading within Burkinabè society. For instance, phenomena like vigilante practices, previously more common in rural and peri-urban areas, are now emerging in the heart of the Burkinabè capital. Individuals identifying themselves as supporters of the regime now hold roundabouts in Ouagadougou after nightfall. They control traffic, claiming to be searching for enemies of the regime, and inevitably extort money from motorists or take consumer goods found in their vehicles. On the “front”, the utilization of those who have become paramilitaries by the national army has facilitated criminal practices in both entities and the fluidity of identities. Moreover, the mobilization of armed citizens by pro-government political, administrative and military networks has contributed to reinforcing the polarization of society. Ultimately, resorting to militias has strengthened certain segments of society and fostered the development of a politico-militant system where patriotism, understood as a political resource, plays a central role. The use of arms has become the alpha and omega of Burkinabè politics. Furthermore, on the international front, the situation appears extremely tense now. Burkina Faso maintains strained relations with France, and the dialogue with the European Union is deteriorating. Any criticism or advice from external actors is perceived as an attempt at interference or destabilization. At the same time, the Traoré regime has moved closer to Russia, and Turkish drones have become a central tool of its propaganda.

Burkina Faso’s future does not seem bright and the current state’s policy of mobilizing civilians will continue to play a key role in how armed violence is organized. Massacres and murders of civilians are expanding across the territory and happen nearly every day. Many of these are fuelled by these thousands of VDP who commit offenses and crimes. Those dynamics thereby create a cycle of reprisals among different armed groups, while the jihadists are targeting populations suspected of hiding VDP. Although some atrocities have been investigated by the authorities, impunity remains the general norm. Recruitment has largely occurred at the expense of the Fulani communities, often suspected by the VDP and authorities of collaborating with jihadists. The current conflict contributes to the

<sup>10</sup> Wakat Sera, “Le capitaine Ibrahim Traoré aux VDP en formation : « Vous êtes l’espoir »”, 11 January 2023, accessed 8 February 2024.

redefinition and the radicalization of identity divisions, especially since the prevalent political narratives exclude entire communities or political opponents, accused of collaboration with “terrorists”. While jihadist groups rule large parts of the country, the government seems to have accelerated the ongoing and long-term process of fragmentation of the national territory and its society.

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