# Tinder to the Fire
# BURKINA FASO
# in the
# Conflict Zone

Rahmane Idrissa

# About the Author

Abdourahmane (Rahmane) Idrissa is a political scientist who obtained his doctorate in political science from the University of Florida. Idrissa's research expertise ranges from issues of states, institutions and democratization in Africa to Salafi radicalism in the Sahel and current projects on the history of state formation in Africa, with a focus both on the modern (Niger) and premodern eras (Songhay).

Before joining the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden, Idrissa founded and ran EPGA, a think tank in political economy in Niger, training students and coordinating projects based on methodologies of political economy analysis that focused on migration, youth employment and demography.

Idrissa is also associated with the Niamey based social science laboratory LASDEL and is on the editorial board of the African Studies Quarterly, at the University of Florida.

# Table of Contents

# Summary

This study examines the reasons why northern Burkina has been engulfed by endemic violence since the mid-2010s, in an effort to understand future evolutions and recommend coping and preventive action. The causes of the violence, the study asserts, are external to Burkina and are found in the contest between militant Salafism and the Western "War on Terror," but the reasons why the conflicts have become entrenched are related to structural issues in Burkina's internal geopolitics, political economy, and state formation.

To demonstrate these claims, the study describes a "Conflict Zone" that emerged in northern Mali following the fall of the regime of Col. Kaddafi of Libya, and that extended into northern Burkina a few years later; it analyzes the internal geopolitics of the country and the peculiar position of the north and the east in relation to the center and the west – described as the twin pillars of the state; it contrasts the impacts of policies of national development under Sankarism in the 1980s and of the neoliberal orientations followed under Blaise Compaoré; it shows how these structures and histories played into tensions and conflicts in northern and eastern Burkina; and how, in turn, these issues made of the region a propitious ground for the extension of the Conflict Zone.

The study ends with technical and political recommendations regarding, on the one hand, the revitalization of the regalian state (justice, security, administration), and, on the other hand, the framing of a new blueprint for society. These recommendations also take into account the fact that the Burkina conflicts are part of a Conflict Zone that has a transnational and international life of its own.

Since 2013, a zone of conflicts has been expanding from the north of Mali into its central regions and later (by 2015) into northern and eastern Burkina – with more marginal impacts on north-western Niger. This zone of conflicts or, as I call it in this study, this "Conflict Zone," is a violent geopolitical formation in the West African Sahel-Sahara in which state forces are engaged in so-called asymmetric warfare, communal rifts have turned bloody, and political and/or criminal agendas are pursued with heavy armament. There is no shortage of explanations about why the conflicts spread and stick. Apart from the caliphal dreams

of groups that are variously called "violent extremists," "terrorist armed groups," "Islamist terrorists," and "Jihadists" (I call them Salafists), these explanations include a number of "root-cause" factors which experts stress depending on their own areas of interest. An emergency meeting of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)' Mediation and Security Council in Ouagadougou in September 2019 gave a laundry list of these factors. They range from the low involvement of community and religious leaders, women and the youth, to the lack of equipment and training of defense and security forces, financial penury, the proliferation of small arms and climate change.[1] In less diplomatic venues, experts also point the finger at the bad leadership of local governments which they see as a prime cause of ills such as social injustice, the marginalization of certain communities, poor and corrupt governance, and general elite malfeasance. Ethnic, inter and intra-community bad blood is also evoked, alongside land conflicts (intractable), population growth (galloping), and environmental degradation (rapid).

This expert discourse thus offers up "the Sahel" – the media metonym for the Conflict Zone – as a unique concentration of trials and challenges. Surreptitiously, the conflicts become, in that way, naturalized, one may even say, fated and preordained. If the factors invoked appear mostly "human" in nature – including environmental degradation, seen as a corollary of human population growth and activities – they seem to emerge naturally from dispositions which are not subject to driving (and contingent) forces of history, such as state policy, social change, or ideological projects. Moreover, the confines traced around "the Sahel" exclude from the analysis of its conflicts the role and agenda of international forces, such as the French army, United Nations missions, or international Salafism. In that regard, only the interactions of local communities, militia, and armed groups matter in expert analysis.

As a result, the presence of Western actors seems to play at a different (higher) level of action that is approached through a different discourse and by a different kind of experts, namely specialists of international relations, analysts of French or American foreign policy, etc. The game plan of north African Salafists is rarely considered and implicitly or not so implicitly, mainline Sahel experts assume that the agenda of the

---

[1]   See *Le Monde* of 3 October 2018, Chrisophe Châtelot, "Le Burkina Faso au bord de l'effondrement," https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/10/03/le-burkina-faso-au-bord-de-l-effondrement_6014081_3212.html

French, for instance – the most powerful Western actor in the region – is what it says it is, i.e., a benevolent, rational intervention to restore order and provide aid to communities torn by their own inner demons.

This study takes a very different tack. I start from the fact that, as a chronological analysis would show, the origins of the Conflict Zone lie *outside* the Sahel. The root causes listed by the expert discourse are important for understanding the context, but they are not peculiar to the area concerned. "The Sahel" in question consists of parts of the territories of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, but the "real" (i.e., geographic) Sahel is an ecological zone that stretches from northern Senegal all the way to the Republic of Sudan, and all the underlying or structural issues that shape the factors stressed in the expert discourse exist throughout that zone, sometimes in more significant forms than in these three countries. Therefore, if conflicts broke out there and not elsewhere, these issues and factors cannot be their true origins.

A key claim in this study is that the primary cause of the conflicts is the mobilization of local communities and national states by outside actors pursuing endgames that are more relevant to them than to those communities and states. These outside actors are north African Salafists on the one hand, and Western states (principally the French) on the other hand. Together, they are engaged in a contest framed by the wider Salafist quest of an "Islamic state" and the broader Western "war on terror." I further argue that this primary cause is also a primary drive, i.e., the conflicts endure because these overarching actors persist in pursuing their endgames. And I contend that the Sahelian terrain has proven a fertile ground for this wrangle because of histories specific to some of its places and countries. The case of Burkina Faso is particularly well-suited to demonstrate these three claims.

The first events signaling the extension of the Conflict Zone into Burkina were terrorist action claimed by militant Salafist groups based in the Malian Sahara. A Romanian security guard was abducted on a Manganese mine in May 2015 at Tambao, a site a few miles away from the border with Mali, and after January 2016, a series of terror attacks killed dozens in downtown Ouagadougou. Between May 2015 and late 2019, the stretch of regions between Tambao and Ouagadougou became engulfed in conflicts which are stoked by militant Salafist groups, and in turn open the way for more action from these groups. In response to the rapid escalation of non-state violence, an overwhelmed Burkinabe state formalized a military alliance with the French in 2018,

and adhered to a "security-and-development" agenda promoted by the G5 Sahel, i.e., the group of countries that "partner" with France's Sahel-wide military Operation Barkhane.

I will return in more detail to these and other episodes in the study, but already, it is clear that the sequence in which they transpired illustrates my argument that (1) the conflicts started outside the Sahel and (2) the Salafists and the French mobilize local actors and ultimately shape the key dynamics that are driving them. On the other hand, the context in which they occur, and which makes them "stick," is defined by changes that have been structurally affecting Burkina's political and economic systems since the late 1980s.

The study has four sections. The first section briefly describes the Conflict Zone. Although this is a Burkina case study, the Conflict Zone is the relevant unit of analysis for the conflicts in the country's north. It is presented as a violent geopolitical formation fueled by the systemic exacerbation of conflicts typical of the Sahel-Sahara's traditional economy,[2] and the role of key actors in this process of exacerbation is highlighted. The second section emphasizes context as history, contrasting the experiments in radical developmentalism of the mid-1980s (Sankarist revolution) to the experiments in radical neoliberalism (Compaoré's "rectification") that began in the early 1990s. In particular, the section focuses on the changes undergone by the Burkinabe state apparatus and internal geopolitics as a result of this political-economic paradigm shift. These evolutions are central to understanding the specific shapes of the conflicts in Burkina. The third section is an analytical account of the conflicts themselves. Here, I focus on events and figures as illustration of the claims of the study. This includes in particular aspects of the Compaoré regime and the circumstances of its fall, the massacre in Yirgou Peul, and the figure of the militant cleric Ibrahim Malam Dicko. Finally, in the fourth section, I return to the Conflict Zone as the unit of analysis for offering recommendations to Burkinabe decision-makers. In particular, I will retell the origins of the

---

[2]  The adjective "traditional" refers here to the conventional opposition between the "modern" and the "traditional" sectors of the economy which is often used in the expert literature to describe the dual nature of developing economies. This does not mean that the traditional economy is a vestige of the past or an economic field dominated by culture and customs, i.e., "traditions." The traditional economy is in fact as modern or contemporary as the so-called modern economy, but its activities, modes of organization, and many of its practices, reflect to a large extent conditions that have not been transformed by modern capitalism. Thus, for instance, the early currents of development economics saw development is modernization, i.e., the transformation of the traditional economy by modern capitalism.

Conflict Zone to highlight the action of outside actors such as the North African Salafists. The recommendations include a technical or practical approach for coping with the conflicts, and a political approach that takes into account their structural, transnational, and international dimensions.

The research that led to this paper included a ten-day fieldwork in Ouagadougou, where I interviewed state and security officials, journalists, academics and civil society activists. It is also based on several weeks of archival and documentary research, and my decades-long experience of studying state formation, political Salafism, and the political economy of social change in the Sahel.

# The Conflict Zone

The Burkina conflicts are an instance of a range of conflicts affecting an area of the Sahel-Sahara which, as mentioned previously, I call the "Conflict Zone." This Conflict Zone is shaped, at structural levels, by the political-economic conditions that prevail across the Sahel-Sahara. Here, I offer an overview of these conditions, focusing on Burkina, Mali, and Niger; and I describe in general terms the patterns of conflicts in the Conflict Zone, including the way in which they transpire in the case of Burkina.

## The Traditional economy and its discontents

Put together, the territories of Mali, Niger and Burkina cover three ecological zones, north-southward: the Sahara (desert), the Sahel (semi-arid scrubland), and the Sudan (wooded savanna). Mali stretches over the three zones, Niger mainly over the Sahara and the Sahel, and Burkina only over the Sahel and the Sudan. The Sahel-Sahara is predominantly agropastoral, and the Sahel-Sudan predominantly agricultural.

These geographic milieus and the occupations that they afford have crucial political and economic implications. In this context, the economy has not been transformed by industrialization and a productive capitalist sector. The livelihood of the larger portion of the population depends almost entirely on natural processes and ecological resources, which vary in accordance with these geographic milieus and evolving environmental conditions. Large-scale labor and production are primarily organized not by businesses and corporations (as in developed capitalist economies), but by communities specialized in certain activities. This includes fishing (Somono, Bozo, Sorko[3]), pastoralism (many subgroups of Fulani and Tuareg), and farming (all of the so-called sedentary communities, including sedentarized Fulani and Tuareg). In the absence of a transformative capitalist sector, the state and international aid attempt to "modernize" segments of these traditional economies, aiming to integrate them into value-chains that would boost the trade balance of the nations and create income for communities. But to this date most of the various traditional-economic sectors are integrated neither with external value-adding processes, nor with each other. This ensures that the traditional

---

[3]   The Bozo and Somono live in Mali, on the Niger River and its tributaries; the Sorko, a subgroup of the Songhay, live in Mali, Niger and Nigeria, on the Niger River.

economy[4] remain a site of chronic scarcity and intense competition over natural resources.

Problems arising from this relate to access to ecological resources, adjustment to natural processes, and rivalry between communities, because they are either engaged in the same activity and may fight over a single pool of resources, or because they are specialized in different activities (i.e., agriculture versus pastoralism) that may hamper one another. These issues need to be managed at the political level to limit risks of violent confrontation, but in fact, they are often politicized, especially in the era of representative democracy which began in the early 1990s for all three countries in the Conflict Zone. Politicization undermines efforts at providing the kind of effective (stable, independent, reliable, and well-resourced) governance that would prevent confrontation or repair broken relations. But it must be pointed out that, especially in the recent period, such efforts have been slight to begin with. In this study, the security sector in the rural areas will be stressed as a case in point.

On another score, despite its stagnation in terms of growth and redistribution, the traditional economy is also a site of change. The descriptions above indicate that of the three economic factors, i.e., land, capital, and labor, the first (i.e., land) is the most important in terms of driving change. Land, here, means fields and pasturelands, and also the general ecological conditions that determine their use and availability. In the Sahel-Sahara, these ecological conditions have been changing dramatically in the past few decades, and problems of land and resource sharing and exploitation are significantly more acute than in the Sudanic quarters to the south. The social consequences in terms of labor and capital include unemployment, inequality and their implications (i.e., pauperization, emigration, violent crime on the one hand, transfer and concentration of capital[5] into small social groups on the other hand).

As mentioned before, these various issues and problems are not unique to Burkina, Mali, and Niger. Also, they sometimes have taken more critical proportions elsewhere, including in places outside the Sahel-Sahara, such as Nigeria's Middle Belt. Yet it is only in a section of the Sahel-Sahara circled in the map below that they have turned into the specific conflicts that are the

---

[4]  The traditional economy also includes some trade and artisan manufacture and reaches into towns and cities as part of the so-called informal economy. In this study, I am referring only to **the rural** segment of the traditional economy, which is the most important in terms of people employed in it – and in fact, the largest economic sector of the Sahelian countries.

[5]  Capital in this agropastoral zone can be cattle and grain, not just money.

object of this study. This indicates that the patterns of tensions that characterize the Sahel-Sahara at large are not the *direct* cause of these conflicts. I will return to this issue of causality through the case study, in the next two sections. At this juncture, I will limit myself to offering a brief description of the Conflict Zone, i.e., what tends to happen there and who are the main actors.
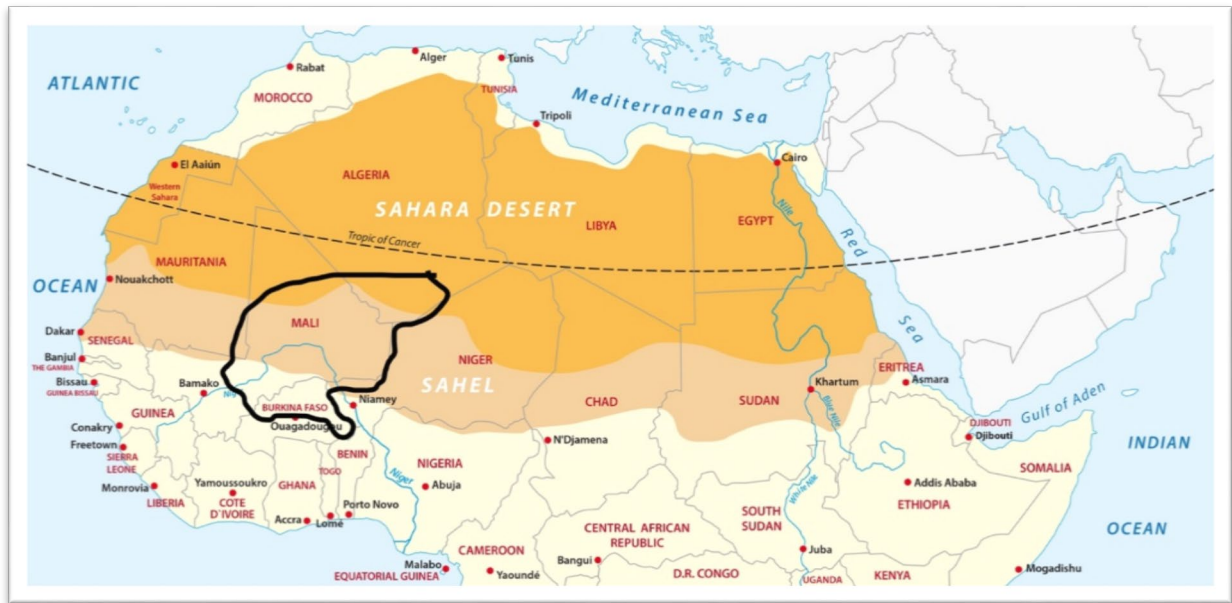


The Sahel-Sahara and the Conflict Zone. © Rainer Lesniewski

## In the Conflict Zone

The actors in the Conflict Zone are varied, and some are more important in one of the countries than in the others. One can divide them in three categories and five groups which may overlap with each other or be affiliated/allied with one another. The table below offers a schematic sense of who these actors are.

| International Actors | Western forces (Opération Barkhane, others) |
|---|---|
| | North African militant Salafists |
| State Actors | Government/National defense forces |
| | Territorial Administration (including traditional chiefs) |
| Local militants | Community-based armed groups |
| | Local militant Salafists |
| Unaffiliated | Criminal networks |
| | Opportunist armed mobs |

Table 1.a.

The general configuration is that of *alliances*, *overlapping interests*, and *hostility*. In general, Western forces and State Actors are allied, and North African Salafists and Local Salafists are allied. In both cases, this alliance is not one of equals but rather a form of dependence or clientage. Community-based armed groups (CBAGs) are somewhat autonomous, and, in any case, have distinct interests. But they are generally supported by actors with more capabilities than them, depending on their community. Certain CBAGs are supported by the French, others by State Actors, and yet others – due to overlapping interests – by Salafist militants. In the murk created by the conflicts, criminal networks (drug and arm smuggling) strive to maintain and expand their operations, while the availability of arms creates opportunities for banditry in a region where highwaymen have been known to operate in the past (this is particularly true of eastern Burkina). Armed hostility exists mainly between the French and the Salafists, and between certain CBAGs, especially Fulani and Tuareg, Fulani and Dogon, and Fulani and Mossi. But there is armed hostility also *within* the complex societies that are known under the generic names Fulani and Tuareg.

This general configuration shows why it is important to speak of conflicts in the plural. There are in effect at least three relatively low-intensity wars in the Conflict Zone: a French-Salafist war, an inter-community war opposing the Fulani and certain communities, and an intra-community war among the Fulani on the one hand, and the Tuareg on the other hand. Each one of these various conflicts has its own history and dynamics, and they are often developing with little connections with each other, even though international actors – especially the French and North African Salafists – strive to organize

them into one great clash of those aligned with "the West" and those who follow "the Caliphate.[6]"

My interest, here, is in the part of the Conflict Zone that extends into Burkinabe territory. The general configuration depicted in Table 1.a. has its Burkinabe iteration, which may be represented in the table below:

| International Actors | Opération Barkhane (SOFA Agreement, Dec. 2018) |
| | North African militant Salafists |
| State Actors | Government/National defense forces |
| | Territorial Administration (Prefects, Mayors) |
| Local militants | Fulani (north) and disgruntled communities (east); Koglweogo (Mossi) |
| | Local militant Salafists (from all communities) |
| Unaffiliated | Criminal networks |
| | Opportunist armed mobs |

Table 1.b.

There are four identifiable conflicts in the Burkinabe case: (1) France's war with the Salafists; (2) the war of lowly Fulani with a variety of enemies (elite Fulani; Mossi and other farming groups); (3) the war in the eastern provinces; and (4) the war of Salafist militants on the Burkinabe state. France and the Salafist militants are the unifying forces for these conflicts. In the French state-military and Burkinabe official discourses, all identified enemies are "terrorists," a code word for Salafist militants and their allies – even when such allies do not, in reality, hold Salafist views and may have entered the

---

[6] For the French rationale, see L. Lagneau, " Sans Barkhane, les pays du Sahel 's'effondreront sur eux-mêmes', prévient le général Lecointre", http://www.opex360.com/2019/07/11/sans-barkhane-les-pays-du-sahel-seffondreront-sur-eux-memes-previent-le-general-lecointre/, and the analysis of the French position by Emmanuel Dupuy, president of the Institut Prospective et Sécurité en Europe in an interview with *Atlantico* ("Faut-il se résoudre à une situation à l'israélienne alors que le Sahel tend à devenir un nouvel Afghanistan ?",
https://www.atlantico.fr/decryptage/3572795/faut-il-se-resoudre-a-une-situation-a-l-israelienne-alors-que-le-sahel-tend-a-devenir-un-nouvel-afghanistan--emmanuel-dupuy). For an early academic analysis of the North African's Salafists strategies confronting the West, see B. E. Selwan Khoury and E. Baron, "AQMI à la conquête du Sahel 'islamique': un califat qui s'étend de la Mauritanie à la Somalie et qui risque d'investir entre autres l'Algérie et la France contre l'Amérique" in *Outre-Terre*, 2013, 3, No. 37: 243-256, and M. Guidère, "The Timbuktu Letters : New Insights about AQIM, " in *Res Militaris*, 2014, 4, No. 1: 25-40.

conflict with different and distinctive motivations. Salafist militants similarly attack any party that appears to support the war effort of the French and the Burkinabe state, and, in a bid to extend their reach, they support groups that nurse grievances against the Burkinabe state.

Although this external factor is the shaping force of the Conflict Zone, I focus, in this study, only on the internal oppositions that are exposing the fault-lines of the Burkinabe polity. This is because my aim is to understand the conflicts in Burkina, not the Conflict Zone as such – although I return to the importance of considering it in the final section of this study. From a Burkinabe perspective, the external agents have been the catalysts for oppositions which play at more structural levels in the country, and which explain the turns that the conflicts have taken there. These structural oppositions are, first the *political* distance between a state reduced to its "regalian[7]" functions – often performed in limited, questionable or illegitimate ways – and the masses, especially those in the traditional economy; and second, the *geopolitical* distance between a state anchored in Sudanic societies and its Sahelian peripheries. The two next sections of the study explore some of the key ways in which these peculiarities of the Burkinabe context provide a fertile ground for the extension of the Conflict Zone across the country's Sahel.[8]

---

[7]   The concept "regalian" is derived, here, from the French term "*régalien*", which describes core attributes of state sovereignty. The regalian state is the state of defense, security, finance, justice, mint, and diplomacy.

[8]   The terminology in the case of Burkina may be confusing, due to the fact that there is an administrative subdivision called the Sahel Region, which includes all the Provinces in the country's north-east corner, including the Soum Province, a hotbed of Salafist action. When referring to the administrative subdivision, I will speak of the Sahel Region. I use Sahel *tout court* in the case of the ecological zone that extends over all of northern Burkina.

# Distance: political and geopolitical

In this section, I analyze the context of the Burkinabe conflicts as defined both by historical developments and the country's geopolitical quandaries. First, to highlight the nature of the country's current political economy and the types of problems which it generates, I contrast it to the period which it has superseded (Sankarism); and second, I offer a perspective on Burkina's internal geopolitics that identifies those peculiarities of its Sahelian regions that are relevant for the objectives of this study.

## Sankarism and Rectification: their impacts

Since the "Rectification" of the early 1990s, a set of political and economic reforms that put an end to the Sankarist revolution of the 1980s and opened the economy to private interests – many close to or associated with the rulers – the Burkinabe state had been essentially at the service of the regime of Blaise Compaoré. Burkina adopted a constitution designed to guarantee Compaoré's hold on power and the dominance of a party machine that could cement its power by making unfettered use of the privileges of incumbency. Essentially, a "system" was built to control key levers of the state apparatus, including especially the military and the judiciary, as a way to protect the regime from military coups and challenges from politicians. During its 27 years of existence, this system of control gradually built specific competences in terms of extinguishing internal opposition and exploiting regional crises. In particular, it was involved in making profit out of the civil wars in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the mid-2000s, the regime established linkages with the networks of drug traffickers (mostly Malian Arabs) and North African Salafists that operated in the Malian Sahel-Sahara in order to position itself in the shadow economy of the Sahara. This had the double benefit of creating (illicit) rents for the top leadership, and of giving them a political weight in the Sahel-Sahara, a region in which strategic interests were at play in connection with the rivalry between Algeria and Libya on the one hand, and militant Salafists targeting (mainly abductions) of their self-identified Western foe on the other hand.

Importantly, ectification and its long aftermath also had meant a retreat from the project of national development. One consequence was to lead to a restructuration of the state apparatus, by shedding its "developmental" organizations, which had been particularly ambitious in the country's revolutionary moment. The reformed state no longer needed the

competence required to mobilize the population for "development," including its social change underpinnings. Under Sankarism – essentially a revolutionary developmentalism – elite groups such as merchants and traditional and religious authorities had been on the losing side of the political process, and the forces of "the people," i.e., the lower layers of communal societies, the youth, and women, had been vigorously promoted. Rectification reversed this. Merchants became a pillar of the regime and traditional leaders were integrated in its informal system of control. Hence, a key difference between the Sankarist and the rectified states lay in the fact that the former excluded the elites and included the masses, while the latter included the elite and excluded the masses. In that regard, one central implication of the structure of the Sankarist regime was the fact that its political process was integrating the lower classes – i.e., the majority groups – of the country's various communities into a national public, around an emotional message of militant development. Under the rectified state, these lower classes returned to their communal identities and, supposedly, under the leadership of traditional and religious authorities supportive of the new regime (with the relative exception of the Catholic Church) – and no new emotional message was developed to provide hope and faith in the Burkinabe national project.[9]

So the Burkina state that was confronted with the Malian crisis in 2012 presented these two general features: first, it was a thinned state, shorn of its developmental (or social) apparatus and in which the security apparatus was mainly at the service of the elites rather than the public – a fact particularly made clear by the creation of an elite military unit, the Regiment of Presidential Security, which was independent from the army, and was at the beck and call of Compaoré (I return to this in the next section); and second, it was a passive state, which did not build a social contract with the nation and contented itself to "*gérer*" (manage) situations as they emerged within or between communities now largely left to their own devices and, in some cases, drifting apart. Given that this is at the roots of the patterns of antagonisms that are sustaining the conflicts in Burkina, and thus paving the way for enemies of the state, it is worth delving – even if in broad outlines – into the historical developments that resulted in the current divisive political economy of Burkina.

---

9   Bruno Jaffré has provided the most cogent coverage and analysis of these aspects of the Sankara years and of rectification. See his *Burkina Faso. Les années Sankara: de la révolution à la rectification* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997) and an article for *Le Monde Diplomatique*, "Burkina Faso's Pure President," current on https://mondediplo.com/2007/11/14sankara.

Under Sankarism, the state sought to develop the traditional economy in the rural areas by adopting an ambitious and visionary agricultural and land reorganization legislation (4 August 1984). The ordinance proclaimed that all land in Burkina was state property and exploitation by private persons and entities was under a regime of usufruct only. Pointing out that 90% of the population was active in agriculture and yet the country was subject to recurrent hungers and famines, the law ascribed this outcome to the fact that land was controlled by "bourgeois and feudal" forces (i.e., private capital and traditional leaderships) and affirmed that a "rational utilization" of land would lead to both "productivity and social justice." The law postulated that a rational allocation of land to agriculture and livestock farming would require the participation of "the rural masses," organized into "democratic structures dedicated to the rational occupation and exploitation of the rural space." In this view, villages would maintain relations with each other and exchange experiences via a schedule of meetings, conferences, fairs, and literacy exercises. Farmers and herders would form democratic associations that would take part in the process through which the selling prices of agricultural and pastoral products were to be determined. Profit must accrue to them, rather than to middlemen, allowing them to maintain self-managed savings and credit funds that would further support their activities.[10]

Evidently, this was not merely a law but a blueprint for society that required the actions of an *État organisateur* (an active state) capable of implementing supporting measures. Thus, for instance, the Sankarist state forbade the importation of fruits and vegetables from Côte d'Ivoire in an effort to create an internal market for fruits and vegetables producers in the south-eastern regions of the country, which were impoverished and difficult to access. A national retail chain was established to deliver products to local committees, making it possible for employees to purchase products at their workplace. Traders, who were importing produce from Côte d'Ivoire via the colonial-era railway, were the losers in the process, but a new sector, profitable to workers and producers, was created in the rural economy. In this way, communities that were virtually excluded from the national project were being integrated to it by drawing their laboring (and majority) classes into a national exchange economy.

According to the World Food Organization, these policies were successful. In 1984-88 (the revolutionary era), the agency notes, Burkina Faso "adjusted itself without external assistance." The state managed to "impose financial

---

[10]  "Ordonnance n° 84-050 portant réorganisation agraire et foncière au Burkina Faso," in *Recueil des textes réglementaires et législatifs en matière de gestion des ressources naturelles. Vol. 2, Burkina Faso*, Ouagadougou: CILSS, and Addis Abeba: OUA, 1988, pp. 3-9.

discipline and to reduce budget deficits while stimulating the productive sectors of the economy – particularly agriculture – and improving social services and education. In 1984-88, economic results were generally satisfying: the growth rates of the GDP were good, inflation rates low, and above all, agricultural production increased greatly.[11]"This was because "absolute priority" was given to rural development. The People's Development Program, the overarching public policy of the Sankarist revolution, dedicated 44% of all public investments to the rural economy, including in terms of water management and the digging of a great number of medium and small water reservoirs across the land.[12] Productive assets developed by the state prior to the revolution were often signed over to producers organized into "democratic collectives." The growth of the rural sectors had direct welfare outcomes for the population, among whom food energy intake jumped from averages of 1600-1700 calories in 1975-84 to 2100-2200 calories in 1985-92.

But only four months after Thomas Sankara was murdered (October 1987), the new authorities contacted the World Bank to start a Bretton-Woods structural adjustment program, which became the economic side of Rectification. The Sankarist policy was gradually dismantled, leading, in 1992, to the design of an agricultural structural adjustment program grounded in the principles advocated by the Bretton Woods institutions. Fundamentally, as has been compellingly analyzed by Basile Guissou in the case of Burkina,[13] these principles and the policies they led to, were anti-development, anti-welfare and more generally, anti-poor (although later language would recite that such policies were "pro-poor"). The state was ordered to disinvest from the rural economy, to end public "monopolies" (which meant the return of the dominance of merchant capital), and to open the country's borders for free export and import of agricultural goods in the name of "food security.[14]"

For the purposes of this study, two major outcomes of this policy reorientation were that (1) the more fragile portions of the Burkinabe territory

---

[11] *La situation mondiale de l'alimentation et de l'agriculture*, Rome, WFO, 1996, chapter 2. According to the author of the study, the marked increase was noticed across the board, i.e., for all agricultural products, commercial as well as subsistence.

[12] For a description and assessment of the policy of water management and its impact on the rural economy, see B. Guissou, "Le Burkina Faso au-delà de l'ajustement structurel," in *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement*, Vol. 21, No. 2/3, 1996: 159-183, in particular p. 171.

[13] B. Guissou, *op. cit.*

[14] This is in addition to anti-poor policies that aimed at balancing the books by curtailing demand, cutting food subsidies, and spurring increase in food price via currency devaluation such as the one which was implemented in Burkina and other Franc zone countries in 1994 (the value of the currency was halved overnight) and the promotion of value added taxes.

– the north and the east – went back to being marginalized because they did not have the potential for returns on (private) investment and for profit which other regions offered, and (2) the principle of competition favored certain products over others (in particular commercial products such as cotton or groundnuts over staple products such as millet and sorghum[15]), and also certain activities over others (land-intensive farming over land-extensive pastoralism). Moreover, the International Monetary Fund not only refused to support the plan of territorial *désenclavement* (access programs) by which the Burkinabe government had sought to link remote regions to national centers, but it conditioned lending to commitment by the government to renounce any "wasteful" expenditures for such policy. In the view of the IMF, it was more important to connect Burkina to centers of export, such as the ports in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire – essentially returning the country to the extractivist and extroverted dynamics of the colonial era, and upending its process of national construction.[16]

Crucially, the *cooperation* between villages and communities which Sankarism sought to foster was replaced by *competition*, and the idea of the *rational utilization of the rural space* was abandoned for a logic of land-intensive farming, stimulated not only by "climate change" or "demographic growth" (the usual suspects for most analysts), but also, and more importantly, by a new policy of *commoditization of the rural space on the cheap*. "Land-intensive" does not mean, here, intensive agriculture but, quite the reverse, the rapid and increasing occupation of new land by farmers who also convert them exclusively to farming. Land-intensive *extensive agriculture* is a substitute for *intensive agriculture*, which would require less land but more investment – i.e., a financial effort beyond the capacities of Burkina's farmers.

This colonization of land by farming undercuts the principle of the commons, which makes pastoralism rewarding or, simply, possible. It also makes of property in land – now a "hot" commodity – a prime source of litigation and conflicts. The land law of 1984 was gradually abrogated by new laws adopted in 1991, 1996, and 2012, that claimed to simply revise it (*relire*) but in fact had ended up replacing it roots and branches. By 2012, land in Burkina was no longer state property. The state now has ownership of "public land" and

---

[15]  Protection was provided only to rice production, one suspects mainly because rice is an elite cereal, consumed not by peasants and other rural dwellers, but by urbanites. Buying Burkinabe rice, the national bourgeoisie uses in self-flattery the slogan of "*Consommons Burkinabè*" ("Let us consume made-in-Burkina products") which was an earnest policy directive under Sankarism.

[16]  Sankara had refused to request the IMF's assistance precisely because he saw it as an "imperialist" institution bent on restoring African countries to a new form of colonial domination.

has its own "private land," but other land may belong to local collectivities and private persons. The process of adjudicating private land-holding relies heavily on local customs, which are largely shaped by the interests of local farming communities,[17] and which promote the increasingly exclusive occupation of land by farming. In this dispensation, Fulani pastoralists rarely hold land, either individually or collectively. Their access to water and pasturelands was predicated on the idea that these were, to a large extent, common resources, to which farmers and herders could have a fairly equal access via an informal agreement or customary entente.[18] But this agreement or entente is subverted by the dynamics of land-intensive agriculture, in a process that is gradually restricting the access of pastoralists to the resources they need for their activity, consigning them to the vagaries of increasingly erratic and unsustainable transhumance. Nowadays, these itineraries extend from south-eastern Burkina/northern Benin to central Mali via western Niger and northern Burkina, thus spanning more or less the Conflict Zone.[19]

The iniquities that this context implies are "managed" by the Burkinabe state via local elites, including especially customary chiefs and leaders from the Fulani as well as from their neighboring communities. Customary chiefs – who, in Burkina, are not formal agents of the state and do not receive salaries and perquisites from public funds – sustain their position by aiding in the collection of taxes and dues and in the enforcement of the "customary" rules that accord with state policy.[20] Their informal mandate[21] can thus easily turn into an opportunity for abuse and predation, in part owing to this very informality and the "grey zones" which it fosters. The prime losers in these evolutions are the young, i.e., those who need to start their socio-economic

---

[17] See the analysis of Q. Gausset in "L'Aspect foncier dans le conflit entre autochtones et migrants au sud-ouest du Burkina Faso," in *Politique Africaine*, 4, 112, 2008: 52-66. Gausset criticizes the Sankarist law of 1984 for being… Eurocentric, because, in his opinion, it went against local "customs and traditions," as if these customs and traditions were an unimpeachable product of the wisdom of the people and the ages, and not an outcome of struggles between competing interests.

[18] See the UNOWAS study "Pastoralisme et sécurité en Afrique de l'Ouest et au Sahel : vers une coexistence pacifique," published in August 2018.
https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/rapport_pastoralisme_fr-2.pdf

[19] But there are problems of the same nature elsewhere in West Africa, especially in the Sudanic ecological band that lies just south of the Sahel, and that crosses through the "middle" of countries like Ghana and Nigeria.

[20] Herrera and Ilboudo thus note that "extremely heavy pressures are exerted on traditional institutions (communities, villages, families, but also value systems, mentalities), in particular through the SAP [Structural Adjustment Program], with the goal of individualizing and privatizing the ownership of customary lands through the establishment of land registers, property titles, and a veritable 'land market'." R. Herrera and L. Ilboudo, "Les Défis de l'agriculture paysanne: le cas du Burkina Faso," in *L'Homme & la Société*, 1-2, 183-184, 2012: 83-95.

[21] Just as in Mali, Burkinabe chiefs can also reinforce this informal authority by seeking elected positions (mayor, deputy). In Niger, where the status of chiefs is formal, this is not possible.

integration – acquiring the means of livelihood, starting a family – in these stringent conditions (especially young pastoralists). This is the equivalent, for the traditional economy, of joblessness and pauperization. Moreover, the economic crisis tends to polarize social systems, i.e., the divide between elites and subalterns – especially among the Fulani, a society that has a more rigid hierarchy and has been more fragilized by the developments just described.

Indeed, the process of social change incubated by this evolving context is felt in some peculiar ways among the Fulani. This semi-nomadic community is based on an intricate and racialized ideology of social domination, with a social divide that has for many centuries been resistant to change. Thus, for instance, just as in the semi-nomadic society of the Tuareg, slaves are considered "Black," because they were originally extracted from the people of the sedentary farming communities, who are seen as racially/culturally inferior by elite Fulani.[22] Due to this original extraction, reinforced by prohibition of intermarriage between elite and subaltern, elite Fulani do not consider people of slave descent to be "real" Fulani. They call them a hard and ugly name, *maccube*, a deformation of *majubbe* (dark and ignorant), and the stigmatizing word has been internalized as a source of humiliation and resentment among subaltern groups. Moreover, even though the actual slave regime of bonded labor no longer exists in its full, "premodern" form, it has left many enduring restrictions and forms of marginalization across the traditional economy, and excludes those tainted by its stigma from powerful social and political positions, either traditional (chieftainship) or religious (imamate) and even modern-political (elected positions).

This social issue is not unique to the Fulani. As mentioned above, it is more or less the same among the Tuareg, and does exist among some of the so-called Black communities. But racialization and other cultural specificities which the Fulani, together with the Tuareg, owe to their old nomadic economy, have created among them a more entrenched version of a regime that is fading faster among the farming communities. Moreover, the recent dynamics of change, both under Sankarism and after Rectification, have been favorable (in different ways) to the emancipation of the Fulani subalterns, most of whom are farmers, not pastoralists. By thus threatening

---

[22] This inferiority may also be seen as religious. The word more commonly associated in Fulfulde – the language of the Fulani – to non-Fulani sedentary peoples is *kado* (plur. *habbe*), which means "heathen", in contradistinction to a self-perception of many Fulani (especially in the more elite groups) of being quintessentially Muslim (*juldamkum*). But this set of perceptions and stereotypes tied to religion is historically recent, and reflects the rise to supremacy of the clerical subgroups of the Fulani society – the *toroobe* – at the expense of the warrior subgroups – the *ardoen*, who were animists – during the era of the Fulani jihads, in the 18th and 19th centuries.

the dominance of the elites and of pastoralism (the two are not the same), these dynamics render the polarization more acute, less manageable.

In Burkina, the Fulani question is essentially a Sahelian question and post-Rectification socioeconomic change plays differently outside the agropastoral area. In agricultural western Burkina, potential for conflict involves competition over land between farming communities. This especially includes the fact that land-hungry Mossi farmers are moving away from their more crowded and drier homeland (much of which is ecologically Sahelian) and are attempting to penetrate the land-rich, greener Sudanic environment of the west, triggering the resistance of local communities. [23] The conflicts emerging from this are interesting in that they do not seem to be as easily amenable to exploitation by Salafist ideologues as those in the Sahel. In that way, they underscore the point that it is not local conflicts that are, as such, the causes of the conflagration in the Conflict Zone. They also relate to key issues in Burkina's internal geopolitics, which will be explored in the next subsection.

By contrast, south-eastern Burkina, the poorer, more isolated Sudanic "relative" of the south-western region, has relapsed in the destitution which Sankarism sought to end via protectionism in the 1980s. Since this region hosts a section of the animal reserve of the "Parc du W," opportunities for turning it into a cash cow for private capital materialized. Here, unlike in other regions, much land has remained state land (as "public land") owing to the animal reserves and parks, and a large extent of it was turned into hunting grounds for French safari lovers and the companies that lure them in. In rarely – if ever – reported stories,[24]local people were brutally evicted from stretches of land to make way for the hunters, using the national security forces for the (mis)deed. The repercussions on the livelihood of locals, though little studied, are dire.

As the many references to regions and ecologies in these histories indicate, geopolitical relations are important to understanding implications relevant to this study. I now turn to them.

---

[23]  This is the situation studied by Gausset in *op. cit.*

[24]  I first learned of them during a research trip in Ouagadougou in July 2019. However, a Google Search on Safari in Burkina Faso does yield endless links publicizing the activity and showing how, quite below the radar, Eastern Burkina had become a Safari paradise – if one that was mired in corruption and loose regulation, according to the French paper *Libération* ("Burkina Faso: chasseurs et braconniers se taillent la peau du lion," 23 December 2018, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/12/23/burkina-faso-chasseurs-et-braconniers-se-taillent-la-peau-du-lion_1699483).

# Geopolitical (im)balances

Nation-states are geopolitical constructs which strive to "integrate" not just different ethnicities, but also different regions under a single state authority. This integration generally develops as a fraught political and economic process that seeks to achieve some sort of working balance between the various regions in the construct. The nature of the process depends on the historical origins of a nation-state – for instance the expansion of the royal state in France (summarized by the well-known French slogan of the "forty kings who have made France") or the onerous resolution (?) of the foundational opposition between "free states" and "slave states" in the United States. In Africa, the process and its particular difficulties nearly everywhere date back to the colonial era. In the case of Burkina, they may be traced especially to the period 1932-47, when the Upper Volta colony ceased to exist.

In the early phase of colonialism, in the 1920s, the French relied heavily on Mossi kings and chiefs, in what is now the Plateau Central Region, to establish the colony's economic usefulness on cotton production. Mossi kings and chiefs assisted in the provision of labor and the organization of the harshly exploitative schemes needed to spur cotton production. But in response to the financial crisis of the early 1930s, and given the limited success of the cotton production schemes, the French divided Upper Volta into three different regions, which they distributed to the neighboring colonies of Niger (the eastern regions), French Sudan, i.e., Mali (the north-western regions), and Côte d'Ivoire (the central plateau and the south-western regions). This latter subdivision was then the more problematic one. It shifted the center of power from Ouagadougou – formerly the capital of the colony and also the anchor of Moaga (sing. of Mossi) influence in the colonial order – to Bobo Dioulasso, in the south-west, which became a bustling commercial town connecting the groundnut, millet, and cattle markets of the French Sudan to Côte d'Ivoire.

In September 1947, Upper Volta was reconstituted largely through the lobbying of the Mossi chiefs, allied politicians, and the Catholic Church. In that period, it is worth nothing that Nigerien politicians vainly agitated to keep the Liptako – i.e., the current Sahel Region – in the colony of Niger, pointing out that it had the same ethnic populations (Fulani, Tuareg, and Songhay) as western Niger. The political process of the restoration of the Upper Volta colony swiftly led to competition between Bobo Dioulasso and Ouagadougou, i.e., between the central plateau and the western regions. From 1947 onwards, the geopolitical history of Upper Volta/Burkina Faso

became one of finding a balance between these two areas of the country. In relation to this all-important contest, the east and the north were of peripheral importance. They had a smaller population, a poorer land, and were away from the wider networks of production and the exchange economy fostered by colonialism, and on which the new state depended for its development policies. At a deeper level, these areas belonged (still belong) to a different civilization. It can be said that western Burkina is in the orbit of the Manden,[25] a fact that was reinforced in the 20th century by colonialism and Islamization; the central plateau has a civilization of its own, known as the Mogho;[26] and north-eastern Burkina is part of the Sahel-Sahara civilization that also includes what are now central and northern Mali, and western Niger (the Nigerien politicians claiming Dori in 1947-48 were "right" in that specific regard). While this cultural aspect of the matter cannot be assessed objectively through the kind of fieldwork I conducted, it is very certainly playing a significant role in the response of the Burkinabe state to the conflicts in the Sahel and in the eastern regions, as some details which I mention further below clearly indicate.

The fact that geopolitical balance in Burkina was about "the West" and "the Central Plateau" focused the national politics of state-building on those two regions. There was (is) a widespread feeling that the nation-state project of Upper Volta/Burkina Faso would fall apart if these two regions fail to develop a durable, structural entente. With the state thus become the business of West and Center, communities in other regions reasonably feel left aside, even if that is not on the basis of any discriminatory policy or agenda. We have seen, in the previous section, that Sankarism strove to change this pattern, but by the early 1990s, it had come back to dominate national statecraft. The Sahel Region especially came to be seen as a remote, isolated backwater in which civil servants were sent as a punishment (that is the perception) – despite the fact that its capital, Dori, is only a four-hour car ride from Ouagadougou. And although the doors of the administration and the political apparatus of the state are wide open to elites from these regions, they have significantly lower rates of school education, largely – it is claimed – due to socio-cultural resistance to "modern" formal education.  But claims of this nature, often made about "nomadic populations" such as – here – the Fulani, are also the sign of a failure to think creatively about policy solutions. To that extent, they reflect a bias of the sedentary cultures that are hegemonic in the state system.

---

[25]  The set of traditions, cultures, and Mande lingua franca referred to as the civilization of the Manden extends from the Gambia valley to northern Côte d'Ivoire through much of Guinea, parts of Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the whole of southern Mali.

[26]  This is a moaga word that means "the world," and by which the Mossi define their civilization.

Enseignement
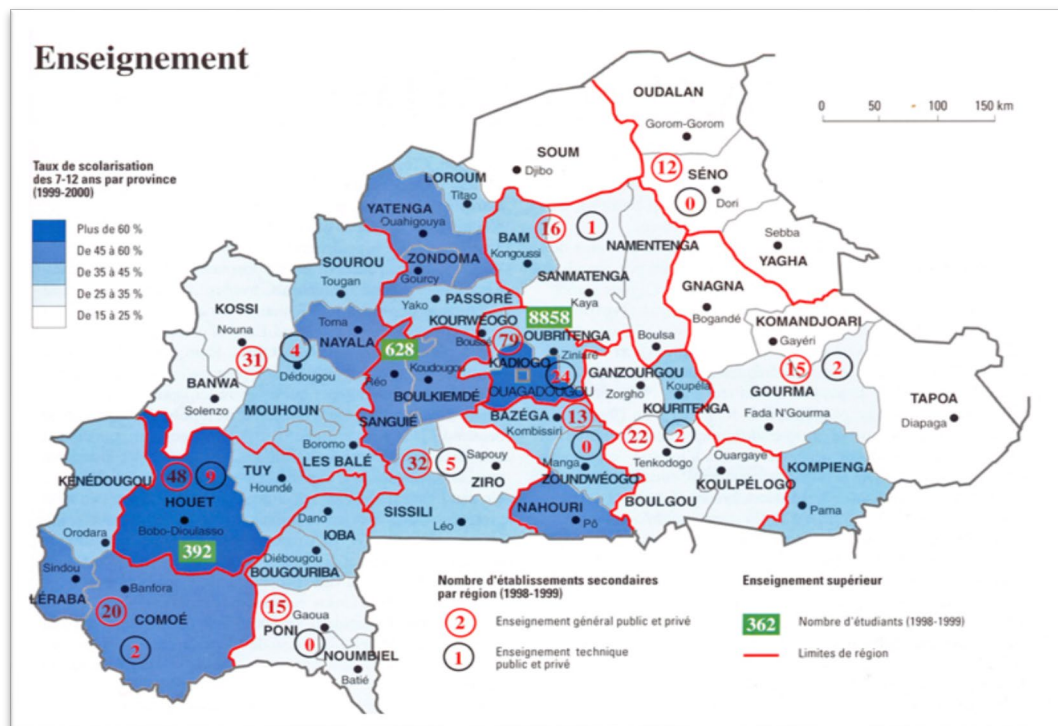
As the map [27] above shows, the regions most affected by the conflicts today have long been the ones with the lowest schooling rates in the country. According to Yacouba Yaro, this picture has remained unchanged since the 1970s.[28] In part, as his analysis indicates, the more urbanized regions have higher rates of schooling, and in the least urbanized regions, schooling generally requires that families send their children to a faraway town for education. By definition, semi-nomadic groups tend to be less urbanized than the sedentary. There are several consequences to this, including higher gender disparities (families would more easily send boys than girls in places far away from their parents') but also a reluctance to send even male children to school for fear of losing them to urban culture (in those regions, schooling does imply a real rupture between children and parents – more so than in the more urbanized social settings).[29] Since the regions to the north-east and to

---

[27] The map was published in Les Atlas de l'Afrique: Burkina Faso, Paris: Éditions du Jaguar, 2001

[28] Y. Yaro, "La répartition des infrastructures scolaires et les mouvements des jeunes ruraux vers les villes au Burkina Faso," in P. Livenais and J. Vaugelade (eds.), *Éducation, changement démographique et développement*, Actes du colloque « Journées démographiques », Paris: ORSTOM, 1993: 119-124.

[29] To better understand the ramifications here, one must remember that in this non-industrialized political economy, the rural/urban gulf has some radical importance. In particular, moving to the city often also means moving out of the traditional economy which is the basis of the livelihood of people and communities in the rural areas; and developing interests that may conflict with theirs. This is especially true for the nomad economy. Sankara strove to counteract this with a

the east are the least urbanized, they register lower schooling rates and a greater cultural distance between the small minority of the school-educated and the bulk of the non-school-educated members of the resident communities.

The larger implications are crucial. School education is the central mechanism for the reproduction of the state here as in other sub-Saharan contexts. One needs school certificates to pursue a career in the state sector, and the state writes and speaks French, a language learned in school. Therefore, even in the absence of any discriminatory policies, communities which have less access to school education experience a greater distance from the state, both in terms of their influence in the state system, and in terms of the cultural underpinnings of state-society relationships. Moreover, north-eastern and eastern Burkina are much less populated than the center and the west, and for purely arithmetic reasons, their communities tend to be less present in the state than people from those other regions.

As a result of all this, in Burkina, state agents and officials tend to hail more largely from other parts of the country than from the north-east and the east. They tend to be less conversant with local cultures and languages. In the violent events that occur in the affected regions, it has been often noted that state officials and agents feel under siege, do not trust anyone in the community, fence themselves off, or leave under heavy protection as if out of an alien land. Such behavior is noticed by the people who conclude that the state does not see them as "real Burkinabes." During fieldwork in Ouagadougou, I thus heard of a call to unify *le Peuple du Turban* ("the People of the Turban"), i.e., the Fulani, the Tuareg, and the Songhay, under the claim that they needed to become a separate country from Burkina. Not too much should be made of this perhaps. The "call" was, by all appearances, one of these gestures attempted by individuals who would take advantage of troubled times to bid for relevance. At any rate, it was not noticed beyond the social networks in which a manifesto and a flag were circulated. [30] But despite being (as far as I know) of no consequence, it certainly resonates

---

voluntarist policy known under the slogan "*À chaque village son école*" – "to each village its school." This experiment, too, did not survive his demise.

[30]  I did not see the manifesto and cannot provide further analysis, but it is known that the Tuareg call themselves *Kel Tiggelmust*, "Those of the Turban," i.e., the head scarf that signals not only protection against the dusty winds of the Sahel-Sahara, but also attachment to the cultural and civilizational values prevalent in the region. The use of the head scarf is not limited to the Tuareg and has wide currency among the rural Fulani and Songhay, for the same reasons. The custom probably originated with the Tuareg (See E. Bernus, *Touaregs nigériens. Unité culturelle et diversité régionale d'un peuple pasteur*, ORSTOM, 1981, p.72, who insists only on the Tuareg aspect of the custom).

with some of the emotions born from the geopolitical tensions described here.

Given these geopolitical specificities, it is unsurprising that north-eastern Burkina should be where the Conflict Zone spilled over into the country. It is also in that region that a low-intensity, asymmetric warfare gradually became entrenched since early 2019. In the next section, I explore more closely the ways in which the structural factors and the historical developments discussed above relate to the events and figures which shaped the fall of northern Burkina into the Conflict Zone.

# The Burkinabe Conflicts

Two events may summarize the extension of the Conflict Zone into Burkina Faso. Although apparently quite different, these events are directly connected and reflect the complexity of the conflicts. First, there was a terror attack in downtown Ouagadougou, in an evening of January 2016, targeting a trendy bar, a high-end restaurant, and a luxury hotel. The attacks were claimed by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and may have been conducted by its Murabitun section (*katiba*), itself born from a merger between a more radical wing of AQIM, the Signatories in Blood, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), a Fulani-dominated Salafist armed group. And second, in January 2019, the targeted killing of six individuals in the village of Yirgou led to action by members of the Mossi-dominated Koglweogo informal policing group that ended in the indiscriminate killing of dozens of people. All people murdered in this way were attacked because they belonged, or were thought to belong to the adjacent settlement of Yirgou Peul (i.e. "Fulani Yirgou").

There were other attacks in downtown Ouagadougou. In August 2016, a posh Turkish restaurant became the scene of a bloodbath. The attack was not claimed however, maybe because there were, among the dead, two Kuwaiti clerics and three students of Burkina's Sunnite Movement, a Salafi-oriented organization. In March 2018, again in downtown Ouagadougou, a third attack aimed at the French embassy and the national headquarters of Burkina's armed forces. Meanwhile, other massacres were perpetrated in the north, including at Arbinda, in June 2019. In the views of security analysts in Ouagadougou, most recent attacks in the north are playing into a strategy aimed both at removing state forces from the northern regions and providing

a base for more sustained attacks on Ouagadougou and regions further south.[31]

While these various episodes signal that large parts of Burkina territory are now firmly in the Conflict Zone – certainly the north-east – and that the capital is vulnerable to attacks, they should be understood in the broader context of the Sahel-Sahara and the problems born from Burkina's history and structural issues of state-building as described in the previous section. As mentioned before, the case I am making in this study is that the Burkina conflicts had their cause outside the country and principally in the clash between the French and militant Salafists; but that the crisis in Burkina's state-building process that dates back to the end of the national development project has created the sociopolitical conditions for the northern regions to turn into a gateway for militant Salafists into the country. This section attempts to substantiate these claims.

I start with a narrative account of the conflicts, going back to their origins in 2011. This is done through a historical analysis which stresses the point that the primary causes of the Burkina conflicts are not Burkinabe. In a second sub-section, I focus on the sociopolitical issues and their structural underpinnings, with the aim to show that the reasons why the conflicts "stick" are very much Burkinabe.

## The Conflict Zone enters Burkina: a historical analysis

In 1995, Compaoré created the elite corps Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP) and put it under the leadership of his right-hand-man Gilbert Diendiéré. The main intent was to protect his regime against a military coup, and the RSP men were recruited especially from the army groups that had taken active participation in the coup against Sankara in 1987. Unlike the army, the elite unit was lavishly funded, its men received high-grade training and they were rewarded with spoils from both the regime's business in Burkina and involvements abroad.[32] It is important to make an analytical distinction between the regime and the state, and I will return to this in more

---

[31] This is the analysis of security expert Mahamoudou Sawadogo, in the various interviews I conducted with him; and of political scientist Siaka Coulibaly (http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20191022-burkina-faso-kongoussi-region-cible-terroristes). There is also the view that after southern Burkina is engulfed, the "Gulf of Guinea" (i.e., Benin, Togo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire) might be the next frontier of the Conflict Zone. (See A. Tisseron, "Jihadist Threat. The Gulf of Guinea States up against the wall", http://institut-thomas-more.org/2019/03/04/jihadist-threat-%E2%80%A2-the-gulf-of-guinea-states-up-against-the-wall/).

[32] For more on these aspects of Compaoré's reign, see V. Ouattara, L'Ère Compaoré: crimes, politiques et gestion du pouvoir, Paris: Karthala, 2006.

details in the next section. Here, I will note that the raison d'être of the regime – as distinct from the state – was to serve the self-centered interests of the ruling elites and maintain the loyalty of sections of the populace which were key to its activities.[33] These generally louche interests sometimes expanded beyond the borders of Burkina, into the troubled spots of West Africa,[34] such as Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s (Burkina then became an exporter of diamonds), Côte d'Ivoire in the 2000s, and Mali in the late 2000s.

The specific regime interest related to Mali was involvement in the drug trafficking that crossed through the Sahel-Sahara, originating in the Gulf of Guinea and ending in Europe. During fieldwork, a former gendarme told me how gendarmerie officers were instructed to waive convoys which they well knew carried narcotics through the borders. This was not unique to Burkina. Instead of trying to police drug trafficking, regimes in the smaller West African states often colluded with traffickers by offering transit corridors against payment. Since West African countries were neither the origin, nor the market of the narcotics, the deals were a form of enclave economy with little local political fallout. In the case of Compaoré's regime, because the trafficking networks were organized by Arab kingpins in the Malian (and Nigerien) Sahel-Sahara, collusion gave to Burkina's rulers a "presence" in that region. Moreover, the regime welcomed Libyan investments in Burkina and cultivated a degree of clientelism with Col. Kaddafi. These various regional activities and interests led Compaoré to develop a network of contacts that strengthened his regime's intelligence gathering capacities.

Again, it is important to note that this was all bound up with the survival and prosperities of the *regime*, not the strengthening of the *state*.[35] The army – an element of the Burkinabe state – resented the neglect in which it languished, and a string of mutinies, in the 2000s, signaled this malaise. In September 2015, the army's refusal to support RSP leader General Gilbert Diendiéré's attempt at restoring the ousted Compaoré was critical to the

---

[33] Especially the so-called "*secteur informel*," i.e., merchant capitalists and their networks of retailers. Muslims dominate this sector, and the Muslim establishment was much more supportive of the Roman Catholic Compaoré than the Catholic Church – which was highly critical of his constitutional manipulations in the later years of his rule.

[34] These shenanigans went beyond the West African region. For instance, the Compaoré's regime served as a back-channel for the selling of weapons to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA movement in Angola in the late 1990s (https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2001/01/05/le-burkina-faso-accuse-par-l-onu-de-trafic-d-armes_350068). The famed investigative journalist Norbert Zongo was murdered by RSP men in 1998 because he was determined to publicize the regime's funny business in West and Central Africa.

[35] Peter Dörrie, in "Burkina Faso: Blaise Compoaré and the Politics of Personal Enrichment" (African Arguments, 15 August 2012) makes the distinction clear. https://africanarguments.org/2012/08/15/burkina-faso-blaise-compaore-and-the-politics-of-personal-enrichment-by-peter-dorrie/

failure of his week-long coup. On another score, by forcing the gendarmerie to protect drug trafficking, the regime compromised a key security agency of the state in pursuit of its own aims. In contrast to this, insecurity issues that plagued the population, especially in eastern and northern Burkina (armed banditry[36]) were left to fester.

These tactics were successful for the goal for which they were designed as long as Compaoré kept control over his home base, and his partners in the Sahel-Sahara kept control over their turf. But in the early 2010s, a crisis internal to the regime – a split between factions – coincided with a constitutional crisis – i.e., a crisis affecting its sole, narrow base of legitimacy – to gradually unsettle Compaoré's grip on the home base. At the same time, the destruction of the Kaddafi regime rapidly subverted the northern Malian status quo. Tuareg men returning from Libya started an armed rebellion from Mali's Kidal Region and were swiftly joined by the radical Salafist groups that had been based across the Azawad[37] since the early 2000s. Several new trends that came from the collapse of the northern Malian status quo were worrisome for the Compaoré regime: shifts affecting the operation of the Sahel-Sahara drug trafficking; changes in the "international" geopolitics of northern Mali following the fall of Kaddafi; and the influx of arms from the Libyan chaos.

First, the Sahel-Sahara drug trafficking networks had been relying on deals also with the Malian regime, whose state forces were routed out of the north by the Kidal Tuareg and the Salafists in early 2012 (the Malian regime too had been neglecting the national army). As a result, Arab drug kingpins had to find new protectors for their business, and new forms of collusions – with non-state actors – emerged, which were problematic for the Burkinabe regime, a state actor. The non-state actors from which the traffickers would need protection would of necessity be any winner from the strife that broke out in the area in 2012 – and this winner might not be a friend of the Compaoré regime.

---

[36] Commercial transportation buses between the Niger border (east) and Ouagadougou were sometimes attacked by highwaymen. As a frequent traveler between Niamey and Ouagadougou, I often witnessed the operation of the gendarmerie escort provided to such buses, an admission of defeat or indifference as to the wider security issue of which the bus attacks were only a symptom. Bus attacks very rarely occur on the Ouagadougou-Bobo Dioulasso road (i.e., the road to the west).

[37] The Azawad is a stretch of Saharan land east of Timbuktu, around a fossil valley known by that name in the area. Tuareg irredentists claim it as their country, but it is a playground of Salafist militants.

Second, the disappearance of the Libyan regime, an influential patron in northern Mali, opened the way for the Algerian military, who developed, there, tactics that did not rely on connections with the Compaoré regime. But Compaoré could hitch his wagon to the French. The former colonial master had for many years been seeking to engage the North African Salafists who were then sponsoring or conducting kidnappings of Westerners in Mali, Niger, Burkina, and Mauritania from their northern Malian turf. Faced with an uncooperative President Toumani Touré in Bamako, the French were welcomed in Ouagadougou where they set up a special-forces base in 2010. In the new situation that developed in Mali in 2012, they initially decided to contain the Salafists through collaboration not with the Malian state – then in full-scale political meltdown – but with the "secular" (an adjective which the international French media Radio France Internationale and France 24 assiduously stressed) Tuareg rebels. This French approach demanded that the Tuareg rebels break ranks with the Salafists – something made easier by the rise in power of the more uncompromising wings of the radical groups[38] –, meaning that Burkina would incur the enmity of the Salafists by repercussion. But the regime felt it had no other option.

Third, and more crucially perhaps, the influx of weapons from the stockpiles of Kaddafi was a game-changer in the area.[39]This ensured that the non-state armed forces were going to hold an advantage in terms of weaponry over long-neglected state armed forces. Weapons not only allowed those forces to outgun and overpower state forces in Mali, but they became a currency of influence whereby those with primary access to them – i.e., the Salafists – could stoke the grievances of the downtrodden and the disgruntled, arm them, and send them on the warpath. Weapons could also be delivered to criminal groups when they were seen to be instrumental in sowing terror or destroying state positions.[40] In 2012-13, this dangerous development was illustrated by the rapid progress of the Salafists toward southern Mali, but

---

[38] Importantly, at that stage, these more uncompromising wings were Malian in origin, not north African – meaning that their stance was also shaped by issues specific to Mali, including hostility between the leading Malian Salafist militant Iyad ag Ghali and the leaders of the Tuareg rebellion, whose docility and submission he demanded (Ag Ghali was a rebel leader in the early 1990s). Burkina intervened in this squabble by sending a helicopter to pick up the leadership of the Tuareg rebels and hosting them in Ouagadougou after they were trounced by the Salafists in June 2012.

[39] For an analysis of this turn of events, focusing on the influx of weapons, see M. Pellerin, "Le Sahel et la contagion libyenne," in *Politique étrangère*, 4, 2012: 835-847.

[40] Several interviewees in Burkina pointed out evidence suggesting that some of the attacks attributed to "Jihadists" or communal militants were really conducted by armed thieves. Evidence includes the stealing of valuable materials in schools, with a clear intent of reselling them – something for which "Jihadists" would not have organized an attack.

was then temporarily obscured by the French Operation Serval, which effectively countered their ground-level firepower with airstrikes.

In the lull that followed Operation Serval, in 2014, as the Salafists were licking their wounds and regrouping, the long-festering constitutional crisis in Ouagadougou finally came to a head. In October, the people rose up in the capital and after a bloody showdown, Compaoré was forced to flee – evacuated to Côte d'Ivoire in a French special forces' helicopter. In the year that followed, the well-armed RSP men, whose corps had survived the flight of Compaoré, grew restive and eventually were led into a coup against the transition authorities by their commander, General Diendiéré (September 2015). After just a week, the coup miscarried due to the instantaneous and brave resistance from the population, and the belated opposition of the army. But if Diendiéré was then arrested, many members of the now dismantled RSP managed to escape.

As was mentioned before, Burkina's national security apparatus was either at the service of the Compaoré regime, or weakened and neglected (I return to some crucial aspects of this in the next sub-section). This means that the part of the security apparatus that was bound up with the regime was the backbone of national security in the country. When the regime fell, that backbone dissolved. Meanwhile, in Mali, the conflicts had worsened, in large part owing to the French tactic of relying on the Tuareg rebels and supporting a "peace process" that excluded other northern Malian communities, especially the Fulani. The Salafists had regrouped and gradually developed new modes of subversion that combined terror bombings, stoking community grievances, destroying state positions, and expanding the scope of their operations using a hybrid network of militants and bandits. Some of these developments began in 2014-15, a time during which the Salafists had also started to consider Burkina as a legitimate target due to its alliance with the French. In January 2016, the threats voiced against the country[41] finally materialized in the carnage in downtown Ouagadougou.

Because this followed so closely the failure of the Diendiéré coup, many RSP men had escaped, and it was widely believed in Ouagadougou that Compaoré had kept in touch with his shadow networks in northern Mali, the attack was seen as engineered, one way or another, by a regime that was refusing to die. A related analysis was closer to the mark, though still

---

[41] In February 2013, a MOJWA spokesman had declared that Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey would be targeted by suicide bombers. Before the 2016 attacks in Ouagadougou, Bamako was indeed hit in November 2015, when militants went on a rampage at the luxury Radisson Blue hotel.

inconsistent, as it contended that Ouagadougou was hit because terrorists felt they had lost an ally in Compaoré. Newly elected president Marc Roch Christian Kaboré gave voice to this view at the end of January 2016 when he explained, during an African Union summit in Ethiopia, that "if we are attacked today, it is because the truce, which was a form of collusion between Blaise Compaoré's regime and these movements, is over.[42]"But as the double attack on the Burkina military HQ and the French embassy underlined two years later (March 2018) the collusion which the "terrorists" were unhappy about was not the one that they allegedly had (and lost) with Compaoré, but rather the one which they saw existing between the Burkina state and their French foe. In October 2018, French forces intervened on the ground in northern and eastern Burkina for the first time (officially) and in December 2018, Burkina formally reinforced the "collusion" by signing a status of forces agreement (SOFA) with the French Operation Barkhane, the strategic military mission developed by the French defense ministry to engage Salafist militants across the Sahel.

Officially, Barkhane's mission is to "stabilize" the Sahel countries "in partnership" with local defense forces by neutralizing "armed terrorist groups.[43]"This indicates that the strategy originates in the French state, with local armies being trained and deployed in support to it, and local governments being required to manage the politics in order to minimize local resistance and assist in the cooperation with relevant institutions or key figures. Using development-aid jargon, Barkhane public relations brochure affirms that a key objective of the mission is to "stimulate ownership from the partner countries of the G5 Sahel of the fight against armed terrorist groups.[44]" (The G5 Sahel is a formal "security-and-development" partnership group of the five states that cooperate with Barkhane, i.e., Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. These states cooperate more with Barkhane than with one another). The need for "ownership" stresses that the approach is not endogenous. While state leaderships appear happy with this rather subaltern form of partnership, it has created strong misgivings in national public opinion. In this view, a discourse identifiable in Burkina, and also in Mali and Niger, claims that the inability of high-capacity, well-equipped "foreign troops" of defeating the "terrorists" is suspicious; that the "terrorists" are, in reality, accomplices of the "West;" that the "Westerners" are playing a long game whereby the issue of terrorism would be used to "recolonize" the Sahel and grab rich, if hidden, natural resources; and that

---

[42]  Quoted by A. Tisseron, "Jihadist Threat. The Gulf of Guinea States up against the wall," *loc. cit.*
[43]  See "Operation Barkhane. Dossier de Presse. July 2019. "
https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/barkhane/dossier-de-presentation/operation-barkhane
[44]  "Operation Barkhane. Dossier de Presse." (*op. cit.*), p. 4.

the Sahel countries are already, to a substantial extent, under "foreign occupation."

This discourse, which is now mainstream, stimulates an incipient protest movement across the three countries. In October 2019, after demonstrations in Burkina's towns against the presence of French forces, a columnist for the Ouagadougou paper *Le Pays* explained that the protest was caused by the suspicious attitudes of Western powers[45] and the notion – presented as a fact – that the Sahel possesses unexploited natural riches, which would explain, more than anything else, Western involvement in the conflicts. (Sahelian analysts generally overlook the fears which militant Salafism inspires in the West and discount the trauma inflicted on the French body politic, e.g., by the killings perpetrated in Paris and elsewhere by Salafi extremists). But the columnist also pointed out that the Sahel states operate along the lines of Western principles, such as rationalism and liberalism, which are hated by the *fous d'Allah* ("Allah crazies"), and that they would not have survived the Salafist offensive without Western help. In the event of a Salafist victory, he noted, many elite Burkinabe would have headed "to the execution squad" and therefore "the baby [Western help] should not be thrown out with the bath water [Western imperialism]."[46] This analysis is a good summation of the dilemma of public opinion in Burkina regarding Barkhane and the uncomfortable position of the Burkinabe state.

But if Western imperialism is indeed the focus of this discourse, it can also be related to frustration over the fact that the Burkinabe state has not developed a strategy of its own, which might not have relied so predominantly on military force and the idea that the conflicts only involve "terrorists" and "victims." Unsurprisingly perhaps, the Fulani civil society groupings (Tabital Pulaaku and its local emanations) offer the most outspoken counter-discourse in this vein, and recommend that governments engage militants on a diplomatic, not just on a military level.[47] But in general,

---

[45] Evidence mentioned in support of this thesis includes, for instance, French policy in the Kidal Region of Mali, where Barkhane is the controlling power; or the fact that the West was able to defeat the powerful armies of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and yet seems to be checked by the weaker armed groups of the Sahel.

[46] "Manif au Burkina et au Mali pour le départ des troupes étrangères. Ne pas jeter le bébé avec l'eau du bain," *Le Pays*, 10 October 2019, http://lepays.bf/manifs-au-burkina-et-au-mali-pour-le-depart-des-troupes-etrangeres/

[47] I did not find any public declarations to that effect on the part of Tabital Pulaaku and related groups, but this is the gist of interview responses I received from members in Niamey and Bamako (responses may not be substantially different in Ouagadougou, where I was not able to meet Tabital Pulaaku representatives due to time constraints). In most cases, though, interviewees were uneasy about the "younger militants" who have embraced the idea of Jihadism.

the debates in Burkina – and this is true in the two other countries as well – have not so far resulted in public positions and approaches that would do justice to the complexity and the structural dimension of the issues. Interview data show that views on these more sensitive issues are often subjective and tend to reflect community perceptions and experiences. They also relate to reasonable concerns for the preservation of "national unity," i.e., an internal balance that – it is felt – risks being compromised when "too much stress" is put (by actors and commentators) on underlying internal geopolitical rifts.

To sum up: the historical analysis proposed in this sub-section shows that the Burkina conflicts are repercussions of the events, in northern Mali, which brought the Conflict Zone into being in 2012-2013. The Burkinabe response to the turbulence in Mali was shaped initially by the Compaoré regime's alliance with the French. The analysis suggests that, had it survived the constitutional crisis in late 2014, the regime might not have prevented Salafist attacks, despite its vaunted RSP and intelligence apparatus. In the changed context of 2012-2014, its tactical decisions had put it in the firing line of the Salafists (threats were made about Burkina as early as February 2013). If the Burkinabe elites had forgotten this in the eventful (for national politics) year 2015, it was brought back home to them at the beginning of 2016, in the gruesome form of a terror attack. Initially reluctant to resume the Compaoré tactic of relying on French help, the new rulers of Burkina eventually reverted to it. By the end of 2018, they had formally signed up to the subaltern partnership proposed in the framework of Operation Barkhane/G5 Sahel. In the meantime, the Conflict Zone had rapidly extended and firmly taken root in large stretches of northern and eastern Burkina, fueled by the structural issues that had developed since the end of Sankarism.

In the next sub-section, I analyze the Burkinabe conflicts in relation to these issues.

## The Conflict Zone takes root: structural accidents

As explained before, the Burkina conflicts have developed in a context of rural crisis exacerbated by the neoliberal policies adopted from the late 1980s onwards by the Burkinabe state. Important elements of this crisis comprise a reduction of state presence, including in the security sector as will be shown below, and a growing imbalance, in the traditional economy, between the farming and the pastoral sectors. Because I have not conducted fieldwork in rural Burkina, I will not enter into many details here. But – also given the theme of the study – I will use the security sector as an entry point into the

conflicts, and I will rely on some aspects of the conflicts to discuss the imbalance in the traditional economy. Although I will not refer directly to this, much of my understanding of these issues also draws from research in Mali and Niger.

If the *Compaoré regime* focused, as mentioned, on its own "business," i.e., remaining in power and enriching those in its networks, the *Burkinabe state* became, after 1987, an entity that implemented policies designed for "developing countries" by international organizations, with the support of "development aid" from rich countries. In the security sector, these policies encouraged decentralization, touting the capacities of local communities to police themselves in furtherance of rule-of-law and human-rights norms which a centralized police organization may more easily violate.[48] Legislation sought to transfer many responsibilities to local communities (*Loi relative à la sécurité intérieure* ["Internal Security Law"], 2003). A decree in 2005 created local committees for security, which were supposed to act as middlemen between local communities and officials of central (prefect) and local (mayor) government for all security-related matters. A corps of community police – called *police de proximité* ["proximity police"] – was created the same year. But an assessment made in 2009 concluded that the committees were barely working ("at 20%"[49]) and the community police was, by and large, a failure. In the jargon-heavy language of administrations, the assessment report stated that "the fundamental reason for this is related to the fact that the socio-cultural references of the [local] populations were not factored into the appointment of the proximity police.[50]" This observation is important. It means that people in official circles were developing acceptance for community-based policing operations, which claimed to ground their rules and protocols in local culture, not in state law. Groups engaging in such operations were known to exist in many parts of the rural areas since the early 2000s. The administration gave them decorous names such as "local initiatives for security" or "community initiatives for security." But they had/have a worrying tendency of acting outside the confines set by the law banning militia – which, for instance, prohibits the unauthorized

---

[48] This follows the philosophy of community policing as it emerged in the United States, in the fraught context of the civil unrest of the 1960s. However, there was also the fact that Burkina's "police density" was inadequate according to United Nations norms. While the UN recommended 1 police officer for 400 persons, Burkina, in 2009, had 1 police officer for 2000 persons. The proximity police, it was hoped, would change those figures. (See D. Wisler, "Les Comités locaux de sécurité au Burkina Faso, " COGINTA, nd.).

[49] D. Wisler, "Les Comités locaux de sécurité au Burkina Faso," *op. cit.,* p. 6.

[50] Introduction to the *Deuxième plan de mise en œuvre de la police de proximité* ["Second plan for setting up the proximity police"], Journal Officiel No. 25 of 24 June 2010.

carrying of weapons – and the penal code (some of their methods fall under the criminal categories of battery and torture).

After 2010, two groups in particular emerged as the dominant players in this field of informal policing, the Koglweogo and the Dozo. The broad territorial "jurisdictions" of the two groups reflect Burkina's classic geopolitical frame: the Koglweogo are present in the central plateau and its northern fringes, and the Dozo in the west. Importantly, both groups are based on the farming communities, the Koglweogo drawing the majority of their membership from the Mossi, and the Dozo from the Dioula. But the implication is not that they only serve those communities. A 2018 survey for the Ouagadougou-based Institut Supérieur de Sécurité Humaine (ISSH) found wide approval of the Koglweogo (and Dozo) across the country. 90% of respondents "valued" this informal police force, a majority (53%) with no reservations, and the results in the ISSH study show that "cultural references" play a much smaller role in the popularity of the Koglweogo than the inadequacies of the state police. The most important factor for approval of the Koglweogo is their capacity of responding rapidly to threats, and the single most important criticism of state police is their incapacity of doing the same. This particular factor scores highest both nationally and as disaggregated by region. As an illustration of what this means, it must be noted that in Burkina (but also in Niger and Mali), aggrieved parties must generally pay for the fuel of the police or gendarmerie vehicle to secure an intervention. This is especially true in the rural areas, where distances may be long and roads bad. While they emphasized "cultural references" as an important factor in the popularity of the Koglweogo, state analysts kept mum on this issue. In essence, they explained away the failure of the state to develop a reliable police force by putting forth claims about "culture." (Meanwhile, much financial resources and equipment had been lavished on the RSP).

A stress on culture also obscures the important fact that as a policing force the Koglweogo are not the promoters of cultural values, they are the defenders of the propertied and the influential. Security is necessarily pursued against those who may threaten the existing order, and who are often the deprived and the dissatisfied. In the context of Burkina's traditional economy in the post-developmental era, the ruling system privileges the elite (chiefs and land-holding families) and private wealth acquired through the control of land or access to land, which is a form of rent. Especially in the north and the east, where good agricultural land is scarce, competition over

land rights[51] at times erupts into deadly pitched battle, and judicial or customary challenges to ownership or exploitation rights of land may result in land becoming derelict. In this context, the state and politicians focus on problems related to the land question (how to fix them, but also how to exploit them for political gains). Issues relevant to pastoralists are marginalized. In fact, cattle, the basis of their activity and identity, tend to become chattel in the hands of those enriched by land rights. This issue leads to a pattern of conflicts and confrontation which plays into a double narrative of Fulani banditry (from the farming group) and of dispossession and marginalization (from the pastoralists). These two narratives talk past each other.

Thus, the Koglweogo narrative about the killing of the chief of Yirgou is not that it was perpetrated by "terrorists" but rather by "Fulani criminals" who wanted to keep cattle that he had entrusted to them for grazing. This is the version of the story given by Samir Abdoul Karim Ouedraogo, the spokesman of the group, who criticized the "Western media" for presenting as an "ethnic strife" an event which, in fact, would have been law enforcement gone awry. In an interview with the French channel of Presstv.com, Ouedraogo maintained that the massacre was not caused by Mossi animus against the Fulani, but by the fact that the Koglweogo of Yirgou were leaderless following the death of the chief, and acted wildly because there was no one to give proper orders.[52]This narrative has some elements of plausibility when related to the context of Burkina's traditional economy. The facts about the reasons for the murder of the chief of Yirgou have not been established yet, but it appears that he was wealthy (by the standards of the traditional economy) and he controlled the Koglweogo, i.e., the dominant "police" force in the area. His leadership of the Koglweogo derived from the fact that he was a Mossi chief and most Koglweogo, in Yirgou as elsewhere, are Mossi. But the Koglweogo narrative suggests that he was killed not because he was a Mossi chief, but because he was a man of wealth and influence in the district.

A journalist (and Koglweogo enthusiast) I interviewed in Ouagadougou about the Yirgou events mentioned – reluctantly – the fact that "the Fulani" complained that they were being squeezed out of land. They were also being

---

[51]  The competition is over rights rather than directly over land. These rights, such as they are, derive from an equivocal mixture of state law, customs, and power play. For a description related to Burkina and its northern and eastern regions, see M. Ouedraogo, "Le Foncier dans les politiques de développement au Burkina Faso," Ouagadougou: GRAF [Groupe de Recherche et d'Action sur le Foncier], Series "Enjeux et Stratégies," Paper No. 112, undated.

[52]  Presstv Français, 23 June 2019, "Aucun conflit ethnique au Burkina," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ISo08cumKM.

deprived of cattle – indeed, made to become the mere caretakers of cattle that once belonged to them, but which they lose through grazing fees and mounting debt. The dynamics of dispossession to which they are falling prey have been naturalized by the pro-market discourse and practices of the state, NGOs, and their key partners in the traditional sector, i.e., local elites. In this context, "Fulani," or rather a certain category of Fulani, have become the deprived and the dissatisfied against whom the Koglweogo feel that they need to maintain law and order. Hence, the "Fulani" in Yirgou Peul were not targeted qua Fulani, but because they were seen to constitute a dangerous class in the traditional economy of the region. Sedentarized and elite Fulani are not part of this description (Koglweogo spokesman Ouedraogo highlighted his intimate friendship with such Fulani). They belong in the world of the propertied and those with rights over land. Moreover, the higher order of Fulani society in the Sahel – chiefs, nobles and religious leaders – also seek to keep their right over deferential labor, i.e., the *rimaibe* and *maccube* classes of subservient Fulani[53] whom Pam Weintraub describes as "slaves of history" – because they inherited their condition and stigma from a past that refuses to die.[54]

In this context of social and economic injustices, many critics denounced the existing order in the Sahel. Among those, the most vocal since the early 2000s was a Fulani idealist, Ibrahim Dicko, who, among other things, preached against the subordination of the *rimaibe* and the economic oppressions imposed on the Fulani lowly. Dicko spread his reformist message using a variety of venues, including radio sermons, madrasa education, and the activities of a religious association, Al-Irchad, that was formally recognized by the Burkinabe state in 2012. These details show that Dicko used the language of Islam for his social criticism, but he was not then a religious ideologue – an "Islamist." His reliance on a religious discourse came from the fact that Islam is the common culture of Burkina's north. Additionally, the Sahel Region corresponds to the ancient emirate of Liptako, a devotional polity established by Fulani warriors – who saw themselves as Jihadists – in the early 19th century; and through the colonial era, the religious culture of Liptako was deeply shaped by Hamallism, a Tijaniyya Sufi doctrine that mobilized the young and the downtrodden and was persecuted by the French in the 1930s-50s due to its attacks on the clerical establishment

---

[53] In fact, although they are bound to Fulani society, these people are not considered to be Fulani by the so-called free men of Fulani society. In traditional Sahelian societies, slavery erases community identity and heritage.

[54] P. Weintraub, "Slaves of history," *Aeon*, 18 May 2015, https://aeon.co/essays/how-descendants-of-african-slaves-are-stigmatised-for-life. Wintraub's essay is about Fulani in Senegal, but what she describes is valid for Fulani society elsewhere across the Sahel.

of the Umarian Tijaniyya.[55]In that regard, Dicko was initially closer to Hamallism than to Salafism. He was married to a daughter of one of the more notable imams of Djibo, the northern town in the vicinity of which he was born, and he was thus linked to the local establishment and well-adjusted in local communities, among which the dominant form of Islam is Sufi Tijan (both Hamallist and Umarian). Without the Salafist war of Mali, Dicko would most likely have remained a popular preacher in the Sahel, disliked by the elite, but tolerated for his own "tolerance" (i.e., lack of radicalism[56]) by the state. Very probably, as the years passed, his preaching would have had little impact on social conditions in the region. But in the 2010s, the Salafist war provided an opportunity to engage in violent action in pursuit of reform. Dicko linked up with Hamadoun Koufa, the Malian Fulani who founded a Macina liberation front in late 2014 or early 2015 and whose personal trajectory bears many similarities with his. By then, Koufa had already opted for violent radicalism after it appeared that the Salafists might win the war in Mali. By embracing the same path, Dicko broke with those among his followers who preferred to stick to persuasion instead of embracing violence, but he drew in those who were ready for a fight and needed only a leader to organize them.[57]In 2015, he was intercepted in Mali by the French on his way north to join Koufa, and he spent a few months in prison in Bamako. After he was released and returned to Djibo in late 2016, he founded the Ansaroul Islam militant group, calling for violent subversion of an unjust, un-Islamic order, and adopting a more perceptibly Salafist slant. As a small operation with no hope of conquering territory by brute force, Ansaroul Islam adopted the method – developed in Mali following the 2013 debacle of the Salafist armies – of suppressing state rule via targeted killings of chiefs and other elite allies of the state, and stealth attacks on state positions (administration, schools, security posts, etc.).

---

[55] As soon as the French were out in 1960, the Liptako became the site of a social-justice reform process, when the teen-ager (he was only 14) Abdoulaye Nassourou Dicko came to power as Emir of Liptako. In measures that have a proto-Sankarist accent, Dicko proceeded to relinquish the land traditionally appropriated by the emiral family; set up collective farms for the cultivation of sesame, groundnuts, and cotton; abolish the in-kind tithe which farmers traditionally owed the Emir; establish a "Fraternal Union of the Believers" with Roman Catholic priest Father Bidault; and prohibit excision. Elite forces rebelled and persuaded President Yaméogo that the young emir was plotting an annexation of Liptako by Niger, a characteristic accusation in view of Burkina (Upper Volta)'s internal geopolitics. This prompted a *coup d'émirat*, with the arrestation of Dicko and the abrogation of the emirate in 1963. The mature Dicko, later reinstated as emir, will abandon this youthful radicalism, which was inspired by a combination of Hamallist preaching and left-wing fervor. See A.-M. Pillet-Schwartz, "Prélude à une approche de l'histoire coloniale de l'Émirat du Liptako,"in *Burkina Faso. Cent ans d'histoire, 1895-1995*, T. 1, Y. G. Madiéga and O. Nao (eds.), Paris: Karthala, 2003, pp. 897-912

[56] Although very critical, the Dicko of those years was not calling for a Sharia state and the destruction of Burkina's civil state.

[57] For in-depth analysis of the tension between, and implications of these two options, see my book *The Politics of Islam in the Sahel. Between Persuasion and Violence*, London: Routledge, 2017.

The apparent success of these tactics – which terrified the elite but roused hopefulness amongst the downtrodden – and the expansion of the Conflict Zone into central Mali, i.e., the regions bordering northern Burkina, had three important consequences. First, by importing weapons they created opportunities for the growth of armed militancy; second, by creating a support network they opened doors for Salafist armed groups from the Sahel-Sahara; and third, by hounding state security forces they lifted obstacles for criminal operations.

The ailing Dicko died in 2017,[58] but his trajectory vividly illustrates the thesis of this study. The proximate cause of the crisis in northern Burkina were the events in Mali, but it became entrenched principally because of the conditions in the region, including the longstanding state disengagement from the security sector, and the social problems tied to land, pastoralism, and labor. While the Compaoré regime is often praised for having built a capable security and intelligence apparatus, we have seen that this was chiefly in view of protecting the regime's interests. In particular, the Compaoré security apparatus was not designed at the scale needed to respond to issues that are both very local and broadly structural in nature. And while the social problems in northern Burkina have been well documented by experts since the 1990s, the neoliberal orientation of the rectified Burkinabe state (and reliance on donor funding) allowed only for scattershot technocratic policies – not reform and a new blueprint for society. Dicko's movement took inspiration from the failure to address those problems, and could grow due to the weakness of Burkina's security systems. However, it was born in connection with the Malian turbulence. Indeed, without the militant Salafism introduced in the region by the north African armed groups, Dicko would have relied on the culture of Islamic social criticism that was an integral part of his heritage as a man from the Liptako, and that was a form of *non-violent* radicalism.

Although the Conflict Zone remains endemic only in northern Burkina (particularly in the Sahel Region), it has made inroads in the south-east as well, i.e., the impoverished areas where, as we have seen, populations suffered from government abuse in connection to the lucrative Safari business. The south-east does not have the Liptako heritage of Islam and *Pulaaku* (the ideal image of Fulani culture), and neither is it a realm of "the people of the turban." But anti-government action, and in particular the

---

58  It is believed that his younger brother, Jafar, has succeeded him (https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/12/21/jafar-dicko-le-nouveau-visage-du-djihadisme-au-burkina-faso_5232877_3212.html).

driving out of reviled security forces, brought the support of local communities to Salafi militants. Moreover, the south-east retains a strategic value as a smuggling corridor with the Gulf of Guinea for criminal operators. These details suggest that support for the Salafists is more transactional here, and therefore weaker than in the Sahel. Indeed, it is here that the Salafists appear to have lost ground to the Franco-Burkinabe alliance in recent months.

Lastly, one may stress that the most effective *armed* response to Salafist, or Salafi-induced aggressions comes from the French, for whom – to use Barkhane's vocabulary – Ansaroul Islam and other actors are "armed terrorist groups." Burkina's alliance with the French has reinforced the Burkinabe public's tendency to define (and simplify) the issues in terms of "terrorism" and its victims. Similarly, we have seen that informal policing groups offer their own simplifications, and describe the conflicts in terms of a "law-and-order" issue of fighting "criminals" – who just happened to be predominantly Fulani. Moreover, frustrated with what they see as the government's inability at ending attacks targeting civilians, natives of northern districts are calling for an increased citizen mobilization for self-defense.[59] Aside from these security-focused responses, the Burkinabe state is raising funds for "development investments" in the Sahel, now considered a priority region for a range of social-policy projects that aim at improving access to public goods such as education, health, or electricity. In a context of guerilla attacks where facilities such as schools are a target and workers are exposed to violence, these projects face obvious challenges.

The key questions at this juncture regard future developments. Will the Conflict Zone extend further south inside Burkina? If yes, how, and why? If not, why not? And what should the Burkinabe government do to better address the problem and limit the expansion of violence? I have no clear answers to these questions, obviously, but in the next and final section, I explore them on the basis both of the claims made at the beginning of the study, and a review of the dynamics in the Conflict Zone.

---

[59] Thus, a group of natives of Kongoussi – a town just over a hundred kilometers north of Ouagadougou whose rural districts were devastated by guerilla attacks in October 2019 – call for the constitution of self-defense groups inspired by… Sankara's revolutionary committees. (https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/11/06/au-burkina-face-a-l-impuissance-des-autorites-a-enrayer-le-cycle-des-violences-des-citoyens-s-engagent_6018281_3212.html).

# Conclusion: A State must Work

In this study, I have focused on issues internal to Burkina Faso, but the Conflict Zone is not a Burkinabe phenomenon. To understand its future evolutions in Burkina, one therefore needs to step back and consider it from the correct perspective, which is international. The Conflict Zone extends over neighboring parts of Mali and Niger and would have been impossible without the involvement of state and non-state actors in north Africa – especially Algeria, Libya, and Mauritania. Beyond this Sahel-North Africa neighborhood, powerful Western and Middle Eastern actors are also involved, the former directly via military intervention, the latter more remotely and informally. In particular, if the issues described in the case of Burkina – and which are closely similar/related to those in Mali and Niger – are the fuel of the conflicts and warfare, the engine is the wider contest between militant Salafism and Western efforts at battling "Islamist terrorism." Taking these two factors – Sahelian-Saharan issues on the one hand, Salafist/Western contest on the other hand – into account, I envision the ways in which the dynamics they spur may lead to two mutually exclusive scenarios, i.e., the expansion of the Conflict Zone into southern Burkina, or its stabilization within its current confines (see Map on p. 4), and I recommend the strengthening of the regalian state and the development of a political approach for tackling the Conflict Zone.

## The Conflict Zone: waxing or staying?

A key conclusion of this study is that the impetus of the Conflict Zone comes from the combination between the endgame of outside actors and the grievances of local actors. Therefore, the Conflict Zone will endure as long as (1) outside actors will pursue their endgame, (2) this endgame could successfully exploit local grievances, and (3) response from local governments remain ineffective. Moreover, the Conflict Zone will expand if outside actors are able to secure local allies further afield.

The initial driving force of the Conflict Zone is the leading combine of (mostly) Algerian militant Salafist organizations which have been known under a variety of names since the 1990s, including (but not limited to) the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA, ["Armed Islamic Group"]), founded in 1993; the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC, [Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat]), which split from GIA in 1998; Al Qaeda in the

Islamic Maghreb; and more recently the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. These groups were spawned by the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, GIA, GSPC, and other groupings had attempted establishing a zone of control in the Sahara by seeking the alliance of the Saharan rebel groups (Tuareg and Tubu) that were harrying the states of Mali, Niger, and Chad. This failed at the time, due to the fact that the agenda of the rebels, i.e., securing independence or a degree of territorial autonomy tantamount to independence, was unsympathetic to Salafist ideology. Moreover, the Saharan rebels often had special relations with the regime of Col. Kaddafi, which was hostile to Salafism, both for ideological reasons (Kaddafi favored Sufi Islam), and due to the fact that these were *Algerian* armed groups and were suspicious as such. In the end, the Salafist armed groups were able to carve out a sanctuary in northern Mali, in a process which I have described in another work.[60]From there, they attacked "Western interests" by abducting Western development workers and tourists in the Sahel-Sahara of Mali and Niger. The target of the Algerian Salafists – later joined by sympathizers from other countries in the Maghreb – was not the Sub-Saharan states, but the West, via its presence in the region, which was limited to development and humanitarian projects, aside from a few mining concerns (uranium in Niger's Sahara, gold in Mali and Niger's Sahel, manganese in Burkina's Sahel).

In that period, their preferred enemy – i.e., the West – saw them as a nuisance, not a threat. But the French, for whom Niger's uranium had strategic value,[61] took them more seriously and started to envision a robust security presence in the Sahel-Sahara, seeking out the assistance of governments in Bamako, Ndjamena, Niamey, and Ouagadougou. Niamey and Bamako, the more important capitals in this effort, were not at first very responsive (Ndjamena was already firmly in the French fold), but Ouagadougou – as we have seen – was more open. The fall of Kaddafi changed the stage for reasons which have been reviewed earlier in the study. One important fact was that, for the first time, a Tuareg rebel group – the one led in Mali by Iyad ag Ghali under the name Ansar Dine – adopted the Salafist ideology and accepted to strike an alliance with the north African Salafists. Moreover, the Fulani – whose grievances have been detailed earlier in the study in the context of Burkina – felt cornered by the pro-Tuareg tactics of the French and left aside by their own governments (Mali and Niger). They became convenience allies of the Salafists in northern Mali – and later, in that country's central region as well. Interview data with Fulani actors in Mali and

---

[60]  A. Idrissa, "In a Neighborhood on Fire: 'Security Governance' in Niger," Sahel Research Group Working Paper No. 008, June 2014.

[61]  The mining site of Arlit was attacked in May 2013 – along with a military base in Agadez.

Niger – some of whom have been involved in the fight – suggest that if, at first, the alliance of Fulani militants with Salafist was transactional, the Salafist tactic of indoctrinating recruits is now grooming Salafized militant Fulani especially in the younger cohorts. Lastly, if the bulk of local fighters for the Salafist war (regardless of whether the primary motivation is transactional or ideological) come from the Fulani communities, the Salafist armed groups draw in also people from other ethnic backgrounds, including Mossi in Burkina. Their ideological appeal, based on a grim interpretation of the Islamic faith, transcends ethnic differences through a religious discourse capable of impressing Muslims of all communities.

By involving local groups in their fight, the North African Salafists have gained staying power, but they also have been compelled to modify their endgame to some extent. Initially, the objective was to remain relevant as a force that could achieve a comeback in the Maghreb – especially in Algeria. The attacks on "Western interests" in the Sahel-Sahara were opportunistic action that brought income through ransom money and helped to maintain relevance. However, after local groups became involved, the agenda changed and included an attack on the Sahel states, although with a variety of goals depending on the group. Thus, the events in northern Mali in 2012-2013 showed that while the north African Salafists (AQIM) sought to limit territorial expansion to northern Mali,[62] the Malian Salafists (Ansar Dine and MOJWA) pushed for conquest of the entire Malian territory, while the Tuareg rebels (Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad, MNLA ["National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad"]) fought for a secession of north-eastern Mali. In other words, AQIM wanted to solidify control over the northern Malian sanctuary so as not to get distracted from its main target, i.e., Algeria; Ansar Dine and MOJWA wanted to establish a Sharia state in Mali; and MNLA wanted to create a new desert state around the town of Kidal. Rapidly, the North African and local Salafists united to eject MNLA, and the tactics of local Salafists subsequently carried the day, prompting an armed drive to the south, since Mali's army was clearly not going to put up much resistance. In the process, MOJWA, a Fulani-dominated group, drew in Fulani fighters from the Niger-Mali border (they had been in conflict with Tuareg sub-groups in the area since the late 1990s, and dreaded the prospect of a Tuareg state in Kidal).

---

[62] See the recovered papers of the Algerian Salafist leader Abdelmalek Droukdel after he evacuated Timbuktu in 2013. https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/838898-aqp-sahara-playbook.html

The Salafist march to Bamako was interrupted by the French in 2013. As a result of this success, the French rapidly became the dominant military actor in the region, expanding the expeditionary mission Operation Serval into a larger-scale operational mission Operation Barkhane. The tactical choices they made in Mali proved, however, ill-considered. Shunting the Malian state aside, they turned Kidal Region into a no-state sanctuary, not only owing to its strategic value for conducting missions across northern Mali, but also because they decided to partner with the very Tuareg armed groups which were at the origin of the Malian crisis, and which did not want the Malian state in Kidal. The political fallout is serious. The Kidal decision became a primary evidence in the anti-imperialist theories against the French intervention in the region, and it moved the French to support a peace process that excluded not only the Salafist forces, but also other (non-Tuareg) northern communities, including especially the Fulani. Moreover, it turned Algeria – which has a long and sensitive border with Kidal Region – into a strategic rival, which is said to have established connections with elements in the Salafist combine to better oppose the French presence at its southern flank.

The Salafist war therefore became especially important among the Fulani for both transactional and ideological reasons. First, given the choices made by the French – and followed by the governments in Bamako and Niamey – many among them felt they had little choice but to ally with the Salafist armed groups and defend their access to natural resources against the encroaching Tuareg (and also the land-grabbing sedentary farmers). Second, this initial motivation turned into a quest for a more general settlement to be obtained by the force of arms, meaning, fuller access to land for pastoralists and the establishment of a more just regime, with clear rules and fair outcomes in a society with no customary subservience – a promise of Sharia law as propounded by Salafism. If these various motivations are idealistic, the results are ugly. At least some of the militant attacks on civilians are efforts at removing farmers from land and forcibly subverting the existing regime of rights to land. Violence also aims at removing elite figures that embody the existing system and state governance – such as, recently, the murdered deputy-mayor of Djibo, Oumarou Dicko (3 November 2019). More importantly, the mixing of motivations for engaging in militant action, and the lack of a central leadership lead to physical violence that is both highly organized and highly unregulated, and that strikes outside the common pattern of conflicts in the Sahel-Sahara. This new kind of violence is at the origin of a phenomenon often described in the media as "psychosis" – i.e., a form of irrational fear and suspicion – through the regions affected.

Given the dynamics described above, it would seem that the Conflict Zone could expand only where an analogous configuration exists, meaning, large, marginalized groups in which a culture of Islam favors the belief that a Sharia regime can bring a just order. The Fulani society presents the only instance in the region – indeed, some of the Fulani militants whom I interviewed in Mali and Niger highlighted this point indirectly, by deploring the fact that, due to their struggling existence in the Sahel-Sahara, the Fulani have become easy prey for groups (meaning, the Salafists) in search of cannon fodder. Yet, even that development occurred largely as a result of shortsighted action from the French and their local allies.[63](Moreover, this outcome is actually quite limited, considering that there are Fulani populations outside the Conflict Zone, including in other regions of Burkina and Niger).

In this interpretation, then, the Conflict Zone cannot extend further south into Burkina Faso – at least not following its current dynamics, which may change due to some unexpected development. For instance, the tactic of stoking local grievances and partnering with the outlaws may inspire other Salafist groups elsewhere, though not necessarily in southern Burkina. On the other hand, if the Conflict Zone may not expand, it may not shrink too. This is because at each stage of its development, circumstances emerged that sustained it. In the early stage, in 2012-13, it grew through territorial conquest in Mali; in a middle stage, in 2013-16, it endured because, in the new context of the war in Mali, the old Salafist tactic of seeking local allies had successfully brought on board militants from all local communities while also stimulating the grievances of large groups, such as the Fulani pastoralists and populations in eastern Burkina; in the current phase, Fulani groups in central/northern Mali and in northern Burkina see in the existence of the Conflict Zone an opportunity for fighting their way to redress and socioeconomic change (within the traditional economy) – while north African Salafists remain active and maintain their networks, relevance and revenue. If the latter are irreconcilable due to the fact that their interests lie outside of the Sahelian countries, local Salafists, and especially those who joined the battle for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons, may in theory be reconciled. But the main concern is that as time passes (1) the pragmatic and ideological reasons for fighting are increasingly merging into one single-minded, less tractable agenda among local militants (especially Fulani) and (2) the North African Salafists are stimulating this dangerous process.

---

[63] This is true especially of Niger in the early period of French intervention, 2013-2015. The Malian government – such as it was – was for a long time out of the equation and Burkina was long out of the Conflict Zone.

# Recommendations

Because the struggles in the Conflict Zone are an entanglement of several conflicts which are shaped by transnational and international dynamics, they cannot be tackled only at the national level. But national governments can develop an approach that would help them cope with the conflicts and prevent possible contagion. And although outside actors can help, the recommendations made her are addressed principally to the Burkinabe government, considered as the relevant and legitimate central actor for devising and putting to work such an approach.

The two key issues which the government has to address in priority are (1) that of the distance between the state and the population. In this context of emergency, the "state" means the regalian state, in particular its justice, security, and territorial administration departments; and (2) cooperation with other actors, including the French, neighboring states, and some non-state actors. At a more structural level – but this is a long shot – the Burkinabe leadership needs to produce a new blueprint for society that replaces the failed paradigm adopted in the late 1980s.

## Develop a Strong Regalian State

In all research I conducted in the three countries, the common complaint – indeed, the only one that recurred despite the differences in events leading to conflict – was the "absence of the state." When this phrase is parsed, it becomes clear that the state that is deemed to be absent is the one which provides the public goods of justice, security, and regular administration. We have seen, in this study, that citizens in Burkina's small towns and villages – i.e., the major part of the country and the realm of the vast traditional economy – often feel they have to take justice and security in their own hands, and that the central state is often content to let this happen, claiming lack of resources, the relevance of "culture," and the notion that such "local initiatives" can be seen as "assisting" or "complementing" the (inadequate) state security force. The massacre at Yirgou Peul has put paid to these illusions – and the fact that months after the events, the courts have not yet sorted out the issue underscores the weakness of the justice system. This weakness, in turn, is tied to the failings of the security system, since the absence of a state police force in the area has complicated the evidence-gathering, forensic and other investigative tasks which sentencing in state courts require.

Strengthening the regalian state means engaging in thoroughgoing reforms that turn the security forces (police and gendarmerie) and the courts into functioning institutions, i.e., institutions that are well-staffed (in number of workers and officers), well-resourced, well-equipped, well-trained, reasonably resistant to political manipulation, autonomous, reliable (with proper levels of accountability and oversight), and endowed with pride in their mission and a level of integrity that would significantly lower corruption and *affairisme* (wheeling and dealing).

In the case of the justice system, this recommendation is well-understood in Burkina. As explained in the study, the deterioration of the regalian functions of the state resulted from the political will of the Compaoré regime to weaken and manipulate them to ensure its survival. Right after the fall of the regime, the first major initiative of Burkina state officials was to convene the estates general of the justice system in order to reform a discredited justice system (March 2015). This national convention led to the adoption of a reformist National Pact for the Revival of Justice, an official protocol of conscience which listed in 114 articles the legal and practical measures needed to clean the justice system and make it work for the people. An Authority for the Implementation of the Pact was created and it was stipulated that the state will design an action plan for the implementation. In April 2016, the Justice ministry issued the 131-page action plan. Regarding the justice system, the recommendation therefore is "simply" (1) that the Burkinabe government should streamline, expand and fast-track the reformist agenda born from the opportune moment of the fall of Compaoré, and (2) that it should especially gear reform to make the justice system work for the traditional economy and the rural areas. But if I put the word "simply" in quotation mark above, it is to indicate that the recommended action is by no means simple, due to major issues of political will. First, as soon as Burkina moved from the transition government, during which it was possible to promote measures for the public good, into elections and a representative government, political calculations and power dynamics created a loss of momentum that reduced the reformist push to a slothful pace – with a growing risk of miscarriage. Second, given the relative fragility of Burkina's political institutions and justice system, incentives remain high for the new government to engage in "regime-formation," i.e., in the undermining of institutions for the purpose of remaining indefinitely in power. To carry out such a project, the justice system would be first in the line of fire. One could only advise that Burkina politicians, especially those at the helm of the state, refrain from letting these instincts loose.

In the case of the security system, the official awareness of the security problems that developed into the conflicts studied, has not led to a similar process of reform. Yet, not only would the justice system, even reformed, not function properly without an expanded and reformed security system, but the problems in the rural areas and the traditional economy will worsen when – as we have seen in the case of the Koglweogo – citizens feel they need to take matters in their own hands due to the inadequacies of the state. We have seen, in the study, that a proximity policy combined with local security initiatives were thought to be the adequate response for the problems in Burkina's small towns and villages. An action plan and schedule of implementation were designed but the policy never took off due to the apathy of top officials. Here, too, the recommendation is to aggressively train and deploy the proximity police and gendarmerie. If, in the conflict areas, their action will certainly be limited by the emergency conditions and the special security tactics that are tried by the government, it will nonetheless curtail the emergence of local vigilantism that adds fuel to fire.

The key idea behind these two recommendations is to prevent the Conflict Zone from extending further in the country by implementing, in the regions outside of it, reforms that are long overdue; and to make the state capable of tackling some of the issues in the Conflict Zone (mass killings, the opportunist actions of criminal bands, vigilantism, e.g.) by streamlining the justice-security combine. There is an interest from European countries in supporting the integration of the services working in the repression of non-state organized violence (criminal or terrorist) – i.e., the so-called "penal chain" –, but this will be more efficient if the reform of the justice system is carried out.

These recommendations do not address the issue of the conflicts themselves, which requires a political, not a technical response. This political response should include elements of a new blueprint for society, and international and transnational cooperation.

## Cooperate

Many of the incapacities of governments in the Sahel come from limitations imposed by the West, and to which they adjusted themselves in the 1990s-2000s – in the case of Compaoré's Burkina, quite willingly. These limitations removed the state from the economy and from local governance and promoted private interests and decentralization. For governments, this served as a pretext (1) to refrain from developing the capacities needed for

rural development and the transformation of the traditional economy, and (2) to abstain from investing in robust territorial administration. The Burkinabe government must find the political will to change this and subvert the existing paradigm. At a structural level, the conflicts in the Conflict Zone express a challenge to this paradigm, which has clearly run its course. The government must understand in particular that the freedom of the market should play, like everything else, in a national strategy of socioeconomic development, which can restrict it according to identified political and economic imperatives; and that decentralization does not mean de-administration. To be sure, this paradigm was generated by the Word Bank, the IMF and other Western-dominated international organizations, not by the Burkinabe state. But whatever the vision that these organizations have, and the power of enforcement that they wield, they are not governments, and the responsibility of running Burkina Faso, or failing to do so – and arguably, the conflicts in the country's part of the Conflict Zone are a failure of government – rest with its rulers.

While that is the case, it also remains true that the Conflict Zone was born outside of Burkina and includes non-Burkinabe regions. The Burkinabe government cannot tackle it alone. The Conflict Zone has a *transnational* dimension in that it spans Burkina, Mali, and Niger; and it has an *international* dimension in that it involves other state and non-state actors. While technical and political efforts at the national level are indispensable, they must be paired with effective cooperation with neighboring states, especially in terms of intelligence gathering and transborder security tactics. Surprisingly little of this is happening, and in fact the French have been more adept at cooperating with all three states than the states between each other. Yet, even this French cooperation is limited by issues such as the reticence of national armies and the lack of trust of the French services in local state services. This is justified by the poor condition of these services which, in the case of Burkina, have been disorganized in 2014-15 by the fall of Compaoré and the Diendiéré coup attempt.

Transnational cooperation is also necessary for engaging in negotiation with the armed groups. Not all of them – or all members of most of them – are irreconcilable Salafist warriors of the "Islamic-state" utopia, and a better understanding of the leaders and the dynamics in the universe of militant groups would enable a divide-and-conquer tactic. However, given the characteristics of the Conflict Zone, such a tactic is unworkable if led by only one government. It implies that the Burkinabe government and its counterparts in Bamako and Niamey should mobilize the resources needed to develop their own coordinated strategy, independent from, though not

necessarily opposed to the French focus on military action and small development projects.

Competent and hardnosed reform of regalian state organizations – going against the instinct of rulers who prefer pliable and soft institutions to durable and functional ones – is in any case a mandatory step to make any of these actions realistically possible, not to mention successful. Other international actors could support, including financially in an initial phase, those efforts at building a strong regalian state, if the current emergency forces Sahelian leaders to choose a clear pathway to achievement and demonstrate political will and commitment in their government work.

**ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG**