



Burkina Faso Security: Threats, Challenges, & Response

Dr. Barak Ben-Zur

Gabriel Toole

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism in Burkina Faso first appeared on a large scale after the collapse of the Compaoré regime and the dissolution of the Presidential Security Regiment (RSP). Analysis of attacks in Burkina Faso from 2015 to 2019 shows that attacks have steadily increased in frequency, lethality, and sophistication. In 2019, the conflict in Burkina Faso accelerated at an unprecedented rate, with fatalities increasing by over 600%. Additionally, there was a drastic shift away from military targets and towards civilian targets. Attacks in Burkina Faso are now perpetrated by local and regional Jihadist organizations, self-defense groups, criminal organizations, and rouge military units. Efforts by local, regional, and international forces to curb the rising violence have largely failed. The weakness of the Burkinabé security response is, in part, due to the lack of a strong intelligence apparatus. In order to rectify this, Burkina Faso should focus on building a strong preventative intelligence network that extends to rural communities and focuses on small scale counter-terrorism operations.

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Introduction

Since violence first spilled over into Burkina Faso in 2015, attacks have more than doubled every year. Violence in Burkina Faso has now risen to an unprecedented level and is becoming an existential threat to the government, as well as its civilian population. By the end of 2019, 454 attacks were documented in Burkina Faso, resulting in 910 fatalities.¹ Furthermore, most attacks and fatalities in 2019 were against civilian rather than military targets, marking a drastic shift from 2018. Efforts by the central government, France, and the G5 Sahel to curb the rising violence have largely failed. Over 2,000 schools have since been closed in Burkina Faso and there are now over 490,000 Internally displaced people (IDPs).¹ By UNHCR's own estimates, the number of IDPs is projected to increase to 950,000 by December 2020.²

This research paper seeks to understand the patterns of violence in Burkina Faso through a counter-terrorism lens. The paper analyzes attacks, and their perpetrators, in Burkina Faso from 2015 to 2019 to understand why counter-terrorism efforts have failed to reduce or contain the violence. The paper is broken into three parts: Part one analyzes the current threats in Burkina Faso, separating the violent actors into three general categories. Part two analyzes the security services response to these threats. Finally, part three provides recommendations and insights for the future. Supplemental material, including the research methodology, is located at the end of the paper.

The Security Threats

Although the attacks in Burkina Faso are all connected in one way or another, the current violence is not uniform and can be divided into three general types:

- (1) *High-value Strategic Attacks*: These attacks began with the Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino restaurant attack in 2016. Since then, one annual attack of high strategic value has occurred every year. One specific actor or group is likely responsible.
- (2) *Border-zone Insurgency*: These attacks began with the formation of Ansar al-Islam in 2016, and have organically grown into a full-fledged insurgency in the northern and eastern border regions. A web of interconnected Islamic militant organizations is largely responsible.

ⁱ This number only reflects attacks by suspected militant groups. It does not include attacks perpetrated by self-defense groups or the Burkinabé armed forces

(3) *Inter-Ethnic Conflict & General Violence*: These attacks consist of acts of revenge, extrajudicial killings, and general crime. Much of this violence occurs between different ethnic groups and communities. These attacks increased after instability surfaced in Burkina Faso and are mainly perpetrated by self-defense groups, rouge military units, and criminal organizations.

High-value Strategic Attacks

High-value Strategic Attacks are defined as such based on a variety of characteristics such as: the target, location, sophistication, lethality, impact on the central government, and international media coverage. Starting in 2016, there has been one annual attack in Burkina Faso of extremely high strategic value. These attacks are particularly unique in Burkina Faso given that they began occurring ten months prior to the rise of the Insurgency in the North. Attacks of this scale require a buildup of infrastructure, training, intelligence gathering, planning and capabilities.

In Burkina Faso's case, a high-value strategic attack was the first major instance of violence in the country since the fall of Compaoré in October 2014. Only ten months later did an insurgency begin to form, following a normal growth trend of increasing experience leading to increasing sophistication, and lethality. The unique timing of these annual attacks, and the links discovered between them, suggests that specific actors are orchestrating major attacks in Burkina Faso and cultivating the rapid spread of instability in the country.

Splendid Hotel & Cappuccino Restaurant Attack - January 15, 2016

The first major terrorist attack in Burkina Faso occurred on January 15, 2016, six weeks after the general elections. At around 7:30 pm, 3-4 individuals armed with AK-47 style assaults rifles attacked the Splendid Hotel and the Cappuccino restaurant in the Capital, Ouagadougou. Both soft targets were along Kwame N' Kruma Avenue, an area of the city frequented by UN personnel and other foreign nationals.³ These specific targets were intentionally selected due to the high number of foreigners present in the area. Additionally, the precise timing of the attack coincided with a 200-person regional meeting of air traffic controllers that was currently being held in the Splendid Hotel.⁴

According to the Burkinabé authorities, some of the attackers arrived at the hotel early and began mingling with the guests.⁵ Later, when the rest of the attackers arrived, the assailants set fire to cars in the parking lot and indiscriminately shot at civilians eating at the Cappuccino restaurant. The militants then launched their assault on the Splendid Hotel, trapping 120 civilians inside.⁶ In

the end, the attack resulted in 30 deaths and 50 injuries. Among the victims were Canadians, French, Swiss, Dutch, Portuguese, Ukrainian, and American nationals. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility for the attack.⁷

Aziz Istanbul Restaurant Attack - August 14th, 2017

The second High-value Strategic Attack occurred on August 14th, 2017 in Ouagadougou, two blocks from the Splendid Hotel. At around 9:00 p.m. that Sunday, 2-4 individuals armed with AK-47 style assault rifles arrived at the entrance of the Aziz Istanbul restaurant on motorcycles. The assailants began indiscriminately shooting at restaurant patrons and forced their way inside, killing the armed guard at the door. The attackers were eventually cornered by security forces and retreated to the upper level of the restaurant with hostages. The attack finally ended in the early hours of August 15th and resulted in the death of 18 civilians and two attackers. Among the civilians killed were French, Lebanese, Kuwaiti, Canadian, Libyan, Senegalese, Nigerian, and Turkish nationals.⁸

Much like the Splendid Hotel Attack, the attackers were able to use the cover of darkness to facilitate their movement and avoid suspicion. Additionally, the timing of the attack coincided with a birthday party inside the restaurant, resulting in a larger than usual crowd.⁹ Attacking along the same Avenue in Ouagadougou for the second year in a row exposed the government's continued vulnerability and inability to protect its capital. Even though a year and a half had passed since the previous attack, the government appeared just as vulnerable as in 2016.

To this day, the Aziz Restaurant Attack has gone unclaimed by any terrorist organization. However, the timing and modus operandi of the attack suggests that the same culprit is likely responsible. The reason for leaving the attack unclaimed may be due to the accidental deaths of prominent Muslims in the attack.¹⁰ Two of the fatalities in the Aziz restaurant were the Grand Imam Sheikh Walid al-Aly and Sheikh Fahd al-Husseini of Kuwait. Their deaths were major news in the Arab world and the Kuwaiti King honored them by commissioning two new mosques in their name.¹¹ It is possible that JNIM was responsible but decided not to claim this attack for fear of losing support in the Muslim world.

Army Headquarters and French Embassy Attack - March 2nd 2018

The third attack to hit the capital is possibly the most sophisticated attack Burkina Faso has experienced to-date. On March 2nd at around 10:00 am, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), painted in the colors of a UN vehicle, drove into the side of the Army Headquarters compound and detonated in a massive explosion.¹² Following the explosion, a group of four

attackers, allegedly dressed in military uniforms and armed with AK-47 style assault rifles, assaulted the compound.¹³ Almost simultaneously, a van attempted to breach the wall of the French Embassy a few blocks away.¹⁴ A separate group of attackers, dressed in civilian clothes, launched an assault on the embassy using similar AK-47 style assault rifles.¹⁵ By noon, the assault had come to an end with eight Burkinabé soldiers killed, 60 soldiers wounded, and 24 civilians injured.¹⁶ Eight of the assailants were killed in the assault while two others were captured.¹⁷ JNIM, a recent merger of AQIM and other al-Qaeda aligned terrorist organizations, claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁸

Increased Sophistication

The attack marked a significant increase in sophistication and aggressiveness of the perpetrators. The previous two attacks were initiated under the cover of darkness and targeted civilians in unprotected soft targets. This new attack occurred in daylight, against two of the capital's most secure facilities.

The attackers used military uniforms and an altered vehicle to successfully enter the area; and the attack occurred simultaneously on multiple targets, which required far more planning and coordination than in the previous two attacks. The attack also marked the first time that a suicide attack was seen in Burkina Faso, and the first time that a VBIED was used.¹⁹ Additionally, at the time of the attack, senior officials from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania were in town for a regional meeting of the G5 Sahel. The meeting was supposed to have taken place in the Army headquarters but had been moved to another room. The room targeted and destroyed by the VBIED was the exact room where the meeting was supposed to have taken place.²⁰

The timing, location, and tactics used in the 2018 Army HQ & Embassy attack all point to an operation that required a significant amount of planning, resources, coordination, and intelligence. The perpetrators had to acquire the resources and expertise to build a VBIED, smuggle weapons and personnel into the capital, cultivate a suicide attacker, and determine the exact timing and location of a high-profile meeting of the G5 Sahel.

Burkina Faso authorities launched an investigation after the attack and initially arrested Burkinabé nationals in connection with the attack. Two of the suspects were current soldiers and one suspect was found to be a former soldier, fired from the army after the 2011 mutinies.²¹ The investigation has produced no clear public results and still leaves many unanswered questions, such as how the current and former soldiers arrested were connected to the attack.

Semafo Mine Convoy Ambush - November 6, 2019

In 2019 on the morning of November 6th, in the eastern province of Gourma, a military-escorted civilian convoy embarked on its daily journey to the Canadian owned Semafo mine in Boungou. The convoy was led by a military escort comprised of soldiers on motorcycles and two armored cars. The military escort drove about 50 meters ahead of five easily identifiable white buses carrying hundreds of local workers employed by Australian Perenti Global and British Norgold.²²

Mine convoys had been the target of attacks in the past, prompting Semafo to start flying its expatriates' to the mine via helicopter while providing its local convoys with military escorts.²³ On this day, the convoy was approximately 40km away from the Boungou mine, when the lead military vehicle struck an IED. After the initial explosion, dozens of attackers descended on the convoy, armed with AK-47 style assault rifles and PKM-12 machine guns. Two of the buses managed to maneuver out of the ambush to safety while the other three were trapped.²⁴

According to eyewitness accounts from survivors, the attackers spoke a mixture French, Fulfulde, Gourmanchéma, Mooré, and Zerma. First, they engaged the military escort, and then the buses, shooting out the tires and firing indiscriminately at the sides of the vehicles. Afterwards, they approached the buses and executed any remaining civilians still alive.²⁵ The final toll of the attack was estimated at 39 fatalities and 60 injuries.²⁶ To-date, the attack has not been claimed by an organization.

The Semafo convoy attack stands out for a few reasons. First, the attack had elements of higher sophistication compared to other vehicle ambushes. The attack was initiated by an IED which both disabled the military escort and prevented the buses from easily escaping. Tactically, the attack occurred along a wooded patch of road #28 that lacked cell-reception, preventing survivors from calling for help.²⁷

Second, similar to the attacks in the capital, the attack targeted foreign presence and investments in the country, both considered crucial to the local economy.²⁸ Burkina Faso is projected to be one of the fastest growing gold producers in all of Sub-Saharan Africa and gold mining has played an increasingly larger role in economic development.²⁹ After the attack, Semafo indefinitely suspended operations at the Boungou mine.³⁰ Less than a month later, the Australian mining services company Perenti Global canceled all contracts and pulled out from Burkina Faso.³¹

Attack Connections & Links

Apart from the thematic similarities between the High-value Strategic Attacks mentioned above, some of these attacks were also found to have more concrete links. First, prior to the Splendid Hotel Attack, AQIM had initiated a regional campaign focused on hitting soft targets such as hotels. Two months before the Splendid Hotel Attack, Al-Qaeda linked militants attacked the Radisson Blu hotel in Mali, taking over 170 civilians hostage.³² In March, two months after the Splendid Hotel Attack, the Grand Bassam Resort was attacked in Côte d'Ivoire in a similar manner.³³

Not only did AQIM claim responsibility for all three of these attacks, forensic evidence suggests that one cell may be responsible for all three attacks. Weapons confiscated after all three attacks were found to have originated from the same source. Chinese manufactured Ak-pattern type 56-1 assault rifles with the same semi-sequential serial numbers were confiscated after the attack on Radisson Blu in Mali, Splendid Hotel in Burkina Faso, and the Grand Bassam attack in Côte d'Ivoire.³⁴

According to *Conflict Armament Research* (CAR), this was the first time these rifles were found in West Africa, the rifles were the most recently manufactured rifle found in the hands of non-state actors in the region, and they were first documented in Syria in early 2015.³⁵ This unique weapon set not only solidifies the theory that one specific terrorist cell is responsible for all three attacks but also points to its unique connections with the Middle East and to resources unavailable to other groups in the area.

Tracing the Cells

Nine months after the Splendid Hotel Attack, on October 23, 2016, a terrorist cell was discovered in Ouagadougou. The cell had apparently been attempting to recruit local youth, send them abroad for training, and then bring them back to carry out attacks. During the raid, one individual was killed in a shootout while the rest of the suspects managed to escape.³⁶

On May 21, 2018, a counter-terrorism operation in Ouagadougou exposed a terrorist cell linked to the March 2nd Army HQ Attack. During the raid on a villa in the capital, security forces seized detonators, detonation cord, French & Burkinabé military uniforms, and a Nissan Alméira, the same model as the vehicle used in the Army HQ attack. They also found the license plate of a moped used in the attack.³⁷

The cell was comprised of two Burkinabé nationals, Ouedraogo Youssouf and Sawadogo Abdoulaye, and two individuals from Mali. The four individuals had apparently occupied the villa since May 10th and were planning an attack in June 2018. It was found that Sawadogo Abdoulaye

was linked to the previous cell in Kilwin and may have been one of the individuals who had escaped the previous raid in 2016.³⁸

In early December 2018, Malian intelligence uncovered another terrorist cell near the southern border of Burkina Faso with additional links to the March 2nd attack in Ouagadougou. Four individuals were arrested in the operation: two Burkinabé nationals, one Malian, and one individual from Cote D'ivoire. The cell had apparently been planning attacks in all three countries over the new year and had also began recruitment operations in Cote D'ivoire. The alleged leader of the cell, Adama Konaté, was a Burkinabé national and had been mentored by Abdallah Sawadogo.³⁹

The fact that terrorist cells in the capital were traced to Burkina Faso's south western border, is an important discovery. It suggests that attacks in the capital are planned and orchestrated from abroad rather than from within the active insurgency in Burkina Faso's northern or eastern regions.

Border-zone Insurgency

In November 2016, ten months after the Splendid Hotel Attack, the first domestic attacks carried out by Islamic militants were documented in Burkina Faso's northern province of Soum. After four years of continued militant activity, much of the rising violence along the northern and eastern borders of Burkina Faso is now attributed to a variety of Islamic militant organizations. These organizations are carrying out both an insurgency against the military and terrorism against the local population. These groups have focused on attacking locals in a series of Targeted Killings and Abductions. The specific targets of these attacks have been tribal chiefs, Imams, marabouts, priests, suspected informants, and local politicians. Additionally, there have been a high number of Incursions, starting out as attacks on education and religious institutions and later turning into an increasing number of village raids.⁴⁰

At the same time, these same groups have carried out an insurgency against security forces in the region. These attacks have targeted security personnel, police stations, military bases, and military patrols in a variety of different ways. Although the number of attacks increased rather quickly, the insurgency itself has grown very organically. Both the frequency and lethality of attacks gradually increased overtime; and as time progressed, newer and more sophisticated types of attacks began to occur.⁴¹

By the end of 2019 it was evident that major changes had occurred in the violence in Burkina Faso. From 2018 to 2019, the number of total fatalities increased by over 600%; and, whereas most

fatalities in 2018 were from attacks on military targets, in 2019 most of the fatalities were Civilians.⁴²

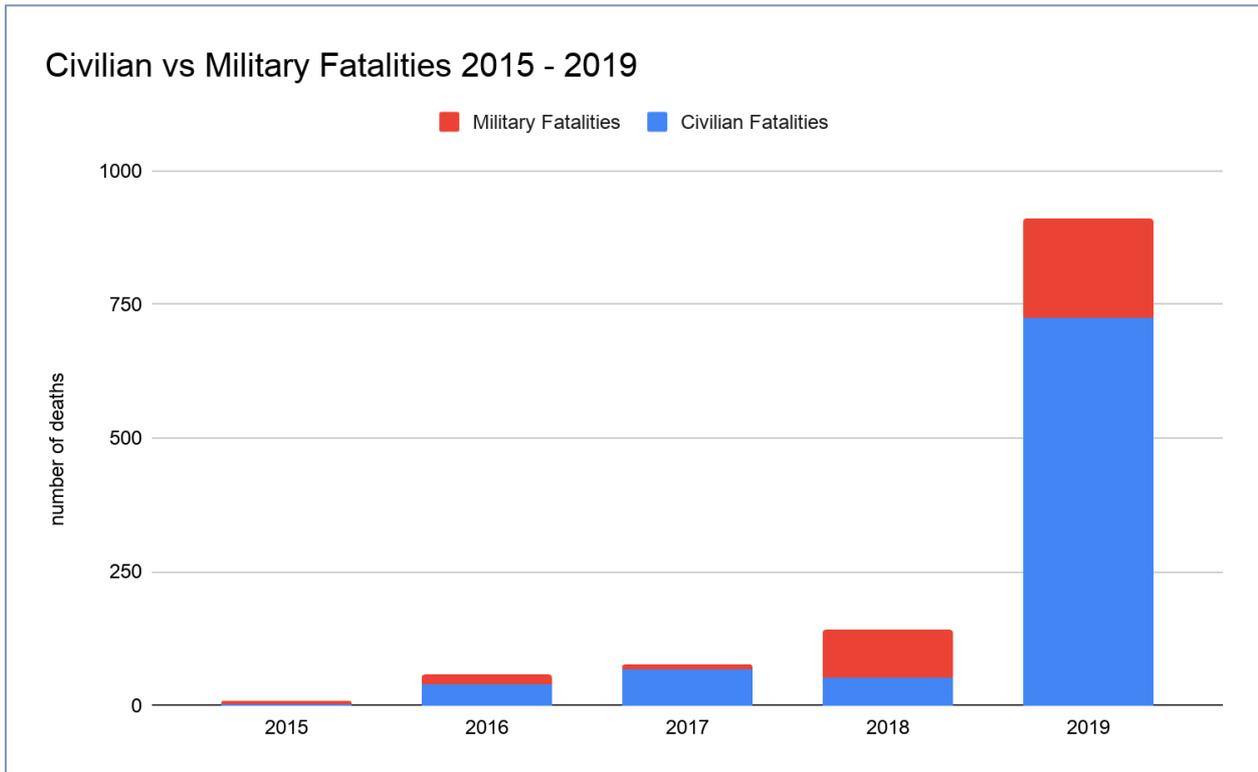


Figure 1. Civilian vs. Military Fatalities 2015 – 2019. Created using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* and the *Global Terrorism Database*.

The enormous increase in attacks and fatalities in 2019, as well as the strong shift towards civilian targets, indicates that the Insurgency in Burkina Faso is now firmly established. The origins of Burkina Faso’s Islamic Insurgency, can be traced back to Malam Dicko and the formation of Burkina Faso’s first Islamic militant organization, Ansar al-Islam, in 2016.⁴³ While Ansar al-Islam is now only a small piece of the larger conflict taking place in Burkina Faso, reviewing the early years of Ansar al-Islam and the initial rise of violence is crucial to understanding how and why the Insurgency was successful.

The Rise of Ansar al-Islam - انصار الاسلام

Among the foreign jihadists travelling to Mali during the 2012 Crisis was a radical Fulani preacher from Burkina Faso, Ibrahim Malam Dicko. Dicko returned to Burkina Faso in 2016 and used his new experience and contacts from Mali to build Burkina Faso’s own domestic insurgency.

Ibrahim Dicko was born into a traditional marabout family in the northern province of Soum and raised to be an Islamic scholar. By 2010, Dicko had developed a small local following through

his charismatic speeches, often broadcast on local radio stations. In his speeches, Dicko challenged the status quo of society and argued that the current system disproportionately favored traditional chiefs and marabouts at the expense of the local population.⁴⁴ As the Mali Crisis unfolded, Dicko became sympathetic to the Islamists' cause and began developing relationships with jihadists in Mali, including Amadou Koufa who later founded the Macina Liberation Front (MLF).⁴⁵

Dicko started calling for the local population in Soum to join the fight; but when his calls for violence faced strong local resistance, especially from the Fulani elites, Dicko left for Mali in 2012, presumably joining up with Koufa.⁴⁶ After his release from prison in Mali, Ibrahim Dicko returned to Soum in 2016 and began attempting to mobilize support against the government and the traditional elites. Dicko's recruitment attempts were not wholly successful within the Fulani community but he was able to attract some support from the more marginalized sub-groups: Remaibé youth and Fulani herdsman.⁴⁷ Dicko played off existing grievances within the Fulani class system to attract support from the Remaibé, those descendant from slaves, against the Fulani noble class. Additionally, he was able to use recent heavy-handed military operations in the area to attract some support against the government and its security services.⁴⁸

On December 15th, 2016, Dicko's words elevated into action when militants attacked a military camp in Noussoumba, killing 12 soldiers. The day after, Ibrahim Dicko claimed responsibility and officially declared the formation of Ansar al-Islam.⁴⁹ The Noussoumba attack was the first major attack by a local actor in Burkina Faso and marks the true beginning of the Insurgency in Burkina Faso.⁵⁰

Spearheaded by Ansar al-Islam, the Insurgency started out with a surge of Incursions, mainly into schools. They also carried out a series of Targeted Killings and Abductions, aimed primarily against tribal chiefs, religious leaders, local politicians, and anyone else they thought represented the institutionalized hierarchy working in tandem with the government and former colonizers.⁵¹ The traditional leaders and politicians in Soum all benefited from the status quo and were seen as the main impediment to the future success of the group; and educational institutions, especially those who taught in French, were viewed merely as an extension of this group of elites.⁵²

Between January and September 2017, 24 Targeted Killings and Abductions occurred, comprising 57% of all attacks during that period. These attacks took place exclusively in and around Soum and were meant to undermine existing societal structures.⁵³ Dicko's strategy was successful to some degree, but the larger significance of the formation of Ansar al-Islam is that it signaled to other regional jihadist organizations that Burkina Faso no longer had the capacity nor the ability to

contain the growing militant activity near the border. Dicko's death in June 2017 opened the door for more experienced militant organizations, under increasing pressure from France and the G-5 Sahel, to quickly move into Burkina Faso and take advantage of the situation.

Arrival of JNIM & ISGS

As Malam Dicko began his insurgency in Burkina Faso, his associates in Mali were busy as well. In March 2017, the Macina Liberation Front, Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and AQIM officially merged under the new banner: Jamaat Nusrat wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and pledged their allegiance to Al-Qaeda.⁵⁴

Malam Dicko and Ansar al-Islam were known to have received outside support from senior members of the now rebranded JNIM. Specifically, the creation of Ansar al-Islam was said to be directly supported by both Koufa's MLF as well as Iyad Ghali's Ansar Din.⁵⁵ In fact, Ansar al-Islam's first attack in Nousoumbou was suspected of being a joint operation between both Ansar al-Islam and Ansar Din's Sèrma brigade.⁵⁶ It has also been claimed that a senior member of AQIM was dispatched in early 2015 to provide training to Ansar al-Islam and the Sèrma Brigade in Mali.⁵⁷

While Dicko's JNIM colleagues had a hand in the formation of Ansar al-Islam, they seemed to have respected Dicko's territorial claims to Soum and northern Burkina Faso. It wasn't until after his death that these groups made a significant push into Burkina Faso.⁵⁸

Dicko's death in June created the perfect opportunity for the newly formed JNIM, as well as ISGS, to move into Burkina Faso and to build on what Ansar al-Islam had started. This is not to say that these groups were not already planning on moving into Burkina Faso, both AQIM and Ansar Din had wanted to move into Burkina Faso for some time,⁵⁹ but Dicko's death marks a drastic change in the attacks in the area and seems to have sped up their timetable considerably. The rapid entry of JNIM and ISGS into Burkina Faso is evident by a shift in the geographic location of attacks (See *Supplimental Materials*, pg. 41), and by a significant change in the militants' modus operandi. In the first half of 2017, all attacks in Burkina Faso occurred exclusively in the Sahel region. A month after Dicko's death, attacks began to occur in the north-western region of Boucle du Mouhoun, a region adjacent to MLF's area of operations in Mali.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the modus operandi of attacks changed significantly (Figure 2.). Prior to Dicko’s death, attacks in Burkina Faso in 2017 consisted entirely of Targeted Killings, Abductions, Incursions, a few Compound Assaults, and one minor Hit & Run. Immediately after his death, Compound Assaults doubled, IED attacks appeared for the first time, and seven Vehicle Ambushes occurred against military targets.ⁱⁱ

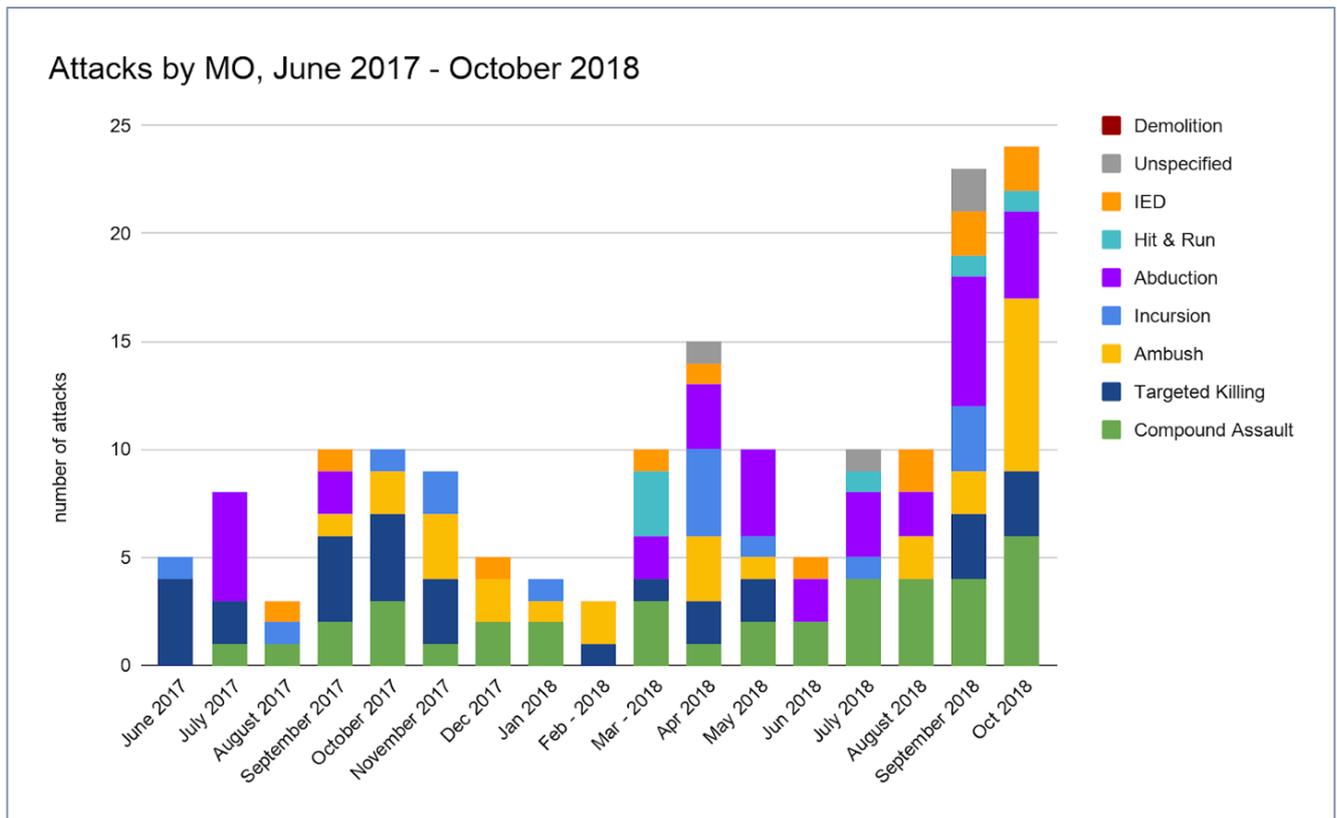


Figure 2. Attack by Modus Operandi from June 2017 to October 2018. Created using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* and the *Global Terrorism Database*.

The sharp increase in Targeted Killings directly following Malam Dicko’s death likely reflects revenge killings carried out by Ansar al-Islam, now led by Malam Dicko’s more violent younger brother, Jafar Dicko.⁶¹ These new targeted attacks maintained the same MO of Ansar al-Islam but escalated in violence. While the first targeted killings were mainly directed solely against the main target, now other civilians and family members seemed to be included in the attacks. For example, on July 24th militants abducted and executed three individuals in three separate villages in Soum.⁶² Four days later, a local councilman and three of his family members were assassinated simultaneously in two different villages in Soum.⁶³

ⁱⁱ One additional vehicle ambush occurred in 2017 on a civilian government vehicle

After the initial surge of Targeted Killings and Abductions in the 3rd quarter of 2017, the MO began trending downwards over the next 12 months, until they ultimately disappeared completely. From October 2017 through February 2018, there were no reported Abductions; and from December 2017 through February 2018, there was only one Targeted Killing.⁶⁴ The shift away from Targeted Killings and Abductions supports the idea that Ansar al-Islam members may have defected after Malam Dicko's death and joined the larger militant organizations moving into the area.⁶⁵ The significant decrease in the number of attacks in August, 2017 gives further credence to this thought. At the very least, it reflects a period of internal reorganization.

The Al-Qaeda - ISIS Relationship

Al-Qaeda and ISIS aligned organizations operating in Burkina Faso have a surprisingly friendly relationship and are even suspected of coordinating some of their attacks.⁶⁶ The lack of violent outbreaks between these groups is especially odd given the extremely close proximity of JNIM's, ISGS', and Ansar al-Islam's theaters of operation. Attacks by JNIM, ISGS, and Ansar al-Islam have all appeared in approximately the same locations. In fact, the overlapping area of operations of all three groups is so intertwined that many attacks included in the ACLED database list the suspected perpetrator as: "presumed JNIM and/or ISGS militants."⁶⁷

The peaceful co-existence between Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Burkina Faso is likely a result of strong inter-personal relationships between group members. It is worth noting that Adnan al-Sahrawi was once a member of AQIM, and then later al-Mourabitoun, before falling out with Belmoktar and leaving to form ISGS.⁶⁸ In short, the leadership of JNIM and ISGS were, at one point, directly working together (See *Supplimental Materials*, pg. 35). Additionally, Burkinabé officials claimed that Malam Dicko had formerly been a member of MUJAO during part of his time in Mali.⁶⁹ If true, this would have put him in direct contact with Sahrawi, the current leader for ISGS.

It is also possible that, after Malam Dicko's death, defecting members of Ansar al-Islam joined both JNIM and ISGS.⁷⁰ If former members of Ansar al-Islam were now imbedded within ISGS and JNIM this could help explain the relationship between JNIM, ISGS, and Ansar al-Islam. Not only were the leaders of JNIM and ISGS cut from the same cloth in Mali, but members of their newly formed cells in Burkina Faso may have all spent time together under Malam Dicko and maintained those personal relationships.

Organic Evolution of the Insurgency

What exactly happened after Malam Dicko's death, and the exact relationship between militant groups in Burkina Faso, will never be fully understood. Ultimately, it is enough to say that the relationship between militant groups in Burkina Faso is complex, interconnected, and reliant on strong interpersonal relations. The coordination between these groups has allowed the Insurgency to evolve quite quickly, which poses a growing problem for Burkina Faso.

Taking a step back and analyzing all attacks in Burkina Faso from 2016 through 2019 reveals three major uptrends that highlight the urgency of the current crisis. From the inception of Ansar al-Islam in 2016 to the very end of 2019, attacks in Burkina Faso have steadily increased in frequency, sophistication, and lethality.⁷¹

Not only are attacks occurring at an ever-increasing rate, but the attacks themselves are becoming more sophisticated. Starting with the initial VBIED attack in Ouagadougou in 2018, militant organizations in Burkina Faso have continued to incorporate new, more sophisticated, types of attacks into their modus operandi.

Once a new type of attack surfaces, it continues to be used every year after. For example, IED attacks first surfaced in August 2017 and Vehicle Ambushes appeared a month later. Both attack types have steadily reoccurred ever since their initial use; and by October 2017, the militants combined both tactics together and began using IEDs to initiate their Vehicle Ambushes.⁷²

A closer look at how explosives are used in Burkina Faso clearly shows that the insurgents are continuously refining their tactics. Once explosives were first introduced in 2017, their use has increased in frequency and evolved into new methods and targets. In 2017, explosives were used exclusively to target vehicles. In 2018, explosives began to be used to demolish schools and were also used in a major VBIED attack. By 2019, explosives were still used to target vehicles and schools, but also began to be used to demolish bridges and to lay booby traps. One such trap consisted of a human corpse dressed in a military uniform and placed in a roadside ditch. When a military doctor attempted to move the body, it exploded, killing himself and wounding two soldiers.⁷³ A couple weeks later, another rigged body exploded in Mali, killing 17 people.⁷⁴

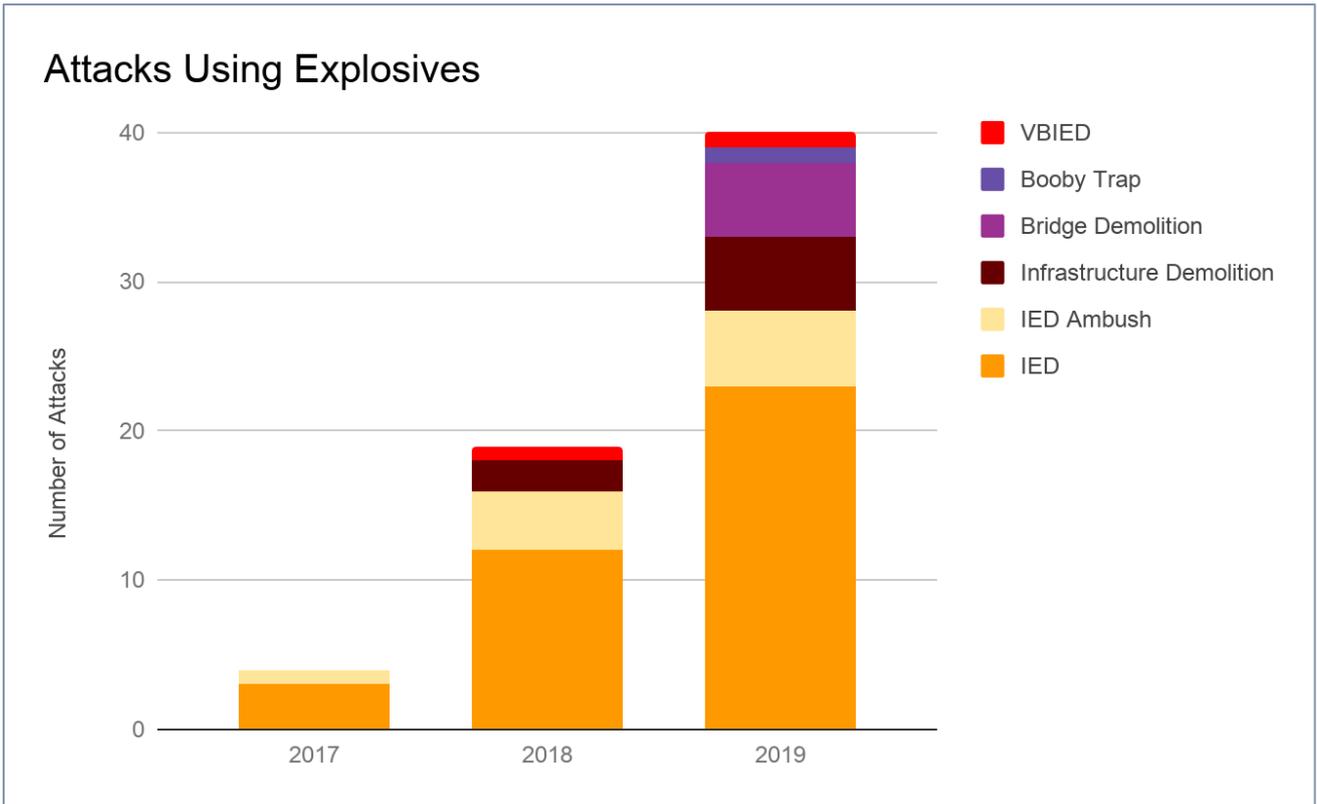


Figure 3. Attacks Using Explosives 2017 to 2019. Created using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* and the *Global Terrorism Database*.

Increasing Lethality

The combination of increasing frequency and higher sophistication has caused the lethality of attacks to rise significantly. By mid 2019, a tremendous gap between frequency and lethality appeared. The below graphs (Figure 4. – 7.) provide a comparison between the frequency and lethality of specific attack types. They show that the lethality of IEDs, Vehicle Ambushes, and Incursions have risen to unprecedented levels. Vehicle Ambushes in particular show how significant this trend is. Even though the frequency of Vehicle Ambushes in 2019 trended downwards over the last nine months, the total number of fatalities in Vehicle Ambushes increased drastically over that same period.

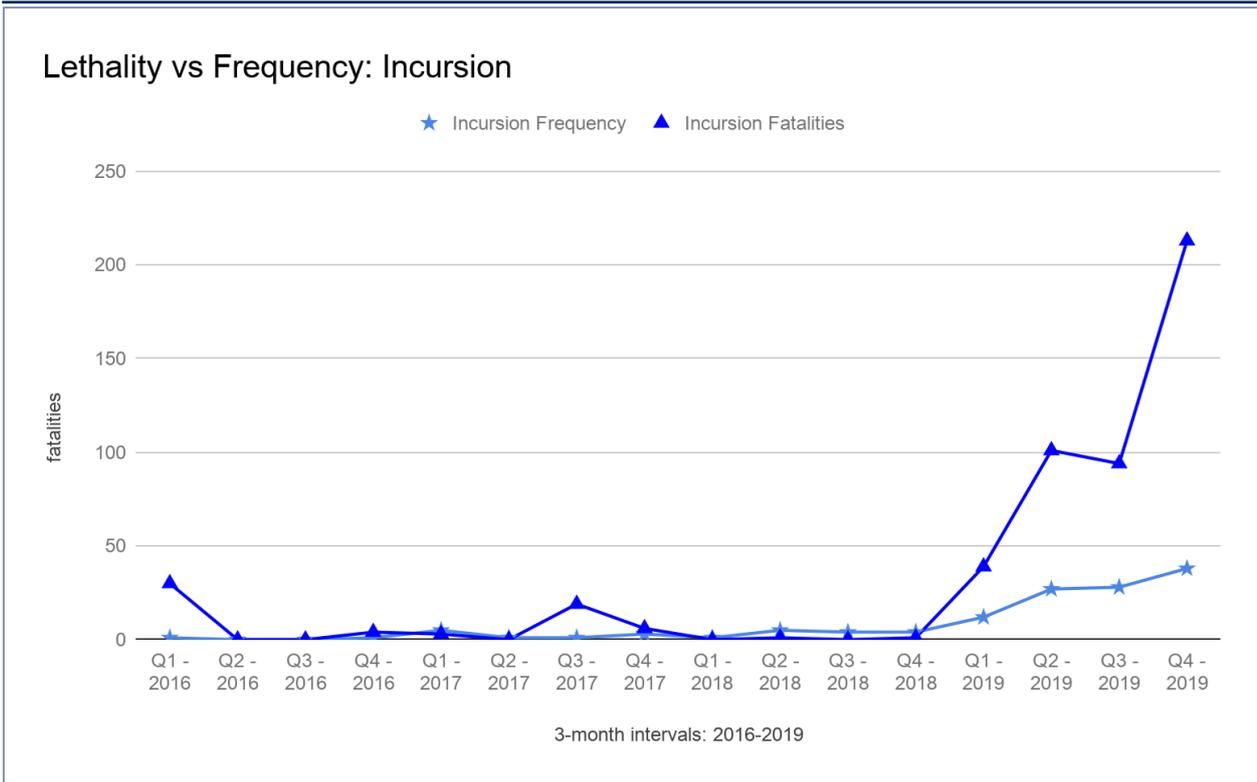


Figure 4. Lethality vs Frequency of Incursions from 2016 to 2019. Created using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* and the *Global Terrorism Database*

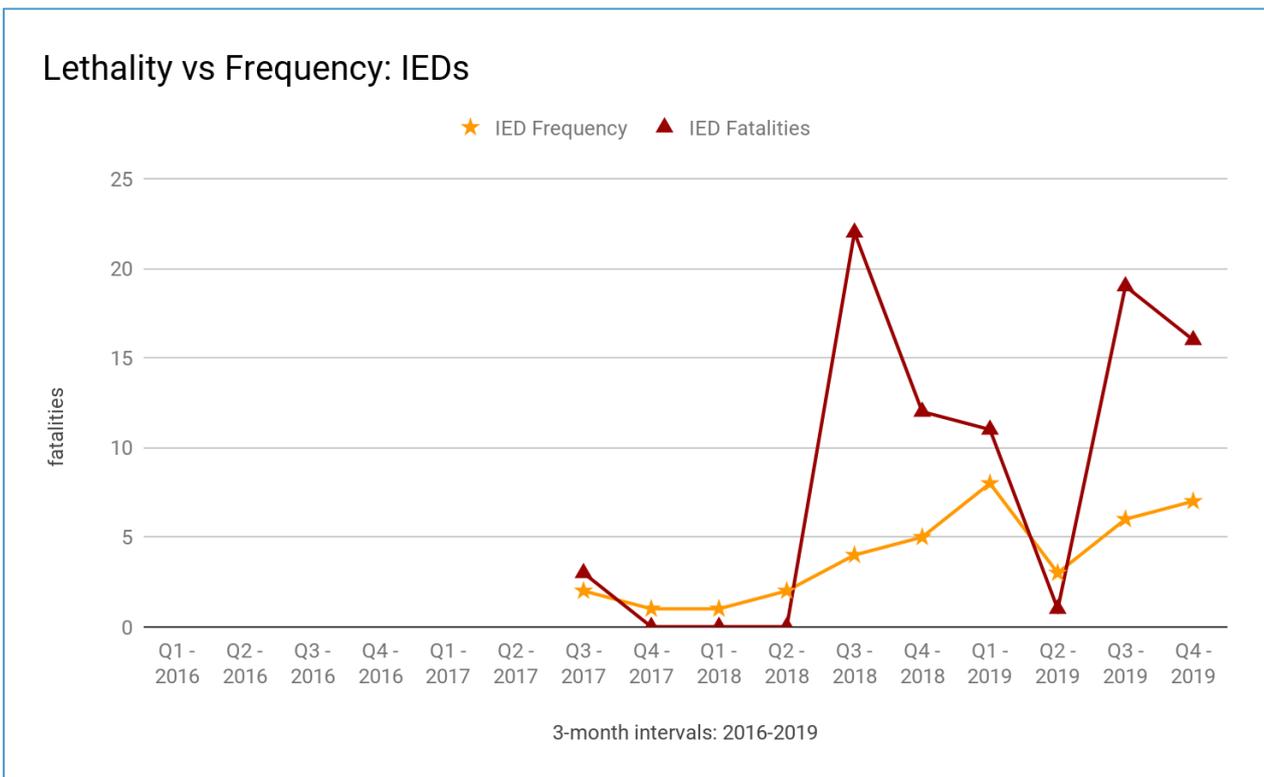


Figure 5. Lethality vs Frequency of IED Attacks from 2016 to 2019. Created using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* and the *Global Terrorism Database*.

Note: See *Supplemental Materials*, pg. 36, for further explanation of fluctuations in IED attacks.

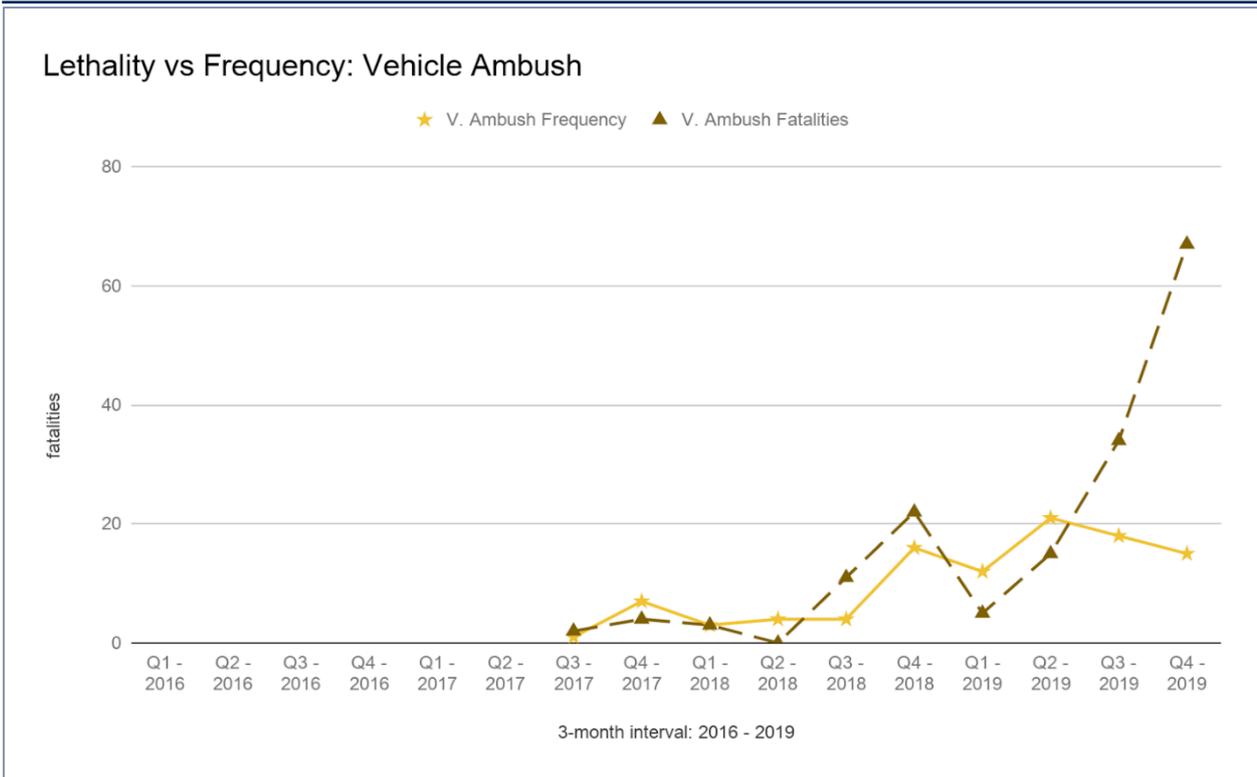


Figure 6. Lethality vs Frequency of Vehicle Ambushes from 2016 to 2019. Created using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* and the *Global Terrorism Database*.

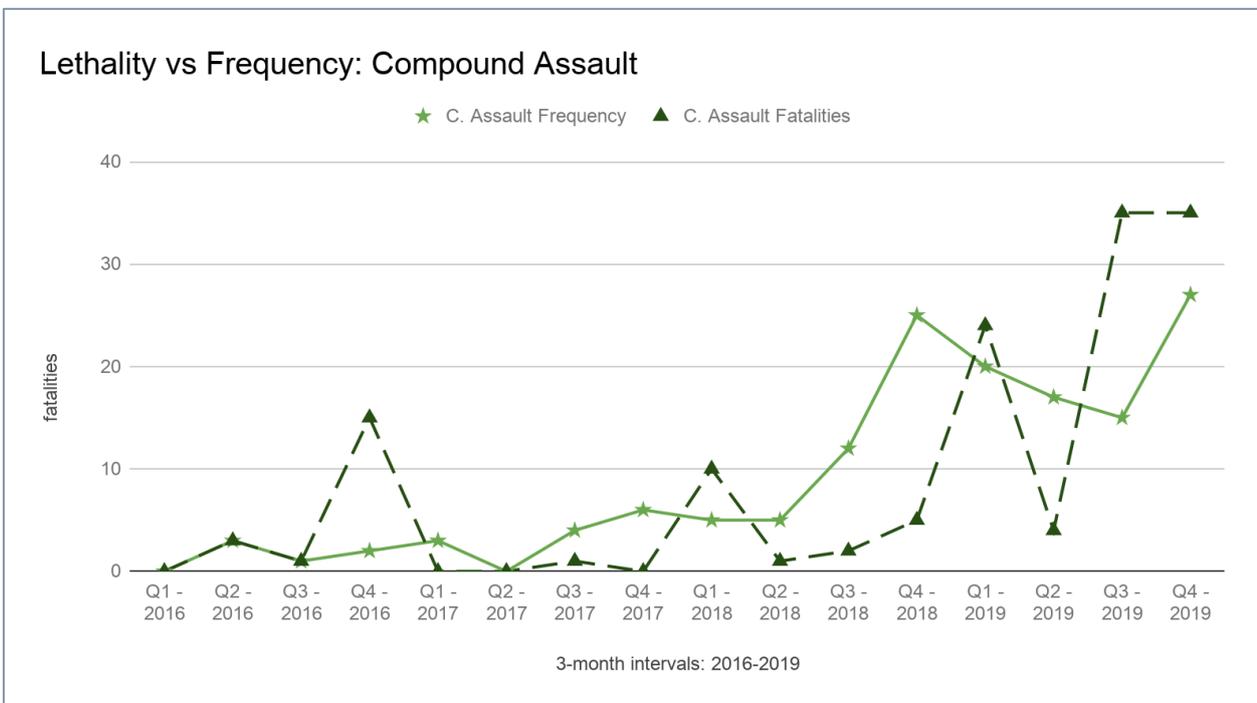


Figure 7. Lethality vs Frequency of Compound Assaults from 2016 to 2019. Created using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* and the *Global Terrorism Database*.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ Note: Graphing Lethality and Frequency of compound assaults is problematic. Compound Assaults may be successful while still resulting in few or no fatalities due to military forces retreating when attacked rather than attempting to confront the attackers. This is most likely why the graph does not show a clear distinction between lethality and frequency over time.

Shift Towards Civilians

2019 marked a significant shift away from military targets and towards terrorism against civilians. Referring back to Figure 1., in 2018 the majority of fatalities resulted from attacks on military targets. By 2019, that trend had completely reversed itself and civilians became the main source of fatalities in the conflict. Of the 454 attacks documented in 2019, 305 targeted civilians, resulting in 725 civilian fatalities compared to 185 military fatalities.⁷⁵

Incursions, specifically village raids, have become the most lethal type of attack against civilians in 2019. Of the 105 Incursions documented in 2019, 75 of them consisted of village raids; these village raids have resulted in a total of 368 fatalities in 2019 alone.⁷⁶ The drastic increase in village raids and civilian fatalities in 2019 points to a worrying reality. First, the insurgents have become deeply embedded in Burkina Faso and are solidifying their control over the North. The increasing village raids suggests that the insurgents are becoming bolder, more aggressive, and may be beginning to purge the civilian population in and around the areas they control.

Secondly, the unprecedented increase in civilian casualties could be a result of rising ethnic conflict. Although most of the village raids are suspected to have been carried out by jihadist groups, there is no clear proof of who exactly is carrying out these raids. Additionally, the village raids themselves have become consolidated within a specific ethnic area and are absolutely stirring ethnic conflict regardless of who the perpetrator is.

Comparing the geographic diffusion of village raids from 2017 to 2019 shows a large shift in the location of villages attacked by the insurgents (Figures 8. & 9.). From 2017 to 2018 village raids occurred exclusively within the Sahel region. In 2019, not only did village raids increase substantially, but most of the attacks now occurred within the predominantly Mossi region of Burkina Faso.

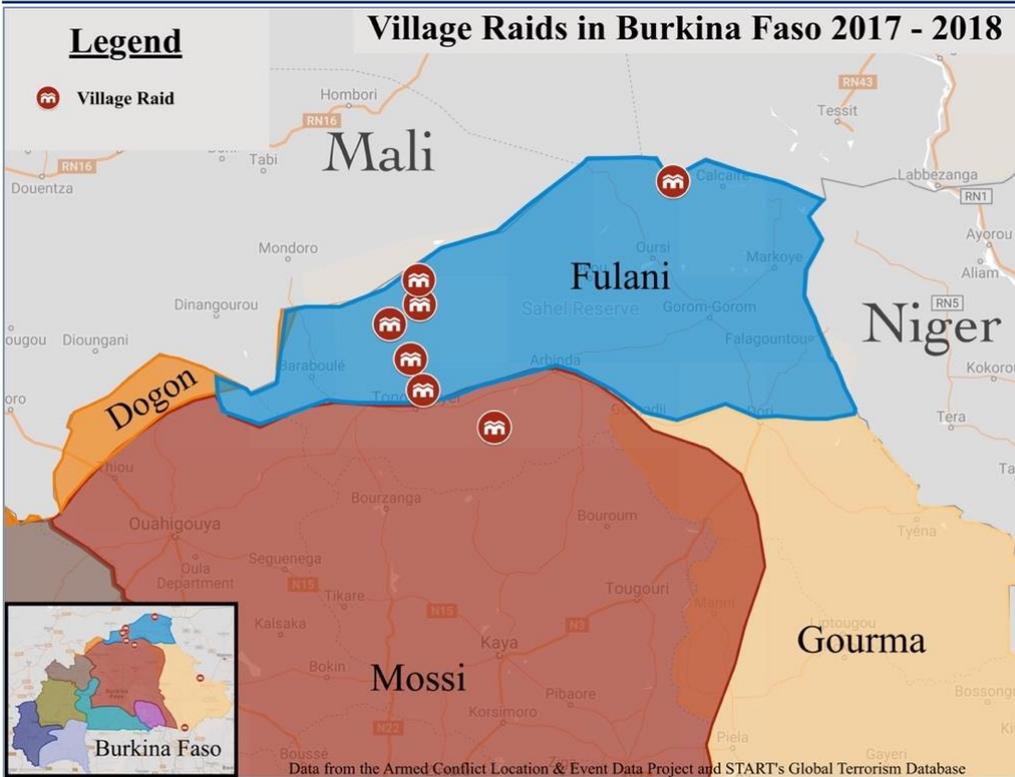


Figure 8. Village Raids in Burkina Faso 2017 to 2018. Attacks plotted using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* and the *Global Terrorism Database*. Ethnic group territories were drawn using a variety of open source maps (See *Supplemental Material*, pg. 37).

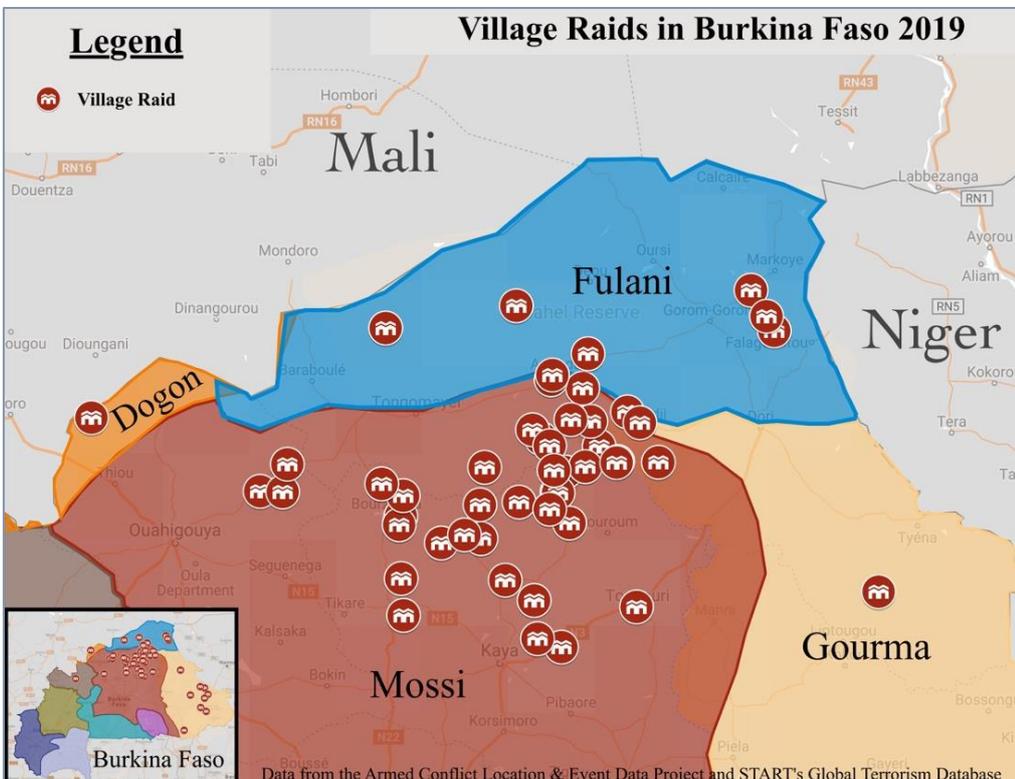


Figure 9: Village Raids in Burkina Faso in 2019. Attacks plotted using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*. Ethnic group territories were drawn using a variety of open source maps (See *Supplemental Material*, pg. 37).

Inter-Ethnic Conflict & General Violence

While Islamic militant organizations are presumed responsible for most of the violence in Burkina Faso, they are not the only actors involved. Self-defense groups and other non-Islamic violent actors are also on the rise. These actors have been responsible for civilian executions, largely directed against the Fulani ethnic group. Ethnic conflict appears to be increasing in Burkina Faso and will most likely continue to increase through 2020. The increasing ethnic conflict in Burkina Faso is directly related to the Insurgency.

The Islamic militants have strategically focused on co-opting the Fulani narrative and driving a wedge between the Fulani and other ethnic groups in Burkina Faso. Although the majority of Fulani are not participating in violent attacks, the Fulani are largely blamed for much of the violence. Many of the jihadists in northern Burkina Faso are Fulani and claim to be representing and protecting the Fulani people from both the government and rival ethnic groups. The perceived association between Fulani and the Islamic insurgents has led to a series of executions and revenge killings carried out by Koglweogo self-defense groups as well as units from the Burkina Faso military.

The membership and activity of self-defense groups in Burkina Faso, often referred to as Koglweogo, began rising shortly after the collapse of Compaoré and the entry of jihadist organizations into northern Burkina Faso. These groups filled the void left by the central government and began implementing their own security and judicial services. Koglweogo often take up the role of apprehending criminals, holding public trials, and dispensing punishments.⁷⁷

Due to increasing terrorist activity, and a lack of an adequate security response, local communities in Burkina Faso have turned to these self-defense groups for protection. In recent years, Koglweogo groups have killed hundreds of Fulani civilians. In one instance in January 2019, after the assassination of a village chief in Yirgou, Koglweogo blamed the Fulani and went on a killing spree, massacring Fulani civilians across 20 villages. While the official death toll was 49, locals who counted the bodies declared the figure was over 200.⁷⁸

Violence perpetrated against the Fulani is not only associated with Koglweogo. A separate attack in March, 2019 perpetrated by the Foulse community killed 60 Fulani.⁷⁹ That same month, a similar attack in Mali perpetrated by a Dogon militia resulted in the death of 157 Fulani men, women, and children.⁸⁰

Additionally, there have been an increasing number of reports of extrajudicial killings carried out by members of the Burkinabé military. A report by the Human Rights Watch documented 19 incidents, between September 2018 and February 2019, in which 116 men and adolescents were

detained and executed by Burkinabé security forces. The report stated that the victims were executed largely based on their Fulani ethnicity.⁸¹

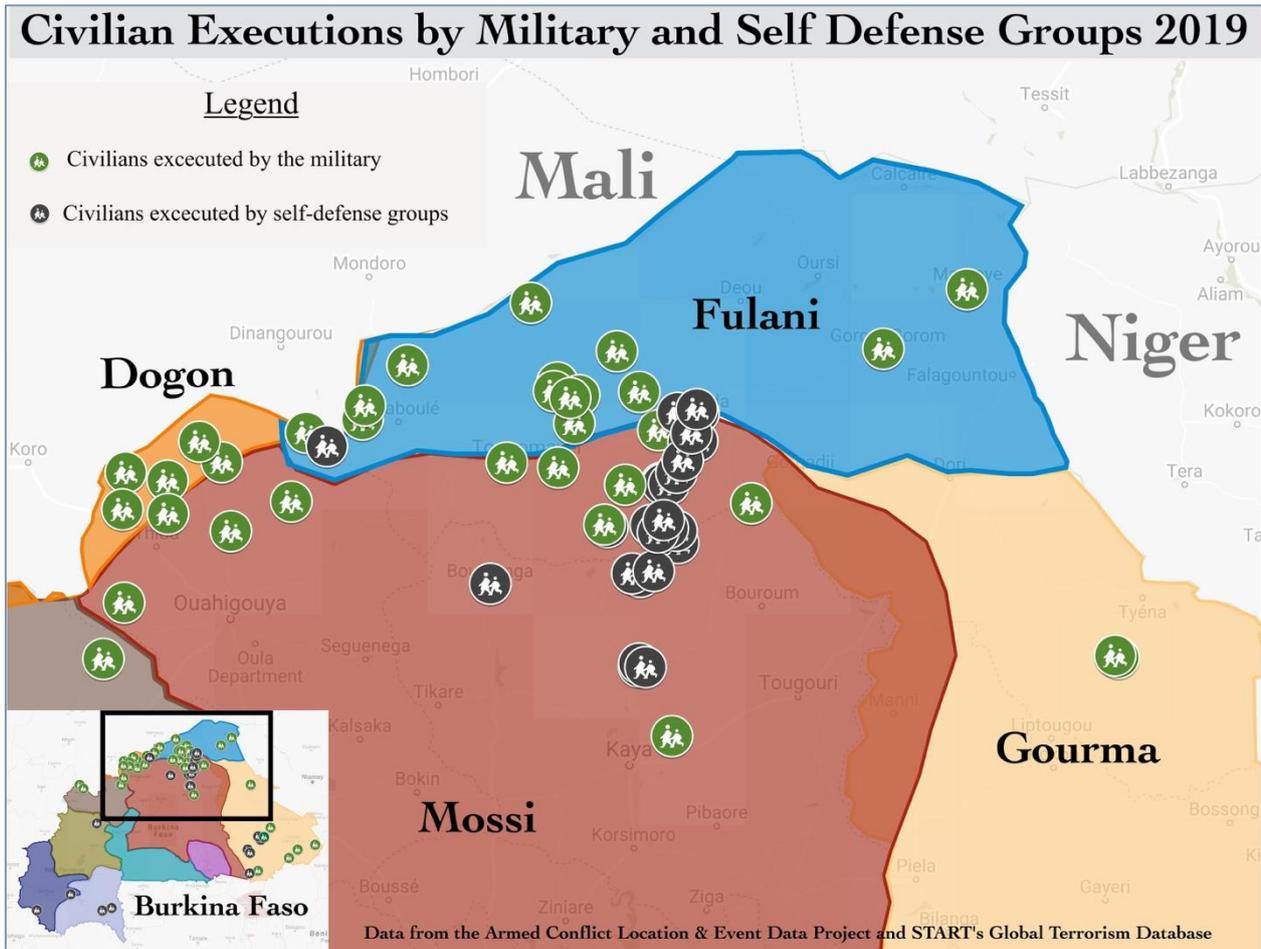


Figure 10. Civilian Executions by the Military and Self Defense Groups in 2019. Attacks plotted using data from the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*. Ethnic group territories were drawn using a variety of open source maps (See *Supplemental Material*, pg. 37).

General Violence

Apart from inter-ethnic conflict fostered by the Islamic Insurgency, general violence is also on the rise for a variety of other reasons. These issues and actors are not central to the discussion of this paper but need to be mentioned.

West Africa is considered one of the most mobile regions in the world;⁸² and although this has benefited the region economically and socially, it has also allowed organized crime syndicates to prosper. West Africa has become a global transit point for both cocaine from South America and heroine from Southeast Asia.⁸³ Gold and diamonds are used in a variety of money laundering schemes in the region and are also used as an alternative currency to acquire illicit goods such as firearms.⁸⁴ To date, there are an estimated 160 million small arms and light weapons (SALWs) circulating illegally in West Africa.⁸⁵ The availability of illegal weapons in the region, in part due to

the rise in jihadist activity, helps perpetuate violent crimes connected to drug trafficking, cattle rustling, and vehicle theft.⁸⁶

Additionally, climate change has had a detrimental effect on security in West Africa. The West African Sahel is experiencing more environmental stressors than any other region on the continent.⁸⁷ The effects of climate change have negatively affected pastoralism and agriculture, the two main production systems of the Sahel.⁸⁸ Farming and herding are practiced in the same space and, as resources are diminished in the region, farmers and herders are increasingly finding themselves in competition.⁸⁹ On the one hand, the development of new farm land often encroaches on lands that the nomadic Fulani traditionally have used in their transhumance routes. On the other hand, migratory movements South have begun within the Fulani herders as they search for better grazing lands. This has brought them into confrontation with farmers in areas historically dedicated to farming and unaccustomed to the presence of herders.⁹⁰ Reports of violent confrontations between herders and farmers in the Sahel were increasing prior to the current destabilization experienced in the region;⁹¹ and the increased circulation of SALWs after 2011 led to further militarization and violence among these groups.⁹²

The Security Response

Despite attempts by the central government to bring security and stability to the country, the attacks in Burkina Faso have continued unabated. The Burkina Faso government is now faced with three simultaneous challenges: the need return security to local communities, the need increase developmental support, and the need protect its own forces and assets. From a security standpoint, the inadequate security response to the crisis in Burkina Faso stems from a lack of resources, organization, and control.

The Burkinabé security forces consist of the Army, Gendarmerie, Police, Customs, and Forest & Water. In all, Burkina Faso has approximately 11,000 personnel across all branches.⁹³ The security forces have historically seen deep internal divisions, corruption, and received inadequate training and supplies. Much of the shortcomings of the Burkina Faso security forces can be traced back to the Compaoré regime and its eventual collapse.

Compaoré & the RSP

After Blaise Compaoré seized power in a military coup in 1987, the military was restructured and used to help consolidate his power. Compaoré took the Para Commando units from Pô and

reconstituted them into the Presidential Security Regiment (RSP). RSP soldiers were controlled directly by Compaoré and, in exchange for loyalty, were given more benefits and higher pay than any other branch of the military.⁹⁴ In addition to their increased benefits, soldiers in the RSP were essentially immune from criminal prosecution and the government turned a blind eye to extrajudicial killings.⁹⁵

As Compaoré strengthened the power of the RSP, divisions within the Burkinabé security forces began to increase. These divisions were not unknown and revealed themselves on multiple occasions. In 2006, in response to a police shooting of a soldier, the army set fire to multiple police stations and released over 600 prisoners from jails. The government responded by announcing a plan to relocate urban military bases further outside of town to limit future interactions between the army and police.⁹⁶

In 2011, Burkina Faso saw widespread mutinies within the military. Massive civilian protests had swept across the country in 2011, sparked by the death of a student in the hands of authorities. After a month of civilian protests, low-rank members of the military began revolting across the country. Even the RSP revolted for the first time, forcing Compaoré to flee to his hometown of Ziniaré.

Compaoré responded to the mutinies by dissolving the government, replacing the Chiefs of Staff of the Army, Airforce, and Police, and naming himself Secretary of Defense. More importantly, he quickly gave into all the demands of the RSP and brought them firmly back onto his side. He then used the RSP, along with the Gendarmerie, to forcefully bring an end to final mutiny in Bobo Dioulasso. This marked the first time in Burkina Faso that a mutiny had been forcefully repressed.⁹⁷

Although Compaoré survived the 2011 crisis, it resulted in huge divisions between the RSP and the rest of the military. Compaoré purged over 500 soldiers from the military⁹⁸ and centralized ammunition, putting all heavy and modern weaponry into the hands of the RSP.⁹⁹ This left most soldiers in Burkina Faso unable to carry loaded guns.¹⁰⁰ The RSP, however, received no punishments for their part in the mutiny and Diendéré kept his position as Chief of Staff and head of the RSP.¹⁰¹

When popular protests gripped the capital in 2014, Compaoré again responded by dissolving the government and withdrawing his proposed constitutional amendment. This time however, his tactics failed to pacify the population. When unarmed protesters marched toward the presidential palace in mass, Compaoré resigned and, with the help of the RSP and the French, fled to Cote D'ivoire.¹⁰²

After the fall of Compaoré in 2014, the continued existence of the RSP was soon called into question. A year after Compaoré's resignation, the new transitional government released a report that recommended disbanding the RSP and delegating their role to the Police and Gendarmerie. In 2015, two days after the commission's recommendation, the RSP, headed by General Gilbert Diendéré, launched a coup and took the interim government hostage. However, the RSP did not have the support of the Army, or the public, and Diendéré was forced to release the transitional government and relinquish power.¹⁰³ A week after the civilian government returned to power, the RSP was disbanded, its members were incorporated into the Burkinabé security apparatus,¹⁰⁴ and General Diendéré was sent to prison.¹⁰⁵

The RSP & Domestic Intelligence

Under Compaoré, Burkina Faso's intelligence apparatus consisted of the Homeland Intelligence Coordination Center established in 2011.¹⁰⁶ The Center was responsible for aggregating and refining information forwarded by intelligence units in the Army, Gendarmerie, and Police. The head of Burkina Faso's intelligence apparatus was General Gilbert Dienderé and, as Dienderé was also in charge of the RSP, The RSP became the main military branch connected to Burkina Faso's intelligence network.

By disbanding the RSP, the new central government unwittingly removed the strongest defense they had against the jihadist organizations beginning to push across the border into Burkina Faso. The RSP's 1,200 strong force had been trained by French and U.S. forces, and had even had its own Counter-Terrorism unit.¹⁰⁷

Not only was the RSP Burkina Faso's strongest security force, but its leadership had developed unique relationships with jihadists in Mali. In fact, Compaoré and his senior advisors, Diendéré, Bassolé, and Chafi, had all been in direct communication with Al-Qaeda affiliated organizations in the past. Both Chafi and Diendéré had acted as intermediaries between Al-Qaeda linked militant groups and the West to secure the release of Western hostages. In 2009, Moustapha Ould Limam Chafi, Compaoré's personal advisor, negotiated with AQIM to secure the release of Canadian hostages it had recently seized.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, in 2012, Diendéré coordinated the release of Italian and Spanish Hostages captured by MUJWA.¹⁰⁹ Compaoré himself had acted as its mediator between ECOWAS and Ansar al-Din during the 2012 Mali Crisis. On two separate occasions Compaoré hosted members of Ansar al-Din in Ouagadougou for negotiatons.¹¹⁰ Additionally, Djbril Bassolé traveled to Mali at one point during 2012 and met face-to-face with Iyad Ghaly, the founder of Ansar al-Din.¹¹¹

Removing Diendéré and Bassolé, and disbanding the RSP, may have been an inevitable decision after the failed coup. However, the sudden removal of the remaining Compaoré elites also removed any clandestine relationship the regime had slowly fostered with regional jihadist organizations, paving the way for their quick and easy entry into Burkina Faso.

Security Assets

Unable to use the now disbanded RSP to respond to threats in the country, the government was left with few assets to contain the growing number of violent actors appearing in the country. Even though most of the former RSP soldiers were incorporated into the rest of the armed forces, the government was still left with a relatively small military force.

The low number of available security forces meant that the government has simply been unable to protect all of its citizens. Rural areas in Burkina Faso may not have a police station for more than 50km; and existing police or gendarmerie stations may only house two to three officers with limited and outdated equipment.¹¹² The increasing rate of attacks, and lack of adequate resources, have led to increased desertion rates¹¹³ and security personnel's refusal to deploy to remote areas.¹¹⁴ In one instance in 2018, the entire police station of Déou abandoned the station and left town, saying that they did not have sufficient supplies and materials to defend against another attack.¹¹⁵ These deficiencies have left a third of the country poorly defended.¹¹⁶

Relationship with Koglweogo

The government's inability to secure large parts of the country has led them to welcome the rise of Koglweogo groups as a means to combat the rising violence. The government has publicly stated that it was impossible to maintain security forces in every town and therefore these self-defense groups should be legal and recognized.¹¹⁷ In January 2020, the government did just that, passing legislation that allowed civilians to be given arms and two weeks of training.¹¹⁸ The legal affirmation of these groups has solidified the government's lack of a monopoly on violence and is a testament to just how desperate the situation has become.

Attempts at Reform

Since the collapse of the Compaoré regime in 2014, the new central government has attempted to reform the security sector with limited success. These reforms occurred slowly as the government began to realize the crisis it had found itself in. Reviewing the security response in the Capital highlights some of these reforms and their shortcomings.

Security in the Capital

Starting with the Splendid Hotel Attack in 2016, the government found itself racing to increase security in the Capital. The Splendid Hotel Attack was the first of its kind in Burkina Faso and took the newly elected administration by complete surprise. Based on the slow and confusing response by security forces, it is highly probable that no actionable intelligence was submitted prior to the attack. The security response to the situation was a chaotic mix of domestic security personnel combined with French and U.S. forces. The response unfolded relatively slowly without any clear coordination. The French forces arriving at the scene requested Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) from the Americans to help with tactical planning.¹¹⁹ These requests, combined with the subsequent chaos, points to the fact that there was no reliable intelligence network able to prevent the attack, nor was there a pre-designed response in place to deal with an attack in the capital.

Even though the attack consisted of a small group of assailants, neither the local forces nor the French were prepared to respond to an attack of this kind. It took approximately two hours for the French and Burkinabé Military to secure the perimeter and another four hours before the counter-assault commenced.¹²⁰ It wasn't until dawn that the assailants were finally killed and the remaining civilians rescued from inside.¹²¹

The Modus Operandi of this attack, although new to Burkina Faso, was not novel to the region and should not have come as such a surprise, given the Radisson Blu Hotel attack in Mali two months prior. In fact, after the Radisson Blue Attack in November 2015, French and Burkinabé authorities began developing a security response plan entitled: The Red Plan, to be used if such an attack occurred in Burkina Faso. The Red Plan was designed to coordinate first responders and treat victims quickly and efficiently. Unfortunately, the plan was not yet finished by the time the Splendid Hotel Attack occurred in January.¹²²

The medical response to the Splendid Hotel Attack was a combination of firefighters, hospital staff, Red Cross rescue workers, and local NGOs.¹²³ Although the first responders were organized by an ad hoc crisis committee, the medical response to the attack was arguably much better than that of the security services. Although The Red Plan was not yet active, the Ouagadougou hospitals had already developed The White Plan that dealt with inter-facility coordination during a mass casualty event. The plan had been accidentally tested during protests in 2014 that left 600 people injured.¹²⁴ This experience certainly helped coordinate the medical response to the Splendid Hotel Attack and

is probably a key reason why the medical response appeared more coordinated than the security forces.

When the Aziz Restaurant Attack occurred in 2017, security in the Capital had improved to some degree. The security response was perhaps slightly better than the Splendid Hotel Attack. Prior to the attack, there were more checkpoints and searches by security forces and the restaurant had posted an armed guard at the door as a deterrent.¹²⁵ Security forces arrived at the scene in 15 minutes and were able to contain the assailants inside the restaurant.¹²⁶ However, the improvements to security in the capital were still not able to prevent an attack of the exact same type and in the exact same area as the year prior.

In 2018, when the dual attack on the Army HQ and French Embassy occurred, The response had improved significantly. Although, presumably the attack still came as a complete surprise, the security response was much better than the previous two years. A month earlier, on February 8th, the public had been notified of a counter-terrorism exercise taking place just north of Ouagadougou.¹²⁷ Given this recent training and the quick response by the security forces during the attack, it seems likely that the government had implemented a new response plan in the event of another attack on the capital.

Once the attack on the Military HQ and Embassy commenced, security forces quickly cordoned off the area and a military helicopter was deployed above the scene,¹²⁸ most likely for Command & Control purposes. The Military's counter-terrorism unit quickly engaged and contained the attackers at the Military headquarters while the French and gendarmerie under assault at the embassy were able to prevent the attackers from breaching the embassy wall.¹²⁹ The increased security response in the capital, combined with the later discovery and dismantlement of terrorist cells, may be why no high-profile attack occurred in the capital in 2019.

Intelligence Reforms

Although the security response in the capital improved to some degree, the government has so far been unable to thwart major attacks in the Capital, let alone in other parts of the country. These failures are largely a result of Burkina Faso's lack of a strong intelligence apparatus.

The operational and tactical level of intelligence is generally where nations such as Burkina Faso need the most help.¹³⁰ Often local security forces in West Africa do not have a dedicated Intelligence Corps or occupational specialty focused on intelligence. Sometimes commanders will simply designate a random soldier as the Intelligence Officer for the battalion before a

deployment.¹³¹ Even if a military has sufficient collection capabilities, it still must have the policies and procedures to use the information correctly and see the larger picture.¹³²

The Burkinabé government was aware of these shortcomings and passed legislation in June 2018, creating the National Intelligence Agency (ANR).¹³³ The ANR reports directly to the president and was given greater operational and financial autonomy. The new Agency deals with a variety of threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, fraud, smuggling, and hazardous materials.¹³⁴ The role of the Agency is to coordinate between other intelligence units, various branches of the military and its own collection units. To strengthen the capabilities of the ANR, it was granted legal access to internal documents of domestic telecommunication operators, banks, insurance companies, and financial firms.¹³⁵ The new legislation also defined the relationship between the ANR and the security services, provided levels of classification, overviewed the protection of intelligence sources, and included methods of intelligence distribution.

Regional and International Cooperation

Burkina Faso's intelligence service coordinates to some degree with other regional intelligence agencies. Publicly, Burkina Faso participates in the annual *Meeting of the Heads of Intelligence and Security Services of the Countries of the Sahelo-Saharan Region*.¹³⁶ There is a general understanding that combating the growing threat of terrorism in the Sahel requires strengthening domestic and regional intelligence networks. International actors, especially France and the United States, have been active in security operations in West Africa for some time. USARAF has trained West African military forces how to collect, analyze, and interpret information since as early as 2005.¹³⁷ The U.S. Military has also built around a dozen discreet air bases in Africa since 2007. Through large scale surveillance operations, the United States used small civilian aircraft to collect intelligence on terrorist organizations operating in the Sahel and other regions across the continent. Dozens of U.S. security personnel set up one such airbase in Ouagadougou, under a classified surveillance program code named Creek Sand.¹³⁸ U.S. officials have said that these surveillance programs are necessary to track terrorist organizations in remote areas.¹³⁹ The French have been even more active in the region, sending 4,000 troops to Mali in 2011 to combat jihadist groups in the North, helping establish the G5 Sahel, and actively training security forces throughout West Africa.¹⁴⁰

Although both the United States and France have been active in the region, their efforts to stabilize the Sahel have largely failed. Lately, the response by the international community to the rising violence in Burkina Faso has been chaotic and contradictory. In November 2019, France

declared it was deploying troops to Burkina Faso¹⁴¹ and in December they began using Reaper drones for air strikes in addition to reconnaissance.¹⁴² However, in January 2020, after a French helicopter crash in Mali, France summoned the leaders of the G5 Sahel and threatened to pull French troops out of the region.¹⁴³ Additionally, the United States has since switched its strategy from “degrading” to “containing” the spread of jihadist organizations in the Sahel¹⁴⁴ and has been debating a large shift away from the Sahel and towards other global theaters deemed more important.¹⁴⁵

Conclusions & Recommendations

Violence Against Civilians

The government’s recent decision to begin arming its civilians to help protect rural villages has a high probability of increasing civilian casualties and stirring ethnic conflict. Self-defense groups have already executed hundreds of civilians in Burkina Faso and this trend may increase as more villages are “weaponized” by the government.

Additionally, putting weapons in the hands of civilians may encourage Islamic militants to focus on villages as a source of arms and ammunition. Islamic militants are already known to assault military camps and bases in an attempt to acquire arms and ammunition.¹⁴⁶ Supplying villages with weapons could create an added incentive for future raid villages.

The government should focus on re-acquiring its monopoly on violence and enact stricter regulation on self-defense groups, especially those suspected of carrying out civilian executions. These groups could potentially be incorporated into the armed forces and given sufficient training and equipment.

High-value Targets

Circumstantial evidence discussed in this paper indicates that a certain actor is actively focusing on attacking high-value targets in Burkina Faso with increasing sophistication. These attacks will likely persist in 2020 with at-least one High-profile Strategic Attack. The government should continue to strengthen its defenses in the Capital and extend these defenses to other assets in the country deemed to be at high-risk of attack.

Furthermore, the connections between terrorist cells in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Côte D’Ivoire highlights that fact that regional terrorist organizations are not only working to destabilize Burkina Faso but the region as a whole. Just as military operations in Mali pushed jihadists south

into Burkina Faso, the same thing could happen to the southern countries of Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire in the future.

Suicide Terrorism

While the modus operandi of the Insurgency has evolved over time, a lack of suicide attacks in Burkina Faso has persisted. To date, there have been two confirmed suicide attacks in Burkina Faso. Both were VBIED attacks, one perpetrated by JNIM during the 2018 Army HQ attack, the other perpetrated by ISGS against a military target in Soum in December 2019. While the use of explosives has permeated the modus operandi of Al-Qaeda and ISIS groups in Burkina Faso, the use of suicide attacks, especially person-borne IED, (PBIED) is almost non-existent. This is particularly unique to the area given the historic use of PBIEDs in other theaters of operation. The lack of PBIEDs could be due to a lack of engineering skills, lack of components, or geographic conditions may not give PBIEDs a tactical advantage given the amount of time and planning such attacks require.¹⁴⁷

Referring back to Figure 3., the use of explosives has evolved every year in Burkina Faso and there is no reason to believe that a lack PBIEDs will continue in the future. It is very possible that PBIEDs will start to be used in Burkina Faso, especially in High-profile Strategic Attacks. The lack of PBIED attacks could be viewed as an opportunity for Burkinabé security forces to take a proactive approach and begin implementing counter-measures to protect hard and soft targets from future PBIEDs. Techniques, Tactics, and Procedures (TTPs) to counter PBIED attacks have already been developed in other countries.¹⁴⁸ These TTPs could be adopted by Burkinabé security forces in order to proactively prevent or reduce the impact of PBIEDs, and VBIEDs, if they surface in the future.

Preventative Intelligence Apparatus

Given Burkina Faso's limited resources and operational capacity of the armed forces, it is simply unable to physically protect the entire country. Burkina Faso should accept this short-term reality and focus on building up its intelligence network as quickly as possible.

The current counter-terrorism strategy in Burkina Faso has mainly been large-scale operations that require a significant number of military forces and last from around two days to two weeks. These operations involve longer planning periods and slower initiation, which results in an earlier warning for militants and allows them to flee the area before military forces arrive.

The government's response to violence in Burkina Faso could be adjusted to a more efficient, intelligence-oriented approach, that combines political and military actors together into a clearly

defined strategy. An intelligence-oriented approach would focus on small special forces units carrying out continuous small-scale operations within the same geographic area. These methods require fewer personnel, less logistical planning, and allow for higher mobility. This intelligence-oriented approach would move away from the traditional dragnet operations and be more effective in finding and eliminating specific individuals.

To do this, Burkina Faso should develop a strong preventative intelligence apparatus that can effectively direct the military's limited resources and increase the number of foiled attacks. The agency should first and foremost focus on counter-terrorism efforts and strengthen its HUMINT and SIGINT capabilities in rural areas. The preventative agency should include a central headquarters, as well as regional and local stations. The local stations would act as counter-terrorism branches and operate semi-independently. These local stations should be close to the epicenters of terrorism in the country in order to cultivate local contacts and develop an early warning system.

Each station would include an operations desk specifically assigned to oversee the stations' collection sources. The collection capabilities should include case officers, interrogators, SIGINT units, and clandestine surveillance units able to operate within the local population. The operations desk should be able to initiate its own collection operations, prioritize suspects to surveil or interrogate, and carry out search and seizure operations against local cells.

Each regional and local station should be supported by a small, highly trained, combat unit. These special forces units should be specifically trained and equipped for counter-terrorism operations. The units would be tied to the station and have a pre-defined geographic area of operation. In this way, the units will increase in operational efficiency over time as they become more accustomed to their specific area of operation.

Actionable intelligence created by the station should be quickly translated into counter-terrorism operations with clearly defined jurisdictions and chain-of command. The authority of the intelligence collection, prioritization, and targeting would go to the operations desk, while authority for the counter-terrorism operations would fall to the special forces units, with the operations desk providing live intelligence and support.

Improving Regional Cooperation

Cooperation between countries is crucial for countering the Islamic Insurgency, whose cells and brigades traverse multiple international borders in the Sahel. Smuggling and trafficking routes should be pinpointed and disrupted on a regional level. In this regard, military operational

cooperation is not enough. Regional intelligence sharing should be improved and permanent channels established between countries. Through increased intelligence sharing, the G5 Sahel would be able to better disrupt the movement of contraband and militants. Additionally, intelligence sharing would help locate and remove the individuals and cells that link domestic insurgencies with global terrorist organizations. This cooperation should be actively encouraged and fostered by France and the United States. Western countries could assist with the development of preventative intelligence stations in Burkina Faso, as well as Mali and Niger, and actively promote the coordination between regional intelligence agencies.

Through regional cooperation, Sahel countries should also help identify and degrade the cooperative relationship between militant groups. In recent months, there have been small signs of tension between militant groups in the region, especially in Mali.¹⁴⁹ These internal divisions could be exploited. Just as Malam Dicko drove a wedge between the Fulani and other ethnic groups, the G5 Sahel could work to divide the larger jihadist alliances in the region and pit them against each other.

Final Remarks

After analyzing attacks in Burkina Faso through the end of 2019, it is evident that violence in Burkina Faso, largely orchestrated by Islamic militant organizations, has evolved into an existential threat to the country. The recent increase in frequency and lethality of attacks, and the shift towards civilian targets, should be taken as urgent warnings for the future. These trends will likely continue into 2020 and act to further destabilize the country. Burkina Faso is in urgent need of assistance at both a regional and international level. Violence and instability in Burkina Faso is a threat to the entire region; and if Islamic militant organizations continue to strengthen in Burkina Faso, instability and violence will continue to spread.

Supplemental Materials

Methodology

The qualitative research for this paper came entirely from open sources including books, academic journals, reports from independent organizations, trans-governmental organizations, and a variety of domestic, regional, and international news outlets.

The quantitative data for this paper came from an author-created database using data from the Global Terrorism Database and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Events in each dataset were reviewed, filtered, and cross referenced to create one large database of unique events from 2015 through 2019. Robberies, local disputes, or other events deemed completely unrelated to terrorism and insurgency in Burkina Faso were removed from the dataset.

Definitions of Attack Types

Compound Assault: attacks against security force stations or compounds such as police stations, barracks, bases, camps, or checkpoints.

These attacks are only against military targets

Incursion: Attacks against civilians that result in assailants entering a village or facility by force. These include village raids, attacks on churches, mosques, schools, markets, or other civilian locations. The human targets of these attacks are not specific individuals but a broader group.

These attacks are only against civilian targets

Abduction: The forced removal of a living person by assailants. Individuals who were abducted and later killed are still counted as an abduction. Events listed as abduction must be the primary attack type. Abductions occurring after an incursion into a school or a compound assault are not counted as an abduction. Abductions, as categorized by the authors, must be pre-planned abductions of specific individuals.

These attacks are against civilian or military targets

Targeted Killing: Assassinations, murders, or attempted murders against specific individuals for specific reasons. These include assassinations of politicians, local officials, teachers, pastors, priests, imams, or other individuals holding a level of importance within a community or group.

These attacks are against civilian or military targets (although almost all are against civilians).

Vehicle Ambush: Surprise armed assaults against vehicles. The attack must include armed attackers and does not include IED attacks, unless the attack involves an IED and individuals as well.

These attacks are against civilian or military targets

IED: In the context of this dataset, IED attacks involve improvised explosive devices and/or landmines placed in or near roads specifically to target vehicles. There have been two VBIED attacks in Burkina Faso both categorized as compound assaults and are not included as IED attacks.

These attacks are against civilian or military targets

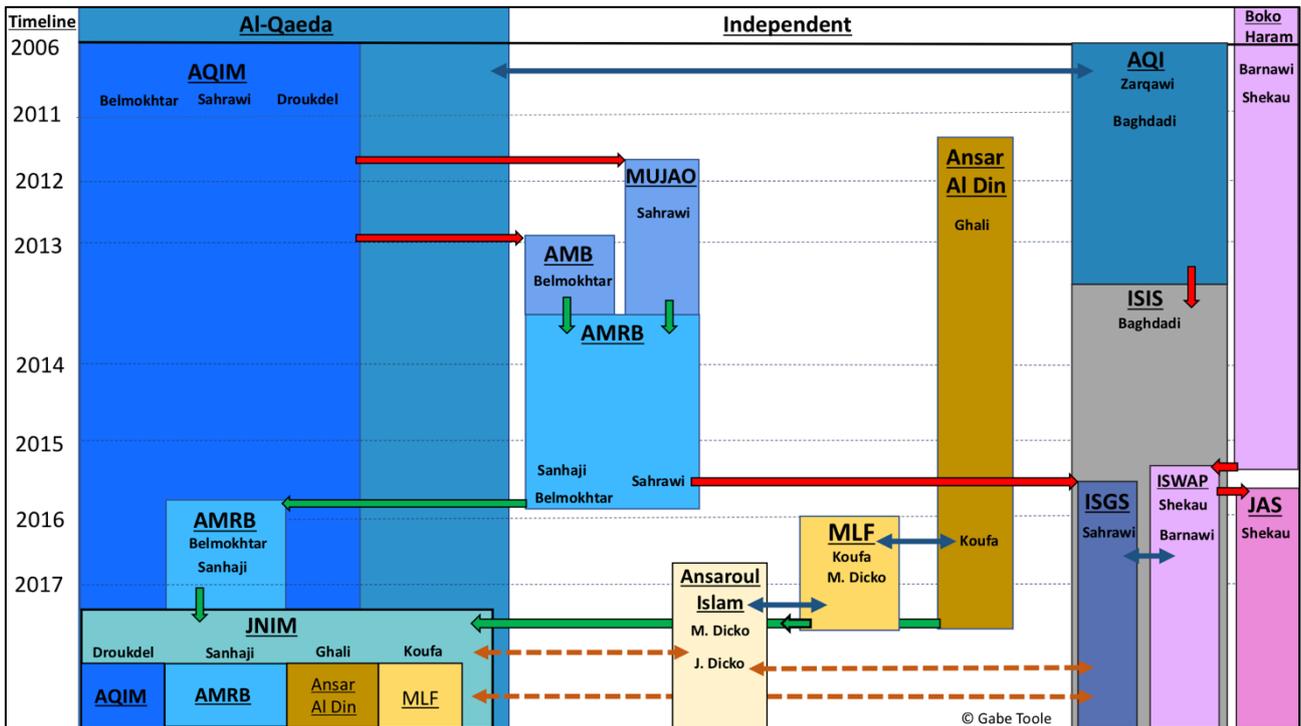
Hit & Run: These attacks involve surprise attacks against security personnel followed by a quick retreat. These attacks usually consist of an individual police officer or soldier being shot at by assailants travelling on motorbikes or other vehicles.

These attacks are against military targets.

Demolition: These attacks consist of explosive materials targeted at infrastructure such as bridges or buildings. These attacks do not involve casualties and were not meant to injure or harm civilians.

Unspecified: these attacks did not fit into any of the other categories. These are general instances of violence, such as a villager shot by unknown assailants. Many of these attacks are similar to targeted killings but the victims appear to be people of no or little importance. Generally speaking, this category is irrelevant to the dataset but does show the presence of general violence in the country to some degree.

Islamic Militant Organizations Chart



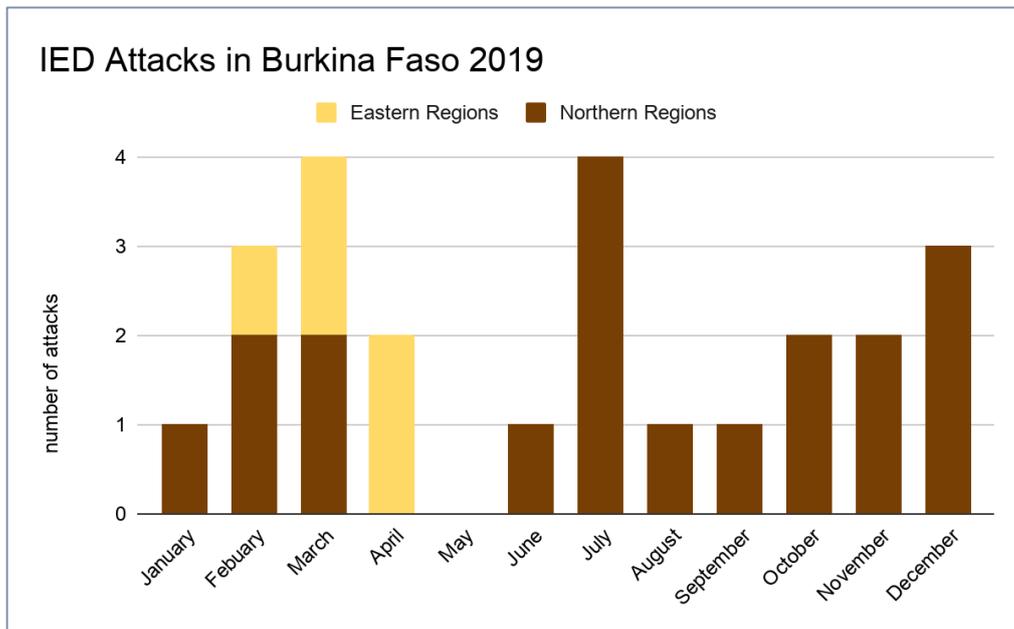
Note: the chart tracks Islamic militant organizations and key leaders over time. It is meant to be a reference when names are mentioned and allows the reader to trace the evolution of organizations in the region. For example, Sahrawi was formerly a member of AQIM (upper left). The reader can follow his name along the chart as he leaves to form MUJAO in 2011, merged with AMRB in 2013, and split again in 2015 to form ISGS. The chart was mainly created using information from the Mapping Militants Project.¹⁵⁰

- AMB** - Al Mulathamun Battalion
- AQI** - Al-Qaeda in Iraq
- Baghdadi** - former leader of ISIS
- Barnawi** - current leader of ISWAP
- Belmokhtar** = Former leader of AMB
- Droukdel** - leader of AQIM
- Ghali** - founder of Ansar Din and leader of JNIM
- ISWAP** - Islamic State in West Africa Province
- ISGS** = Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
- JAS** - Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda' Awati Wal Jihad
- J. Dicko** - current leader of Ansaroul Islam
- JNIM** = Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen
- Koufa** - founder of MLF
- M. Dicko** - founder of Ansaroul Islam
- MLF** = Macina Liberation Front
- MRB** = Al Mourabitoun
- MUJAO** = Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest
- Sahrawi** = former Leader of Al Mourabitoun, Current leader ISGS
- Sanhaji** - leader of AMRB under JNIM
- Shekau** - former boko haram leader and founder of JAS
- Zarqawi** - Founder of AQI

Legend

- Split
- Merger
- Strong Affiliation
- Suspected Limited Cooperation

Fluctuations in IED Attacks



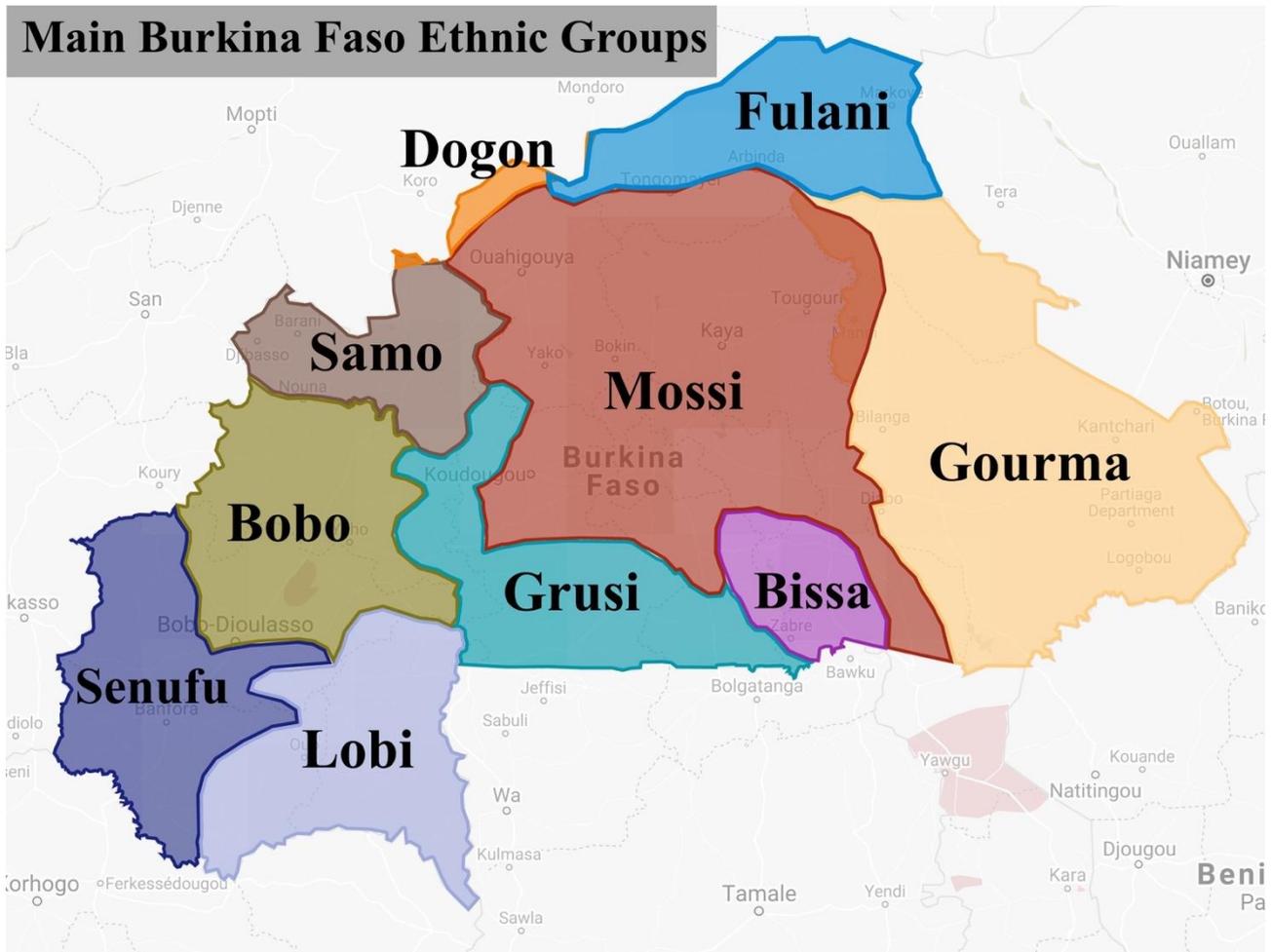
Graph created using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

The gradual increase in IED attacks was temporarily reversed between April and June, 2019. This sudden decrease seems to coincide with new military operations in the area and the confiscation of IED components.

From March 25 to April 11th, French, Malian, and Burkinabé forces carried out a large military operation in Mali along the Burkina Faso border. During the operation, a logistical base and a training camp were identified and destroyed. According to the French Military, large amounts of materials used to make IEDs were discovered at both sites, including homemade explosives, detonating cord, and firing devices.¹⁵¹ Additionally, Burkina Faso launched Operation Otapuanu on March 7th, aimed at combating the rising instability in the East. The operation supposedly led to the dismantling of 5 militant bases in the area and seems to have had an effect on IED manufacturing capabilities in the eastern regions of Burkina Faso.¹⁵²

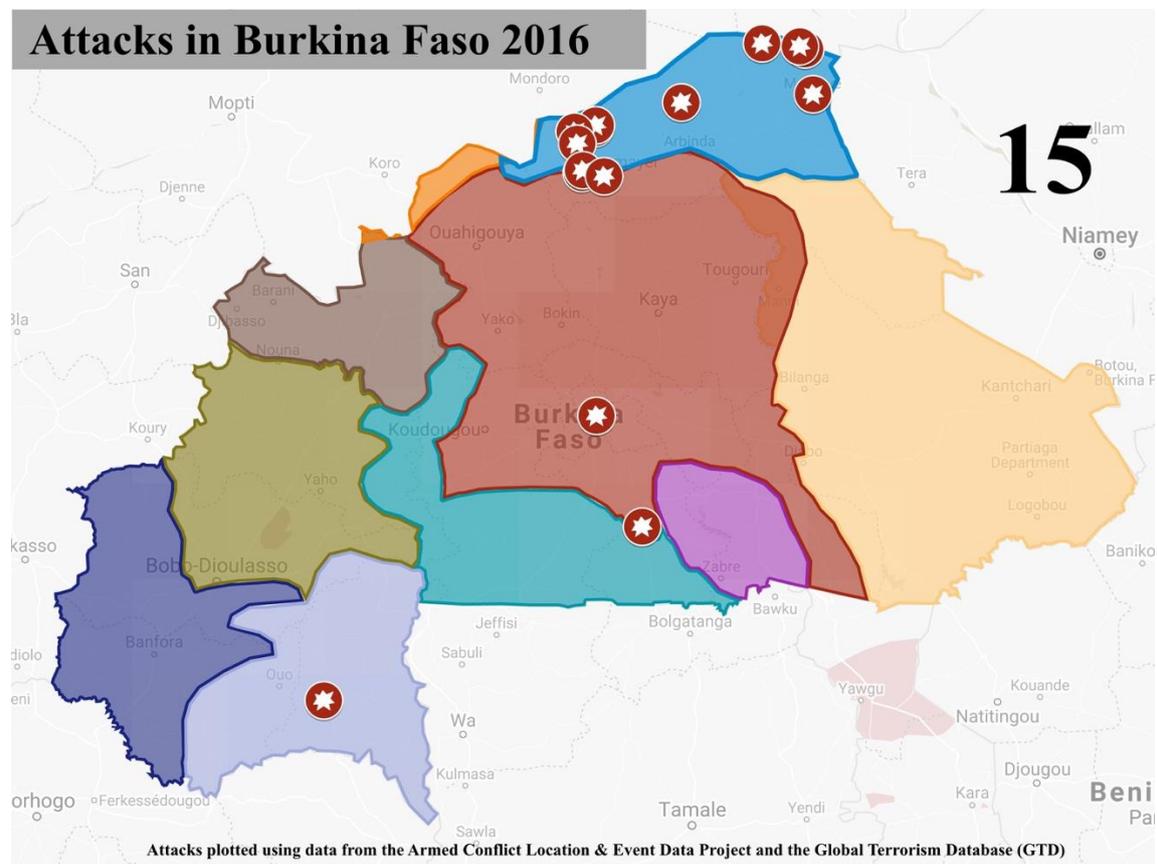
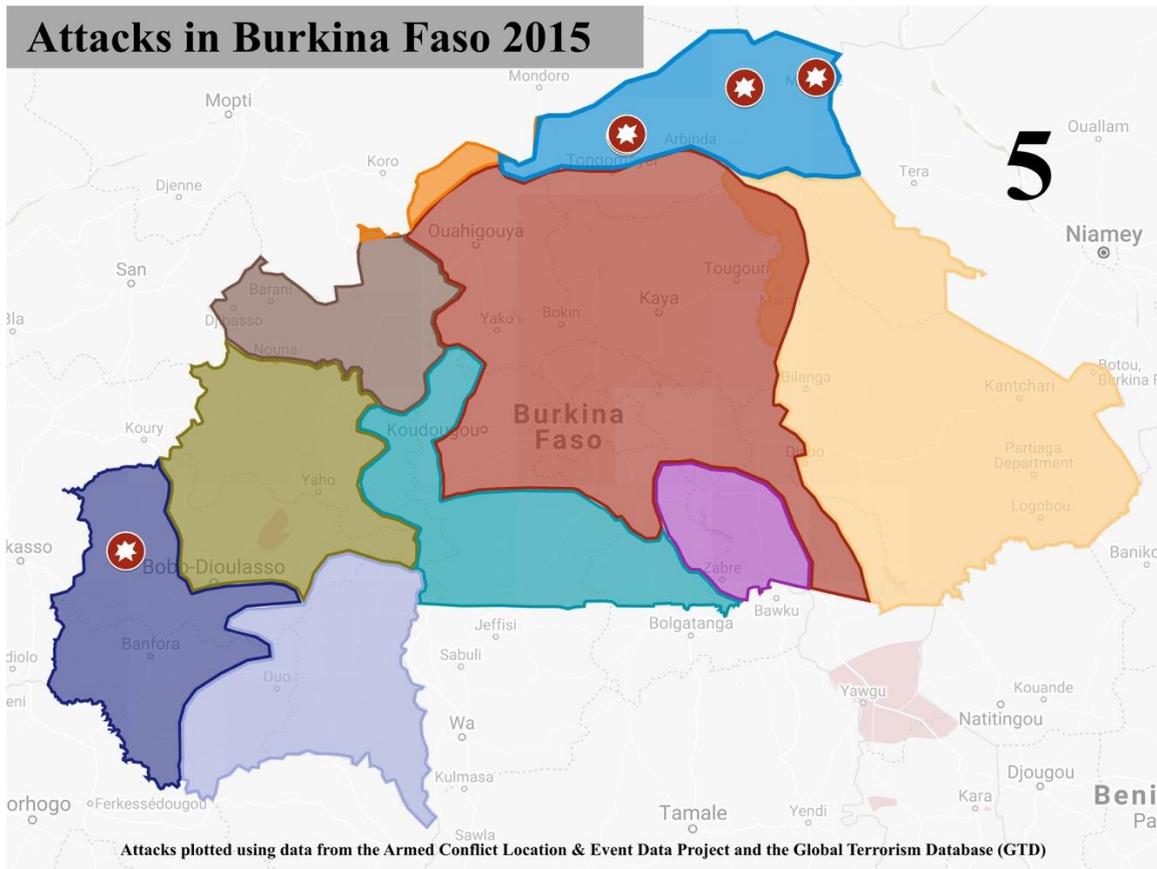
A closer look at the timeline of IED attacks in Burkina Faso reveals that IED attacks in the northern regions of Burkina Faso fell to zero directly after the March 25th military operation. Between March 26 and June 26th 2019, no IED attacks were seen in the northern regions of Burkina Faso. IED attacks returned to the North in June and have slowly increased. However, from June through the end of 2019, no new IED attacks were seen in the East.

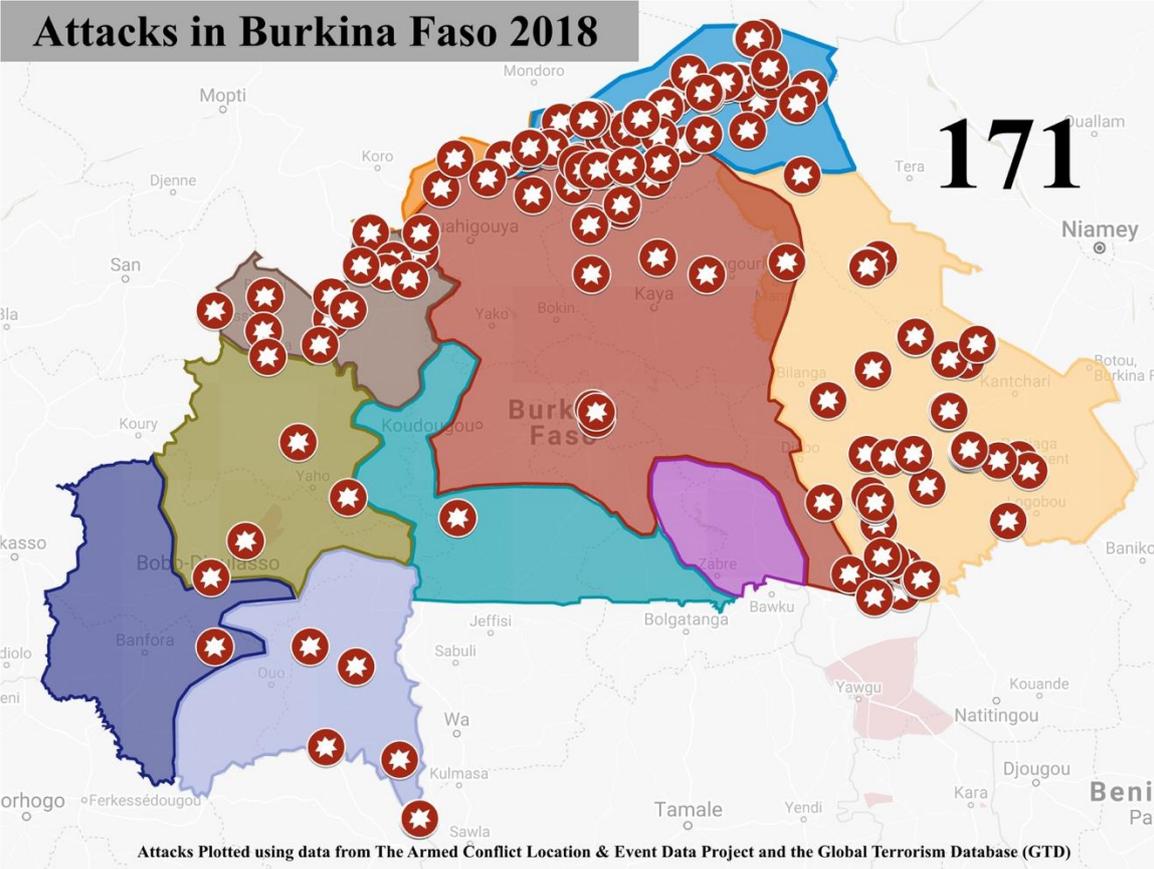
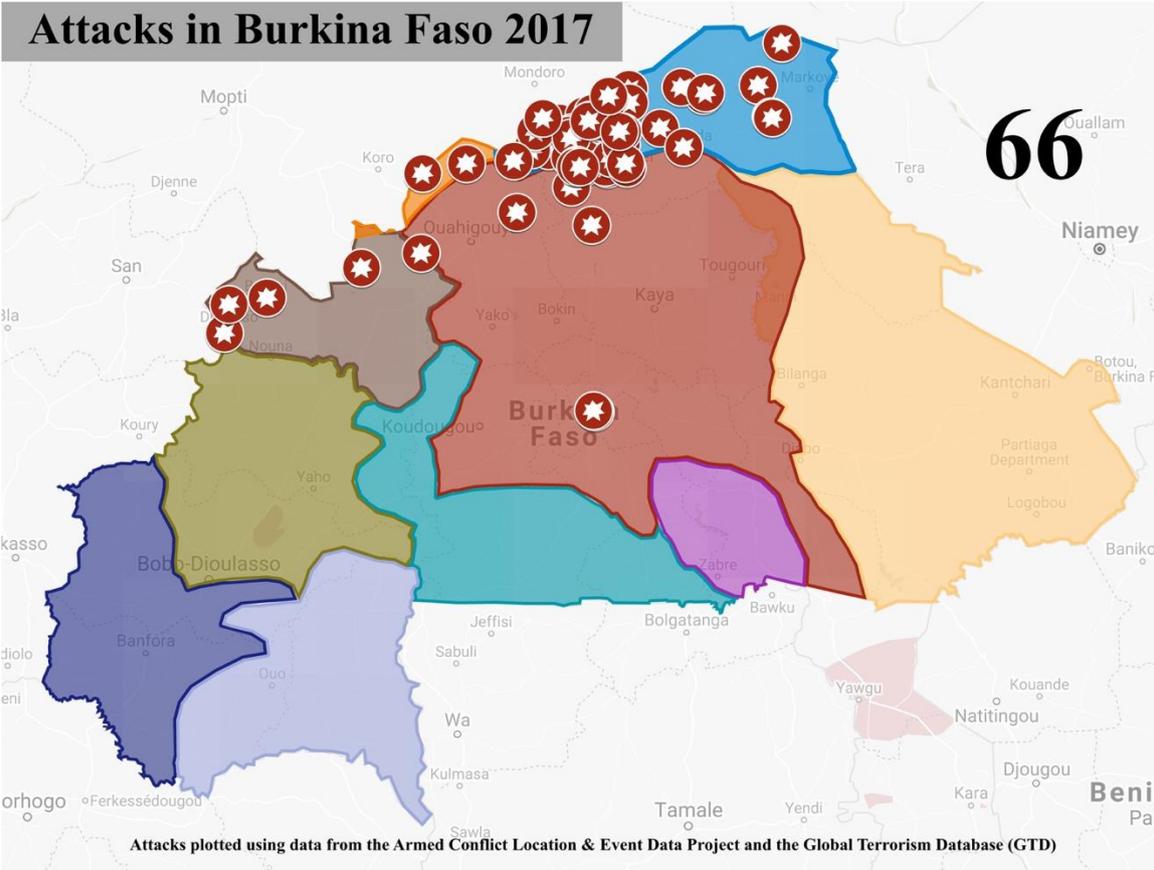
Burkina Faso Tribal Map

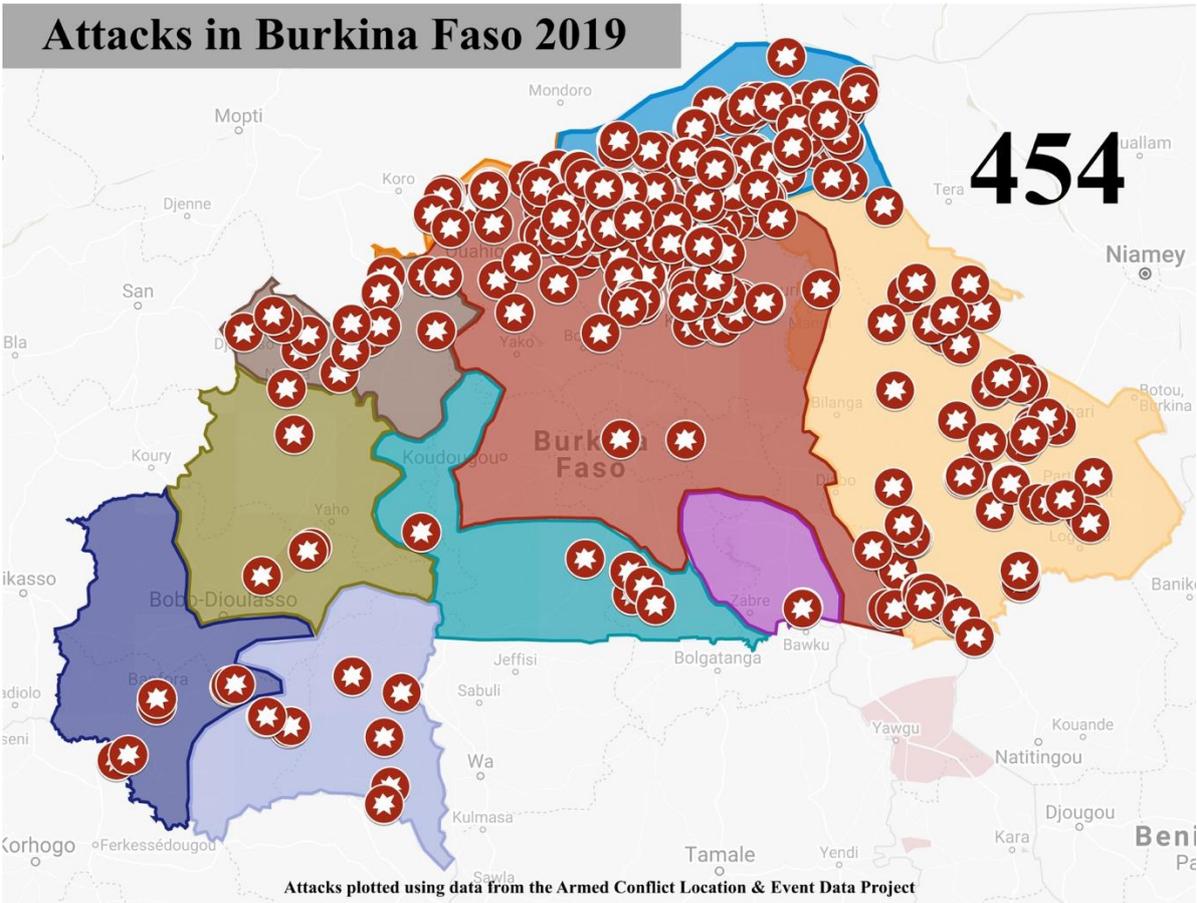


Note: Ethnic group territories were drawn using open source maps from the Joshua Project,¹⁵³ Fraym,¹⁵⁴ and Tracing African Roots.¹⁵⁵ Ethnic group areas shown on the map are merely a rough portrayal by the authors. In reality, the ethnic areas are far more detailed and intermixed than represented above.

Supplimental Maps

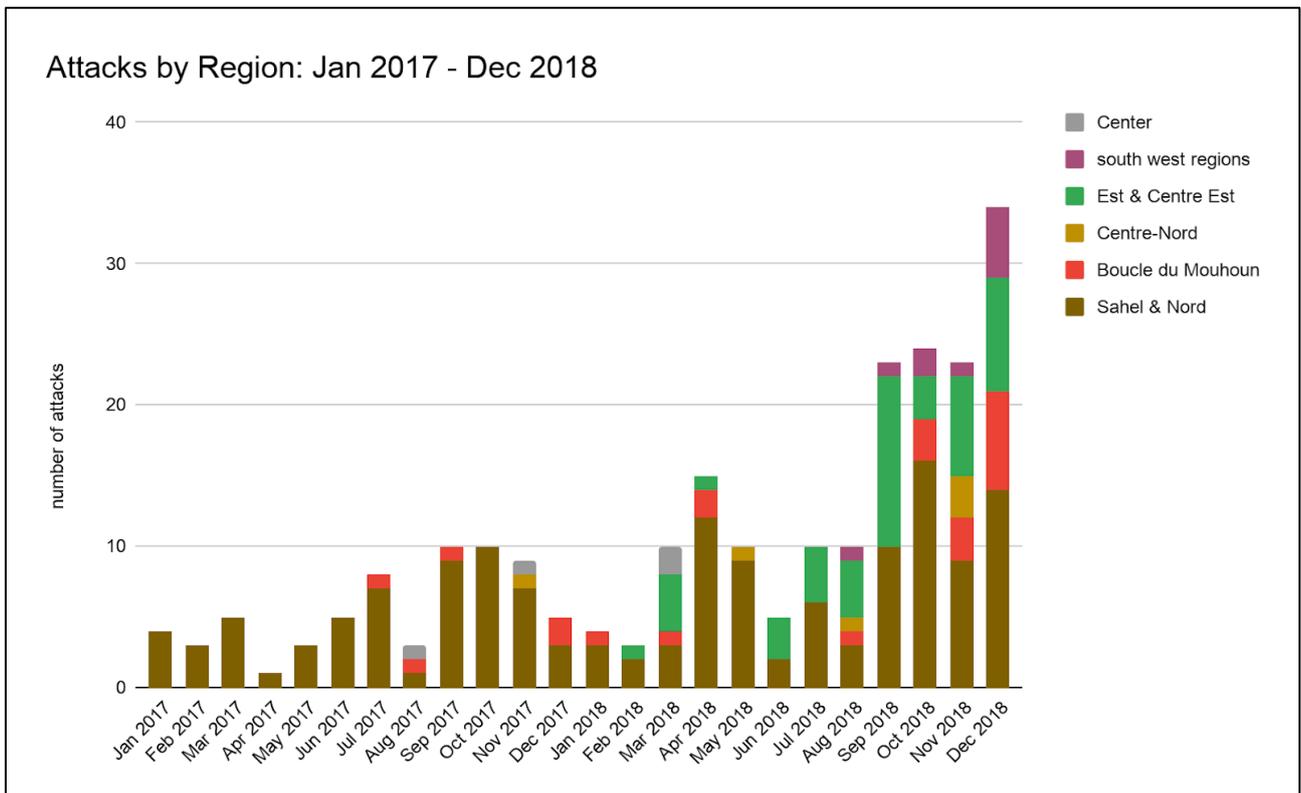
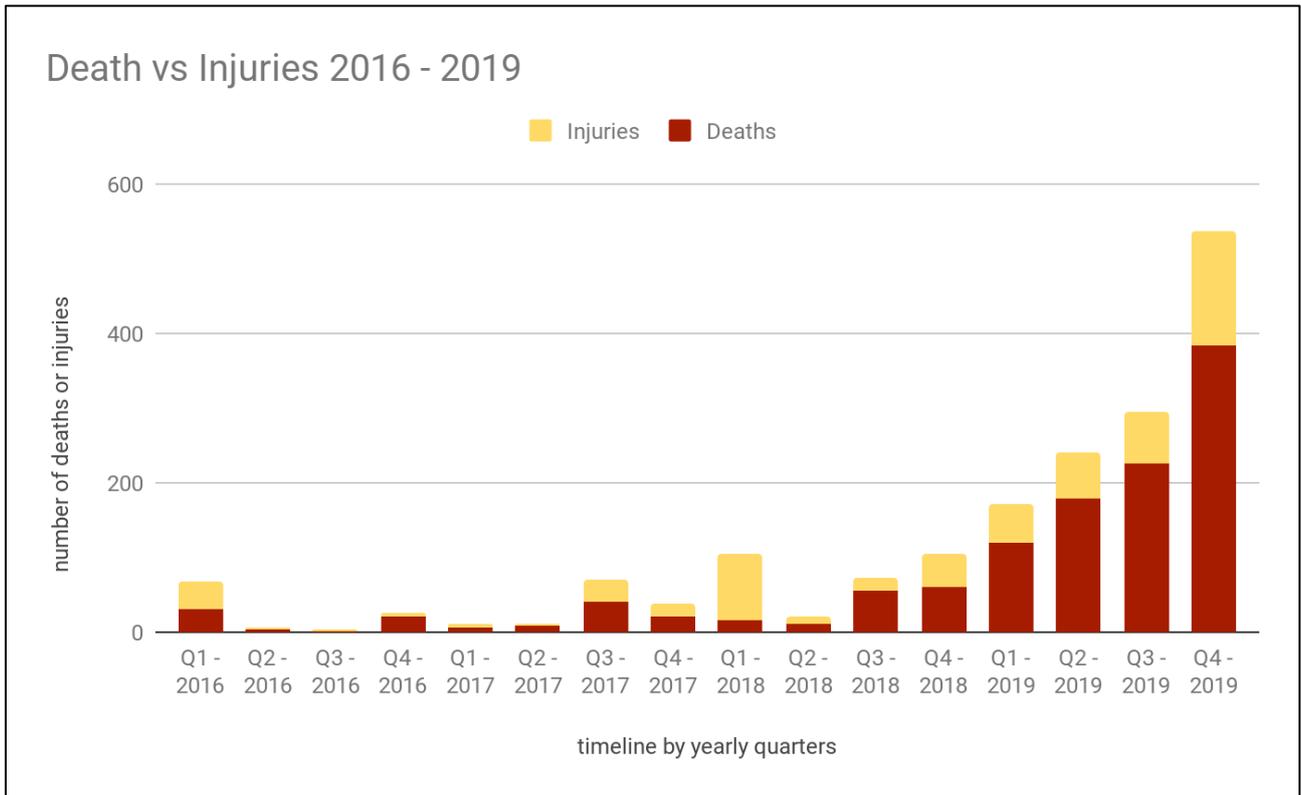


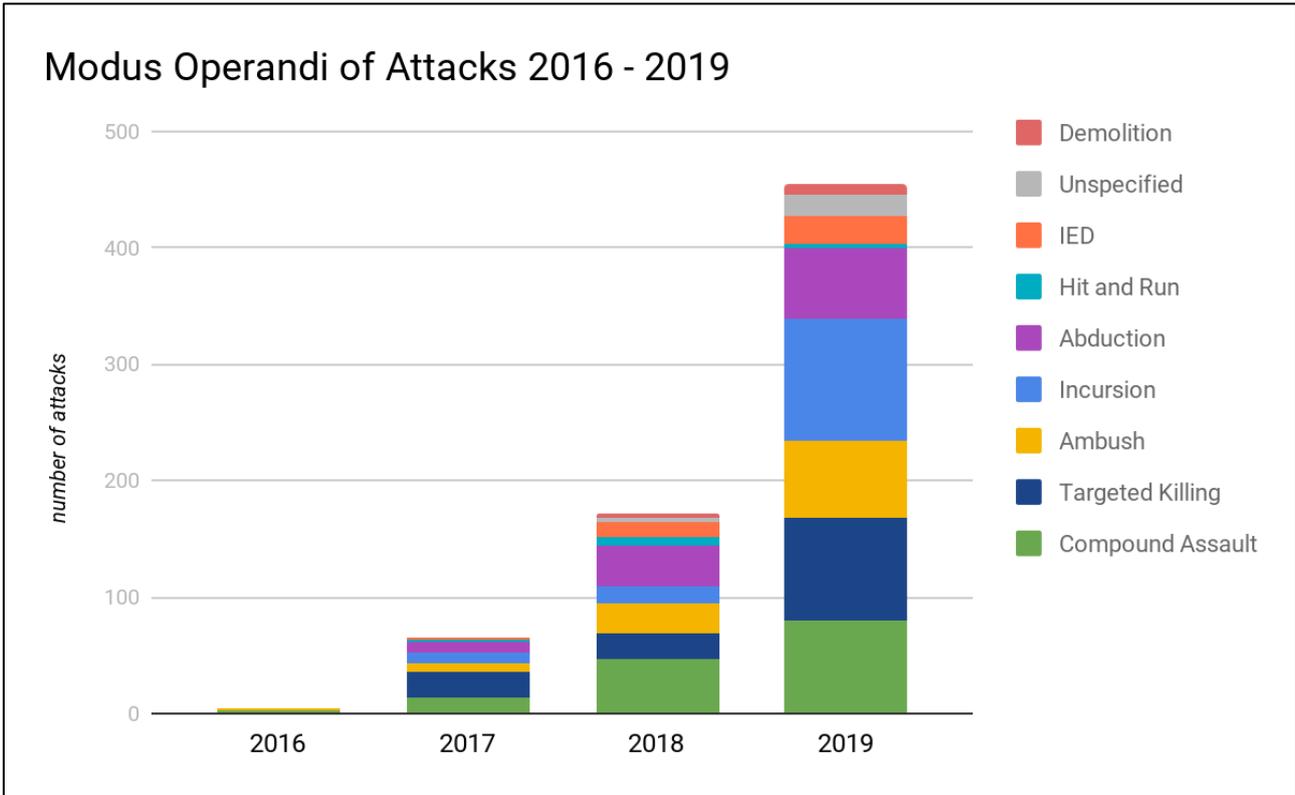




Note: Attacks plotted on all maps come from the author-created database built using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project and the Global Terrorism Database. All maps were created using Google Maps.

Supplemental Figures





Note: All Supplemental figures were built from an author-created database using data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

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