Statehood – Between Fragility and Consolidation

A New Epicentre of Terrorism?

West Africa in a Downward Spiral of Extremism and Fragile Statehood

Anna Wasserfall / Susanne Conrad

The interplay of fragile statehood and the spread of extremism and organised crime is destabilising more and more countries in West Africa. While most Western actors are predominantly focused on Mali and Niger, terror and instability are spreading southward. The example of Burkina Faso shows just where this can lead.

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Fragility, Conflict, and Violence in West Africa in 2022

The security situation is deteriorating with alarming speed in West Africa, a region replete with fragile states.[1] The 2021[2] Fragile States Index, issued by the Fund for Peace, a US NGO focusing on conflict assessment and early warning systems, shows just how widespread weak governance is in West Africa. The farther up the list a state is, the more at risk it is of deteriorating state structures. Of a total of 179 countries, there are a number from Central and West Africa near the top: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (5), the Central African Republic (6), Chad (7), Nigeria (12), Cameroon (15), Mali (19), Niger (21), and Burkina Faso (36). The governance vacuum prevalent in these countries gives rise to a phenomenon familiar in terrorism research, of which the fragile security situation in West Africa provides an almost textbook example: Islamist and other extremist groups exploit the existing power vacuum and state incapacity, presenting themselves as alternative providers of state services to the local civilian population. The line where weak legitimate governance starts, and increasing power of terror networks ends, is blurry. This speeds the deterioration of the security situation and political stability in many West African countries. But what triggers this vicious cycle?

Organised crime players and armed non-state groups are gaining power and influence among the population of many West African countries. This is especially true of ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province), the West African offshoot of Islamic State (IS), but also of countless militant groups in the border regions, which are sometimes difficult to distinguish from each other. IS' reach now extends to large parts of Africa.[3] After its decline in Iraq and Syria, the terrorist group is experiencing a renaissance on the neighbouring continent, where it is competing successfully against Boko Haram and al-Qaeda. According to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), compiled by the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) and covering 163 countries and thus 99.7 per cent of the world's population, Sub-Saharan Africa is becoming the global epicentre of terrorism. For instance, 48 per cent of global terrorism-related deaths occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, with the Sahel as the region with the fastest-growing terrorist groups, led by ISWAP, which has become the deadliest terrorist group in the world.[4]

IS appears to be spreading unchecked across the continent – with a regional terror hotspot in West Africa – and is challenging all countries in the region for the exercise of executive power. The countries of the Sahel are most affected by this socio-political emergency. But this situation also threatens to infect the coastal countries of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo, which are all still stable by comparison. Such a development would harm the stability of the entire region. Moreover, the political and security policy effects would not be limited to West Africa, but would affect Europe, the immediate northern neighbour of the Sahel and Maghreb regions.

Unprecedented Escalation of Violent Conflicts: Causes of Collapsing State Legitimacy

Since the beginning of the current conflict in Mali in 2012, many countries of the Sahel have

been in the grip of an escalating chain of violent conflicts. This situation is documented strikingly by data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)[5] on the number of attacks on population groups. This NGO specialises in the collection, analysis, and crisis mapping of disaggregated global conflict data. This data shows that violent attacks increased in Mali by 230.3 per cent between March 2012 and March 2022, with a rise in deaths of 1058.1 per cent. The data for Burkina Faso in this period is scarcely better: according to ACLED, the number of attacks there rose by 442.9 per cent, and the number of deaths by 438.8 per cent.[6] The wider consequences of this can be seen, for instance, in the number of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso, which had risen to more than 1.8 million by March 2022 amid the sustained waves of violence, ongoing since 2012.[7]

These numbers are a drastic statement on the blatant lack of state presence and ability to act in the affected parts of the countries. No country in the Sahel appears even remotely capable of exercising the state's monopoly on the use of force to protect the population throughout its territory. The state security structures – especially in the politically neglected margins beyond the urban centres – are too weak to intervene effectively in the event of attacks by extremist actors, or intercommunal or interethnic conflicts, to guarantee the security of the civilian population. If the military or police do intervene, it is often with indiscriminate violence – which repeatedly results in many civilian deaths, and exacerbates the existing mistrust and rejection of state authority by the local population.

This erodes traditional resilience mechanisms, social cohesion, and the security situation in rural areas. The same is true for educational and training opportunities, or the funding of economic growth connected with income opportunities. Here, too, domestic approaches and efforts are largely limited to the capitals and urban centres, so young people in rural regions have few opportunities to finish school and acquire decent prospects for their lives.

The toxic combination of poverty, political marginalisation, lack of prospects, and distrust provides an ideal opportunity for armed non-state groups and actors to establish themselves among the rural civilian population as guarantors of security. Additionally, terrorist and extremist networks are able to offer concrete income opportunities through smuggling and other criminal activities, and are thereby able to recruit many members.
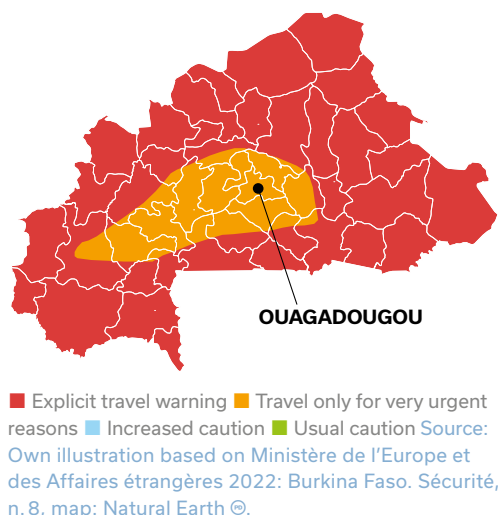
The social downward spiral in Burkina Faso began back in 2014.

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Case Study: Burkina Faso – Extremism as a Driving Force of Instability

Burkina Faso is a highly topical example of how state fragility and the increasing influence of extremist groups reinforce each other. In the West African country, this development was ultimately even used as an argument to overthrow the democratically elected government.

Since 2016, extremist groups with connections to al-Qaeda and IS, coming largely from Burkina Faso's northern neighbour, Mali, have begun to build new bases in Burkina Faso's northern territory from which they can spread throughout the country. The presence of armed terrorist groups has grown significantly in all of the country's peripheral areas. Terrorist groups have bases primarily in the border regions with Mali, Niger, and Côte d'Ivoire.[8] Although Burkina Faso has long had the reputation of being one of the more stable West African nations, the above-mentioned 2021 Fragile States Index ranks the country in 36th place on a list of 179 nations.[9] Despite recurring conflicts over land and resources, Burkina Faso was known for the peaceful coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups, by regional standards. It has only been since the arrival of al-Qaeda and IS fighters, infiltrating local communities, that serious tensions have arisen.[10]

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■ Explicit travel warning ■ Travel only for very urgent reasons ■ Increased caution ■ Usual caution Source: Own illustration based on Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2022: Burkina Faso. Sécurité, n. 8, map: Natural Earth ☺.

Power Vacuum Creates Opportunity

The social downward spiral in Burkina Faso began back in 2014, when President Blaise Compaoré was forced to resign after sustained protests. Having ruled the country for 27 years, Compaoré was, at the time, one of the most senior incumbents in Africa. He came to power in 1987 after the murder of his former political companion and then head of government Thomas Sankara, who many still call "Africa's Che Guevara". At the time, many thought that Compaoré was responsible for the death of Sankara, a national hero – and this perception was strengthened in April 2022, when a court ruling found the former president, who now lives in exile, guilty of complicity in Sankara's murder, sentencing him to life imprisonment.

However, the protests against Compaoré were triggered primarily because he planned to pass a constitutional amendment that would allow him another term in office. Frustrated with the high unemployment, widespread poverty, and lack of prospects, the largely young Burkinabe population demanded real and lasting political change. In addition, accusations of corruption against the president, his family, and his inner political circle were repeatedly raised. Ultimately, the

Compaoré government's inability to combat the growing number of extremist training camps in Burkina Faso, and the deteriorating security situation in the country may well have been the last straw.[11] Compaoré's resignation was followed by a phase of political uncertainty, leading to increasingly fragile state structures, and ultimately to a power vacuum. The extremist and militant actors in the northern part of the country used this situation to their advantage, expanding their power base and developing new spheres of action in the country.

> **Extremist actors in Burkina Faso are adept at exploiting existing social or ethnic tensions for their recruitment efforts.**
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Glaring Weaknesses in State Security Structures

In October 2015, Roch Marc Kaboré finally took office as the new president of Burkina Faso. Given the growing threat and the increasing number of terrorist attacks in urban areas, Kaboré made improving the security situation his political priority. He increased the national defence and security budget by a whopping 271 per cent between 2016 and 2021.[12] The additional funds were intended to improve the operational capabilities and the living and working conditions of Burkina Faso's security forces. These forces were often deployed for extended periods to border areas, where they were sometimes neither adequately supplied with food, nor with necessary military equipment. Low pay, missing paychecks, and high casualties from attacks by militant groups targeting patrols or bases eroded the fighting morale of the already disillusioned security forces. The most prominent example of this is the terrorist attack on the Inata military base in northern Burkina Faso in November 2021, in which 49 military policemen and four civilians were killed.[13]

One among almost two million: The number of internally displaced persons fleeing extremist violence has risen sharply during the last decade in Burkina Faso. Source: © Zohra Bensemra, Reuters.

Shocking deficiencies in public budget management, as well as corruption in the country's political and military structures meant that the massive budget increase did not significantly contribute to improvement in the security situation. The chasm between political leadership and the military played a role here as well: since the dissolution of Blaise Compaoré's presidential guard, which was involved in an attempted counter-coup in September 2015, the political leadership's trust in the military has been fundamentally damaged. Against this backdrop, any significant strengthening of the country's military structures can be viewed as a double-edged sword.

Fighting Causes Instead of Effects

But even improving military capacity would ultimately only address the effects of the problem, not its root cause, i.e. the blatant weakness of the government in Burkina Faso. The lack of state presence at the sub-national level not only enables extremist and militant groups to develop ever larger spheres of action in the territory of Burkina Faso, but also repeatedly contributes to bitter, often violent, conflicts between communities over the use of resources and land.[14] Since the state cannot fulfil its protective function, this increasing violence has led to the establishment of numerous local self-defence militias, often based on ethnicity, multiplying the number of actors, and thereby further confusing matters. As in Mali, extremist actors in Burkina Faso are adept at exploiting existing social or ethnic tensions for their recruitment efforts, and exacerbating existing conflict lines to their own advantage. The spiral of violence, of mutual attacks and retaliations between local communities, triggered by these processes, sometimes takes on more drastic and deadly dimensions than the attacks by extremist actors themselves.[15] The country's military is also a violent actor: as the attacks on security forces increase, so too does the severity with which soldiers approach the civilian population in the context of the fight against terrorism. In addition to arbitrary arrests and torture, there are repeated reports of executions, including mass executions. These actions are taken not only against extremist actors, but also against their supporters, or suspected supporters, in the civilian population.

Military Coups – A Current Trend in West Africa?

The catastrophic operational conditions of the security forces, the large number of casualties, the increasing loss of control, and the escalating violence were ultimately the precursors of the coup on 24 January 2022, in which President Roch Marc Kaboré was deposed by the military. In a speech, a spokesman of the new military government cited the country's security crisis as one of the reasons justifying the violent overthrow of the government.[16] The military takeover of the government found broad support among the population, suffering as it was from the escalating situation and prevailing poverty. Burkina Faso thus joins a number of other West African countries that have experienced an undemocratic change of government in the last two years. It is true that most of these military governments have established firm schedules for a democratic transition. But the example of Mali shows clearly that such schedules cannot necessarily be taken seriously, and that current transitional governments are very much interested in maintaining power. The increasing

number of coups is not just a trend, but also an expression of a severe crisis of West Africa's political systems.[17]

State Fragility on the Rise – Including outside the Sahel

This societal development is not limited to states in the Sahel. The events in Burkina Faso do not bode well for the country's southern neighbours – Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, and Ghana – which may currently be at the beginning of comparable developments. These coastal countries on the Gulf of Guinea are struggling with similar structural challenges and state fragility – especially in the north, where they border Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These states suffer from a number of geographical and socio-economic factors which further encourage the spread of extremist actors: long borders that are difficult to control, with close family and economic ties on both sides, and various national parks in the border areas. The dense vegetation makes them hard to access with motorised vehicles, rendering area-wide control by state authorities virtually impossible. The vegetation also provides effective protection against air reconnaissance and attacks. The protected status of the areas means that hardly anyone lives there, so they are ideal for extremist actors to operate from. From Burkina Faso in particular, such actors move across the borders

Military coups as a last hope? When taking power – as happened in Burkina Faso in early 2022 – West African armed forces today enjoy the support of large swathes of a violence-stricken population. Source: © Vincent Bado, Reuters.

to establish areas of refuge. These spots provide them with sources of income in the form of smuggling and illegal resource extraction, and recruitment grounds in the local population.[18]

Even though the situation in Burkina Faso is not identical with that of the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea, there are sufficient parallels to show what a worst-case scenario for those states might look like. If the security situation were to develop in the same direction as in Burkina Faso, important regional anchors of stability would cease to function. This would have far-reaching long-term effects for all of West Africa, such as escalating violence, exploding numbers of refugees, and a sustained loss of democratic structures.

Europe and Germany would certainly feel the effects of such destabilisation. For one thing, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Ghana are three reform partnership countries of Germany, with whom the latter cooperates closely, and to whom large financial flows are sent in the context of development policy. There are also commercial ties. Above all, however, a sustained destabilisation of these countries would trigger migration movements whose scope may well greatly exceed the capacities of neighbouring African states, and of European countries.

France remains a core security policy actor in the region.
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Unlike Mali and Burkina Faso, the states on the Gulf of Guinea still have options they could pursue to avert such a scenario. The example of their northern neighbours has created awareness of how quickly control over national territory can be lost. In the meantime, governments in the Gulf of Guinea have all taken measures to counter the growing security threat. For instance, efforts are being made to increase intelligence and the capacities of security services; military operations and patrols in border areas are being stepped up, and the presence of

security forces is being intensified. There are also increasing initiatives aimed at improving relations between the civilian population and state security forces – a result of the growing awareness that effective prevention and countermeasures are not possible without the support and participation of the local population.

A Strategy for Germany and the EU

The severe security crisis in West Africa – of which Burkina Faso provides an instructive example – is potentially a massive regional destabilising force. It will force Western partners to develop new, pragmatic methods of cooperation. This will require a strategic partnership that pursues approaches at both the regional and local levels. Resilience mechanisms against fragility, conflict, and violence cannot be achieved with security policy and military intervention alone, as the impotence of external security missions in Mali has sufficiently shown. There must also be targeted socio-political and economic support measures at the local and regional levels to re-establish trust between citizens and governments, while at the same time pursuing a regional solution to overcome the transnational security crisis.

Germany should therefore work with the EU to develop more regionally-focused perspectives and support stabilisation measures of West African countries, which focus on an integrative strategy of regional and local measures. There are a number of options and approaches. They should focus primarily on improving basic services and municipal infrastructure, restoring resilient livelihoods, and strengthening state and democratic structures in the long term.[19] From a regional perspective, a further goal could be supporting regional initiatives such as the Accra Initiative, which was launched by Ghana in 2017, and now includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo (Mali and Niger have an observer status). Its goal is preventing terrorism from spreading from the Sahel and to jointly combat cross-border organised crime and violent extremism in the member countries' border regions.

Germany remains a respected partner in the region despite increasing anti-Western sentiment, and should view this as an opportunity in the process of reorienting German security policy to become more involved in West Africa. The extent to which heightened German security policy engagement in the region will have a supporting effect can be estimated from the Bundeswehr's "Gazelle" operations in Niger – a model that could be transferred to other countries in the region. Strengthening intelligence services would be a sensible approach to support the countries concerned in the fight against extremism and organised crime. An information advantage – especially at the external borders – would be important in order to implement targeted countermeasures.

Both Germany and other European and international actors must invest in long-term measures, both in concept and implementation. It is important to build on existing successes and to use the accumulated experience to render cooperation with partners on the ground more efficient, targeted, and inclusive. The debate over greater conditionality cannot be avoided here. The current situation in West Africa must be seen in this context for what it is: the result of decades of complex development, not a short-term crisis that can be solved with one-dimensional, time-limited approaches and strategies. In the same way, overarching processes, such as climate change, which is already exacerbating resource-related conflicts in the region, cannot be addressed effectively on the time scale that underlies most development cooperation measures today.

With this in mind, Western actors will have to change their perspectives and prove their staying power if they desire to be a sustainable, effective part of a lasting solution. The prerequisite for this is greatly improved coordination among the various states and organisations in West Africa, whose current activities betray a severe lack of consultation and coordination. Attempts to correct this deficit, such as the creation of a "Sahel Alliance", have so far proven ineffective. Improved coordination also requires an increased degree of transparency and openness – among external actors, but also with West African partners. This would also help to overcome the growing scepticism and rejection of Western intervention within the populations of West Africa. This sentiment is based on the ineffectiveness and short-term nature of measures, and on the fear that Western partners have a hidden agenda in the countries in question.

For Germany, it would be particularly necessary and advantageous to increase complementary engagement with France, which remains the largest and most important European actor in West Africa. Despite all prevailing resentment, France remains present in the region with extensive military structures, and thus remains a core security policy actor. Nevertheless, Germany should also develop sufficient foreign policy confidence to state its own interests within the framework of an Africa strategy, which should include approaches towards the stabilisation of West Africa, and the resolution of the migration issue from the Sahel towards Europe. Given the changed framework conditions in Mali, Germany's role and objectives in the region must be reassessed – this would be an opportune moment. Whatever the future shape of Western engagement in the region, one thing is certain: given West Africa's current trajectory towards becoming a new terror hotspot, inaction, both in the short and long term, is not an option. And even though Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is, from a European perspective, the current focus – it should not be overlooked that a major security crisis is brewing in West Africa, with as yet unforeseeable implications for Europe.

– translated from German –

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Anna Wasserfall is Desk Officer for West Africa and Digital Formats in the Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Team at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Dr. Susanne Conrad is Desk Officer for Rule of Law and Security in the Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Team at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

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