



Updated May 15, 2025

Burkina Faso: Conflict and Military Rule

Burkina Faso has been under military rule since 2022, part of a wave of coups in the Sahel and West Africa. The military's seizure of power put an end to Burkina Faso's brief tenure as an emerging democracy and rising U.S. regional security partner. A decade of escalating conflict has plunged the country into a humanitarian crisis. Al Qaeda- and Islamic State (IS)-affiliated groups control 30% of the country per official estimates, a potential undercount. State security forces and allied militias have allegedly committed massacres and other abuses, fueling ethnic violence and insurgent recruitment.

The ruling junta has reshaped Burkina Faso's foreign and defense relations, as have counterparts in neighboring Mali and Niger. These countries have curtailed cooperation with former colonial power France—previously a key partner in U.S.-supported counterterrorism operations—and strengthened ties with Moscow. The three countries formed the Alliance of Sahel States in 2023 and withdrew in early 2025 from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which had pressed for elections.

Congress may consider policy toward Burkina Faso in the context of strategic competition, changes in U.S. foreign assistance, and security concerns. In the 118th Congress, the House and Senate held hearings on U.S. policy in the Sahel.


Military Rule

Junta leader Capt. Ibrahim Traoré is among the world's youngest heads of state at age 37. He has assailed Western powers and emphasized pan-Africanism, sovereignty, and self-reliance, themes with strong resonance in Burkina Faso and beyond. He has expanded recruitment of “volunteer” fighters to counter insurgents and has sought to enhance state control over gold mining, a key sector. Traoré initially pledged elections within two years, then deemed them “not a priority.” In May 2024, the junta extended its rule for five more years; Mali and Niger have made similar moves. Authorities have claimed to foil several coup plots.

Capt. Traoré has mobilized large shows of support on the streets of Ouagadougou (**Figure 1**) and on social media. In April 2025, condemnation erupted from Traoré supporters after the Commander of U.S. AFRICOM, Gen. Michael Langley, in Senate testimony, accused Burkina Faso's junta of using the country's gold resources to protect itself. Such support has continued despite insurgent gains and socioeconomic challenges. Authorities have brutally repressed dissent and reportedly benefited from misleading propaganda. Local magistrates, journalists, civil society activists, opposition party figures, and other critics have faced arrest, censorship, forced conscription, and apparent enforced disappearances. Political party and civil society activities are officially suspended. Authorities have suspended several local and international broadcasters over critical coverage, including Voice of America. Burkinabè

officials have rejected human rights criticism, claiming that the military is the victim of a smear campaign.

Figure 1. Burkina Faso at a Glance

Size: Slightly larger than Colorado	
Population: 23 million	
Languages: French (official), local languages	
Life expectancy: 64.2 years	
Adult literacy: 46% (male 55%, female 38%)	
Religions: Muslim 63%, Roman Catholic 25%, Protestant 7%, other/none 5% (2018 est.)	
Ethnicities: Mossi 52%, Fulani (Peul) 8%, Gurma 7%, Bobo 5%, Gurunsi 5%, Senufo 5%, Bissa 4%, Lobi 2%, Dakara 2%, Tuareg/Bella 2%, other/unspecified 8% (2010)	
GDP growth / per capita: 4.5% / \$1,005 (2024 est.)	
General government gross debt: 50.2% of GDP	
Key exports / partners: gold, cotton, oil seeds, coconuts/ brazil nuts/cashews, cement / Switzerland 72%, UAE 10%, India 3%, Mali 3%, Côte d'Ivoire 2% (2023)	
Key imports / partners: refined petroleum, plastic products, cement, electricity, packaged medicine / Côte d'Ivoire 14%, China 13%, Ghana 9%, Russia 9%, France 7% (2023)	

Sources: CRS graphic; data from CIA *World Factbook*, International Monetary Fund (IMF); 2025 estimates unless noted.

Background

Capt. Traoré seized power in September 2022, ousting a more senior military officer who had carried out a coup in January of that year. Traoré's coup came on the heels of widespread public frustration over the government's failure to curb insurgent attacks. Rivalry among specialized military units may also have been a factor.

Burkina Faso has a history of military mutinies, coups, and social unrest, though it was seen as relatively stable under former leader Blaise Compaoré, who held power from a coup in 1987 until he was overthrown in a popular uprising in 2014. Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, a civilian politician, was elected in 2015, after transitional authorities put down a failed coup attempt. Kaboré was Burkina Faso's first post-independence leader to enter office via elections. He faced growing insurgent threats, along with popular demands for job creation, governance reforms, and accountability for Compaoré-era abuses. He was reelected in 2020, then ousted in the January 2022 coup.

Terrorism and Insurgency

Armed Islamist violence has escalated since 2016, when Al Qaeda-affiliated militants conducted an unprecedented large-scale attack in Ouagadougou that killed 30 people, including a U.S. citizen. Islamist armed groups, including a Malian-led Al Qaeda affiliate known as JNIM and a rival Islamic State (IS)-aligned faction, have expanded their areas of operation within the country and in Mali and Niger. JNIM appears to present the more operationally capable

threat, exploiting local tensions and grievances to expand through much of Burkina Faso's rural north, west, and east. JNIM has also leveraged its strongholds in Burkina Faso to press southward into coastal West Africa, especially Benin and Togo. Insurgents have targeted gold mines, among other aims, reportedly raising money from gold smuggling.

JNIM has long besieged towns in its northern strongholds, choking off access to food and medicines in an apparent tactic to force residents into submission. In May 2025, the group launched a complex attack on the besieged town and military base of Djibo, reportedly killing over 100 people.

Capt. Traoré has vowed to defeat insurgents by force, rejecting backchannel negotiations that previous leaders reportedly pursued. His government has recruited tens of thousands of "Homeland Defense Volunteers" (VDP), expanding a system of state-backed militias. Soldiers and militia fighters have reportedly committed mass killings and other grave abuses during counterinsurgency operations. Such abuses have reportedly disproportionately targeted members of the minority ethnic Fulani community, fueling a vicious circle of JNIM recruitment and atrocities.

Shifting International Relations

Roughly 100 Russian security personnel have reportedly deployed to Burkina Faso since late 2023 to train the military and provide personal protection for Capt. Traoré. The expansion of Russia's footprint from Mali—where Russian personnel have participated in combat operations—came as Moscow was asserting state control over operations previously spearheaded by the Wagner Group private military company. Russia has also supplied weapons to Burkina Faso. In April 2025, Russia pledged arms and training for a new Alliance of Sahel States regional force.

Diplomatic ties with Russia have tightened. In 2023, Traoré referred to Russia as a "strategic ally" and played a prominent role in Russia's Africa Summit. There, he held talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and voiced support for Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. Russia reopened its embassy in Ouagadougou later that year, having closed it in 1992. Traoré again visited Russia in May 2025 and met with Putin, praising Russia's cooperation and ability to withstand international sanctions. Burkina Faso has also been a focus of Russian "soft-power efforts," including grain shipments and scholarships. The Africa Initiative, a pro-Kremlin media outlet, has an office in the country. In April 2025, the government awarded a new mining license to Russia's Nordgold, which is under U.S. sanctions. Burkina, Mali, and Niger have accused Ukraine of supporting terrorism, a reference to Malian rebel groups who have killed Russian personnel.

As in Mali and Niger, partnership with Russia has served as a symbolic rejection of France, a populist bid for domestic legitimacy and a means to seek external security support. After taking power, Capt. Traoré expelled France's ambassador, terminated bilateral defense accords, and forced the exit of French troops who had conducted regional counterterrorism operations (with U.S. logistical and intelligence support). Burkinabè officials have pursued other nontraditional partners, for example meeting with representatives of the Taliban in Iran in May 2025.

Burkina Faso reestablished diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2018, severing ties

with Taiwan. In 2024, the PRC and Burkina Faso elevated bilateral relations to a "strategic partnership." PRC arms sales to Burkina Faso also increased, with the reported delivery of over 100 armored vehicles. PRC economic links are less prominent than in many other African countries, but Burkina Faso reportedly owes the PRC undisclosed debts.

The rift within ECOWAS, which the Sahel juntas accuse of serving French interests, has spurred tensions with neighbors—especially Côte d'Ivoire, which Capt. Traoré claims is plotting to destabilize his regime. Recently elected leaders in Senegal and Ghana have sought to mend ties.

Humanitarian Emergency and the Economy

Over 2 million Burkinabè were internally displaced as of early 2025—one of the world's highest tolls—and some areas exhibited acute food insecurity just short of famine, per UN data. Insurgent attacks have closed thousands of schools and hundreds of health centers, affecting millions of people. The junta expelled the country's top UN official in 2022. (A new UN coordinator was named in 2024.)

Landlocked with high population growth and a largely agrarian workforce, Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries. Cotton and gold exports are key sources of state revenue and foreign exchange. Under Capt. Traoré, authorities have moved to increase state and local control of the gold mining sector, including by raising taxes and nationalizing some gold mines, actions that (on top of security concerns) challenge foreign investment. Canadian firms have generally led the sector. The junta has also introduced new taxes on imports and telecoms to finance counterinsurgency efforts and the Sahel alliance. The IMF assessed in April 2025 that growth had reached 5% in 2024, despite humanitarian and security challenges, though it noted that deficits remained high.

U.S. Policy and Aid

The Trump Administration has not articulated a specific approach toward the Sahel, but its broader foreign assistance policies have implications for U.S. relations. The Administration's termination of many USAID programs has reportedly affected at least some activities in Burkina Faso. The United States allocated \$75 million in bilateral aid in FY2023 (latest public data), most of which supported health programs, on top of emergency humanitarian aid.

The 2022 coups disrupted U.S. security and development cooperation, while U.S. efforts to counter Russian malign influence took on greater salience. The Biden Administration applied coup-related legal restrictions on certain aid to the government, primarily affecting military aid. The Millennium Challenge Corporation also ended a planned \$450 million development compact after the coup, and the Biden Administration ended Burkina Faso's eligibility for trade preferences under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, P.L. 106-200, as amended). Bilateral trade is negligible, totaling \$59 million in 2024.

Annual appropriations and defense authorization bills present opportunities for Congress to shape U.S. engagement. As introduced in the 119th Congress, H.R. 2157 would extend combat-zone-equivalent tax benefits to any U.S. servicemembers serving in Burkina Faso.

Alexis Arieff, Specialist in African Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.