

Background

The Liptako-Gourma region in the Central Sahel, of which Burkina Faso's northern Administrative Regions of Boucle du Mouhoun, Nord, Sahel, and Est (see overview map in Figure 1) are a part, has seen the rise of a complex array of insurgent movements organized around Islamist, tribal, and ethnic identities. Compounding crises brought on by the activities of transnational criminal networks, "climatic disruption, rapid population growth, high levels of poverty, community tensions, [and a] lack of state presence and basic social services," have fueled the radicalization of political extremists¹ while external civil conflicts in Mali (2012-present) and Libya (2014-2020) have also produced the effect of flooding the volatile region with arms, munitions, and foreign fighters.²

Figure 1: Burkina Faso Regional Overview



Much of Burkina Faso's institutional weakness in the face of mounting insurgent activities within its borders stem from the country's political upheaval in 2014, when the 27-year long reign of Burkina Faso's second president since independence, Blaise Compaoré, came to an unambiguous end after his failed bid to abolish term limits on the Burkinabe Presidency.³ The collapse of Compaoré's regime had long-lasting repercussions for Burkina Faso's internal security and the stability of its governing institutions – fostering deep divisions and mistrust between "favored" and "unfavored" units of the armed forces, weakening the credibility of command-and-control relationships between senior and subordinate officers, and calling into serious question the central government's ability to maintain law and order throughout the country.⁴

In January of 2022, military forces loyal to Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the commander of Burkina Faso's Third Military Region,⁵ staged a successful coup against the elected government of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. Eight months later, Damiba himself was overthrown by disgruntled elements of the Burkinabe army led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré (at the time, the commander of an artillery regiment based in Kaya),⁶ who has since led Burkina Faso's junta government – styled as the "Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration" (MPSR).⁷ Both men, and their co-conspirators within the Burkinabe armed forces, legitimized their seizure of state power (and dissolution of Burkina Faso's transitional charter and National Assembly) on the grounds that preceding governments had failed to address mounting security crises posed by rampant jihadist insurgencies raging across the country's northern territories.

Damiba's coup in many ways mirrored the Malian military's similar moves in 2020 and 2021 to topple what frustrated officers perceived as ineffective governing institutions in the face of mounting internal violence and instability brought on by Islamist insurgencies.⁸ The poor state of arms, munitions, and rations of many Burkinabe military units, high combat casualties from the counterinsurgency campaign, and a bloody wave of high-profile attacks on Burkinabe security forces by insurgent groups in November of 2022,⁹ exacerbated deep resentments against Kaboré's government within Burkina Faso's military establishment, leaving him with few defenders when the putschists came knocking at his door. Captain Traoré, in a nearly identical vein, claimed Damiba's ouster was motivated by his failure to "refocus [Burkina Faso's] transition on the security question," as well as Damiba's rejection of "proposals by [MPSR] officers to reorganize the army" – which had remained largely organized as it had been under Kaboré's Presidency.¹⁰ Both coups claimed that a temporary consolidation of state power into the military's hands was necessary to restore order to the country, and ward off the metastasizing danger posed by Islamist insurgents. To date, the validity of this argument remains in question.

Research Questions

This project explores how Burkina Faso's military coups in January and September of 2022 have impacted the country's security environment, and whether the military's takeover of civilian governance has effectively delivered measures of success on its promise to control, counter, and crush insurgent movements terrorizing Burkina Faso's civilian population. It also seeks to examine where conflict fatalities have tended to concentrate, subside, or worsen in Burkina Faso over a period beginning after the fall of Blaise Compaoré's government at the end of 2014 (seen by many external analysts as one of the catalyzing events for Burkina Faso's current security crisis) to the present day in 2024.

Data: *ALCED*,¹¹ Event Type = Violence Against Civilians, Explosions/ Remote Violence, Battles, OR Strategic Developments

Conflict Event Legend

- Violence against civilians
- Explosions/Remote Violence
- Battles
- Strategic developments

Figure 2: Conflict Event Map, 2015 to 2024

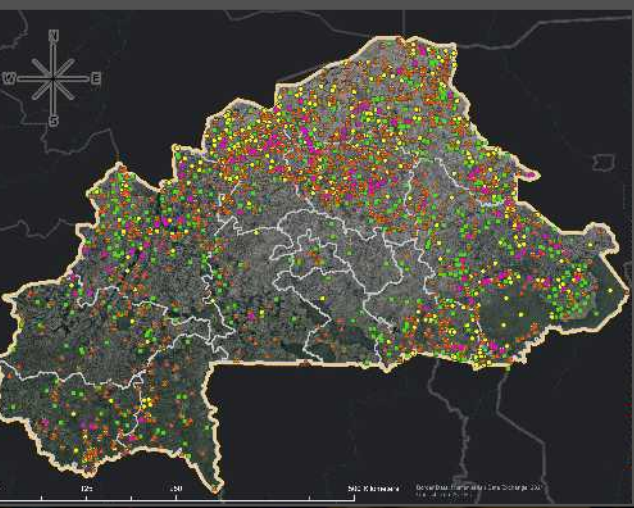


Figure 3: Fatality Hot Spots, 2015 and 2016

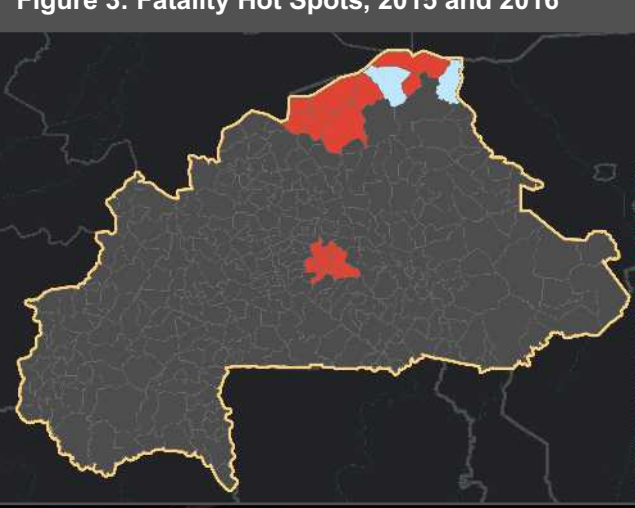


Figure 4: Fatality Hot Spots, 2017 and 2018

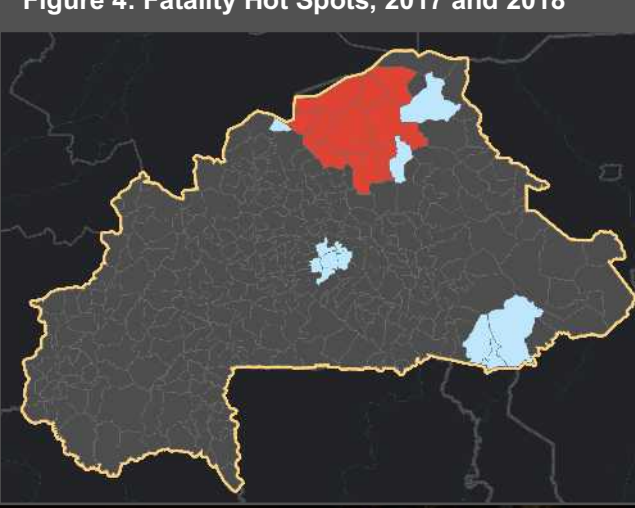


Figure 5: Fatality Hot Spots, 2019 and 2020

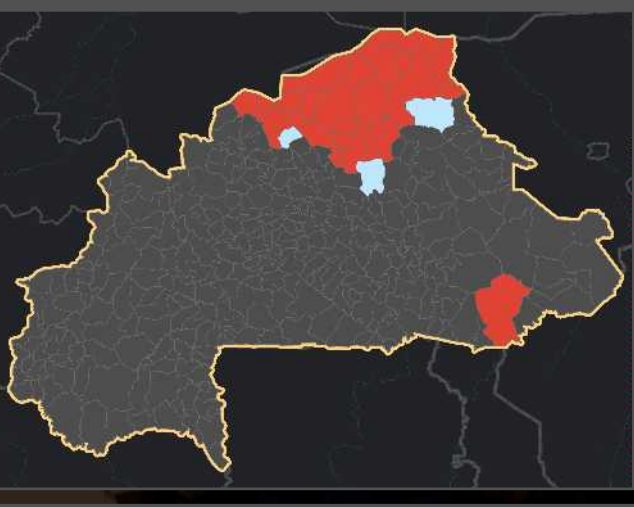


Figure 6: Fatality Hot Spots, 2021 and 2022

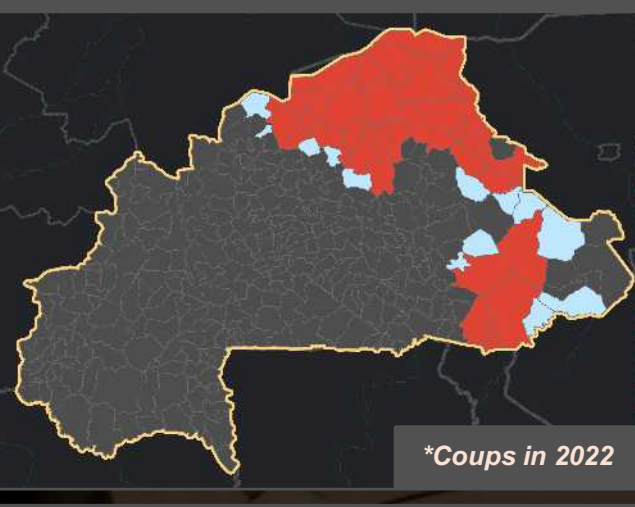
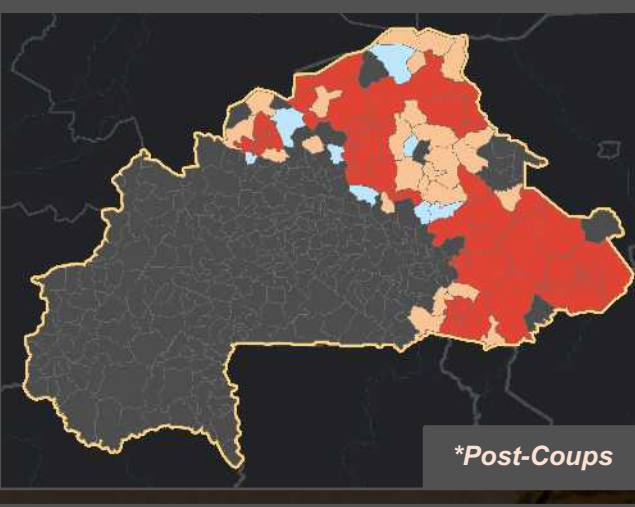


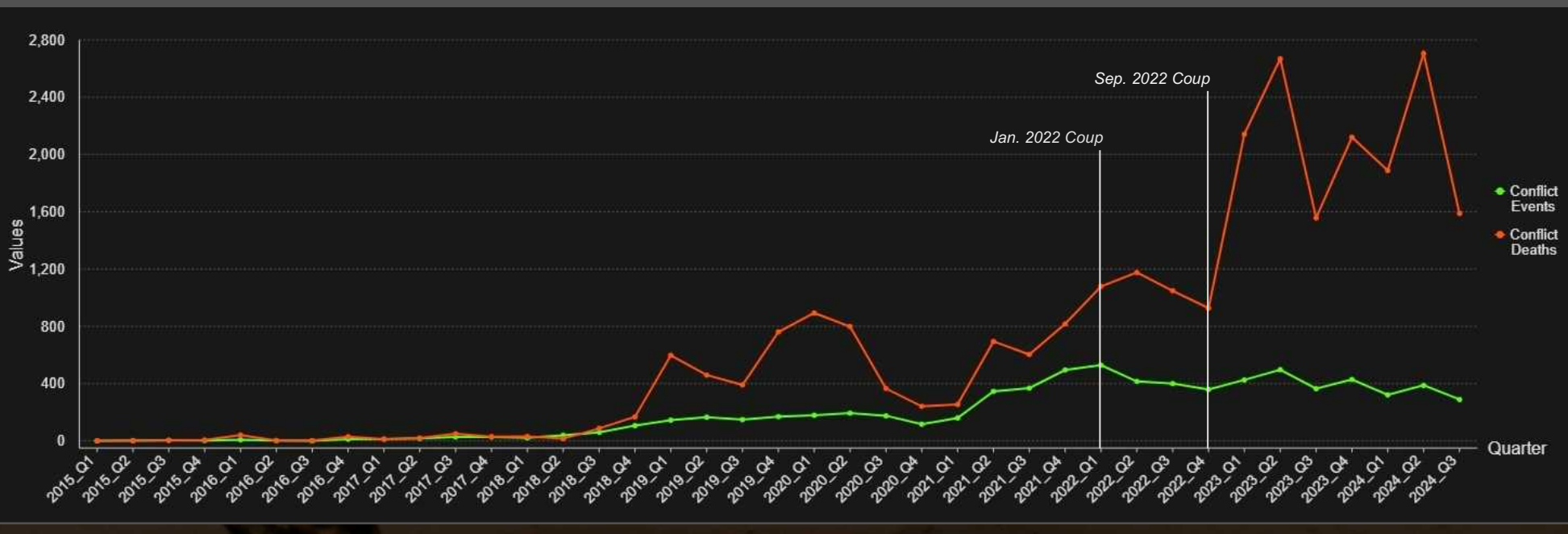
Figure 7: Fatality Hot Spots, 2023 and 2024



Hot Spot Analysis Legend

- Hot Spot with 99% Confidence
- Hot Spot with 95% Confidence
- Hot Spot with 90% Confidence
- Not Significant
- Cold Spot with 99% Confidence
- Cold Spot with 95% Confidence
- Cold Spot with 90% Confidence

Figure 8: Burkina Faso Quarterly Conflict Events and Deaths, Q1/2015 to Q3/2024



Sources

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² Center for Preventive Action, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel," Council on Foreign Relations, October 23, 2024, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global/conflict-tracker/conflict-overview/center-preventive-action>

³ "Burkina Faso: Blaise Compaoré's ouster," BBC, November 2, 2014, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25111101>

⁴ "Who is Burkina Faso coup leader Lt-Col Damiba?" BBC, January 26, 2022, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60141195>

⁵ "Tham Niaga and Anne Mensah," Burkina Faso soldiers announce overthrow of military government, Reuters, September 30, 2022, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/heavy-gunfire-heard-burkina-faso-capital-military-overthrow-2022-09-30/>

⁶ Raleigh, C., Kishi, R., & Leke, A. Political instability patterns are obscured by conflict dataset scope conditions, sources, and coding choices. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 10, 742 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-01959-4>

⁷ "Burkina Faso: Ibrahim Traoré proclaimed President," The Africa Report, October 1, 2022, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.theafricareport.com/24/569/burkina-faso-ibrahim-traore-proclaimed-president-damiba-ousted/>

⁸ "Nabaha looting, Burkina Faso coup: Gunshots in capital and roads blocked," BBC, October 1, 2024, accessed November 1, 2024.

⁹ "Who is Burkina Faso coup leader Lt-Col Damiba?" BBC, January 26, 2022, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60141195>

¹⁰ "Burkina Faso: Blaise Compaoré's ouster," BBC, November 2, 2014, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25111101>

¹¹ "ALCED," <https://www.alced.org/>

Methodology

Data Collection and Preparation: Conflict data for this project's examined period (2015-2024) in Burkina Faso was sourced from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) database, focusing on 7,426 events classified as "Violence Against Civilians," "Explosions/Remote Violence," "Battles," or "Strategic Developments" to restrict the analytical scope to occurrences of violence linked to conflicts between Burkina Faso's constellation of insurgent factions and the Burkinabe Armed Forces. Event and fatality data from database entries classed as "Riots" or "Protests" are therefore not reflected in this analysis. Metrics from these events, which ACLED geocodes based on available latitude and longitude information, were then aggregated at the Departmental level.

Spatial Analysis: Hotspot analysis (Getis-Ord Gi*) in this project is used to identify statistically significant spatial clustering of high (hot spot) and low (cold spot) fatality counts produced by conflict events at the Departmental-level over time steps of two-year intervals (assessing whether high and low value spatial clusters are more prominent than one would expect in a random distribution).

Figure 2: Map depicts the positions and classifications of all 7,426 ACLED conflict events reflected in this project's analysis (lat-long data for events included in ACLED dataset).

Figures 3 – 7: Temporal maps depict the evolution of fatality hot-spots and cold-spots at the Departmental-level in two-year steps from 2015 to 2024.

Figure 8: Graph depicts the quarterly totals of both frequency of conflict events and number of event fatalities from Quarter-1/ 2015 to Quarter-3/ 2024, overlaid with timeline information regarding Burkina Faso's two military coups in 2022.

Findings

2015 – 2018 Hotspots: Centred around Ouagadougou and northern departments along the Malian border, correlating with early-stage attacks an unrest targeting the capital during the downfall of Compaoré's government; **Cold spots:** Minimal presence, with most regions neutral.

2019 – 2020 Hotspots: Expansion to most departments in northern Sahel region, and movement into northern departments of the Centre-Nord region; **Cold spots:** Isolated pockets on the periphery of hotspot region in the north, potentially indicating efforts by security forces to clamp down on insurgent violence.

2021 – 2024 Hotspots: Progress to dominate most of the Sahel and Est regions, with most departments along the Mali and Niger borders appearing as statistically significant hotspots (possibly linked to cross-border conflict spillover from neighbouring countries); **Cold spots:** Still apparent on periphery of expanding hotspot region, but disappear eventually in most of Est region.

Key Points - (1) Hotspot Migration: Fatalities shifted from the capital in 2015-2016 to the northern and eastern regions by 2023-2024, likely driven by escalating cross-border insurgent activities near Mali and Niger; **(2) Intensification:** Hotspot areas in the Sahel and Est regions expanded significantly following Burkina Faso's military coups in 2022, reflecting both a widening area impacted by the conflict and an intensification in fatalities generated by conflict events. While the number of conflict events occurring quarter to quarter appear to be on the decline (though still high), resulting fatalities from those events remain significantly higher than before the military seized power in 2022; **(3) Cold Spots:** The appearance of cold spots on the periphery of hotspot regions potentially indicates isolated pockets of success in security force efforts to impose order and stability, though the persistence of these pockets also appears short-lived; **(4) Cross-Border Dynamics:** Hotspots in the Sahel and Est regions highlight the impact of cross-border instability, likely linked to the activities of cross-national militants and spillover violence from Mali and Niger.

Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Limitations - Data: Potential under/over-reporting of conflict events and fatalities in remote areas; **Temporal Gaps:** Time aggregation may miss finer temporal trends.

Recommendations - Enhanced Monitoring: Invest in local data collection for better conflict tracking in underrepresented areas; **Resource Allocation:** Focus on northern and eastern regions for targeted interventions and development programs; **Rethink Utility of Military Governance:** Burkina Faso's junta does not appear to have delivered the stability it promised following its coups in 2022, and may in fact be linked to an intensification of observed fatalities over the last two years. A return to civilian governance, and the establishment of robust judicial and law enforcement institutions to hold security forces and officials accountable for abuses, appears an advisable course of action at this stage.

Conclusion – This analysis identifies a shift in conflict fatalities to Burkina Faso's northern and eastern regions and an expansion of affected regions in the aftermath of the military's seizure of power in 2022, driven by cross-border instability. Targeted policies and regional cooperation appear critical to mitigating violence and safeguarding affected populations.