

The Burkina Faso Time Bomb Is About to Blow, and It Might Take Down West Africa

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The landlocked West African nation of Burkina Faso is a time bomb that's about to explode as evidenced by the drastic increase in terrorist-related violence there over the past year and its attendant humanitarian consequences, yet both the region and the rest of the world as a whole seem powerless to prevent what the UN warned last month might become "another Syria".

Burkinabe Backgrounder

The word "Syria" has become a euphemism for many things to different people, but practically everyone can agree that it's a buzzword for one of the worst humanitarian crises this century, which is why the world should take notice when the UN warned last month that the landlocked West African nation of Burkina Faso is at risk of becoming "[another Syria](#)". That country has been experiencing a drastic increase in terrorist-related violence all throughout the past year as a result of its Malian neighbor's security challenges finally spilling across its border and destabilizing this fragile but geostrategically significant state, exactly as the author foresaw would inevitably happen in a series of three articles that he published in just as many years. The reader is encouraged to skim through them at the very least in order to better acquaint themselves with the genesis of this crisis:

- 21 August, 2017: "[Burkina Faso Is Becoming A Battlefield In the War On Terror](#)"
- 12 October, 2018: "[Burkina Faso Is The New Flashpoint In France's 'War On Terror'](#)"
- 17 May, 2019: "[The Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger Border Triangle Is The New 'Syria'](#)"

Long story short, the 2011 NATO War on Libya led to an outflow of heavily armed and highly trained Tuaregs back to their Malian homeland where they restarted their separatist insurgency a year later that was quickly subverted by the Islamist Ansar al-Dine, which in turn paved the way for France's ongoing anti-terrorist intervention there since January 2013. The region's former colonial power then organized a multinational coalition called the [G5 Sahel](#) in 2014 in an ultimately failed effort to contain the chaotic processes that were unleashed several years prior. One of its members, Burkina Faso, experienced a [People's Revolution](#) in October of that year which unseated its long-serving leader Blaise Compaore, the man who [notoriously killed](#) Burkinabe revolutionary icon [Thomas Sankara](#). Compaore's loyalists in the security sector staged an [unsuccessful coup](#) nearly a year later in September 2015, and since then, the country's situation has been worsening.

From Slow-Motion Destabilization To Accelerated Crisis

It was therefore only a matter of time before the transregional terrorist threats emanating

from Mali spread across the border and began to fill the Burkinabe security vacuum. The past year saw this process unfolding in full force as terrorists went on a slaughtering spree all across the northern provinces and also started [specifically targeting Christians](#) too. Nearly half a million people have fled from their homes, which is what prompted the UN to issue its dire warning about Burkina Faso becoming “another Syria”. [Last month](#), terrorists killed several dozen local workers on their way to a foreign-owned gold mine, which also attracted widespread international attention for perhaps the first time since the country’s previously slow-motion but increasingly accelerated destabilization began over half a decade ago. The consequences of this crisis continuing to go unchallenged could catalyze a [large-scale regional refugee outflow](#) to the EU.

That obvious observation makes it all the more surprising why the rest of the world hasn’t yet stepped up to help the Burkinabe people, though it should also be said that no so-called “humanitarian intervention” or anti-terrorist one should be commenced without the permission of the country’s internationally recognized authorities. Even if more concerted multilateral efforts are undertaken, that might still not solve the problem as seen by France’s humiliating failure over nearly the past 7 years. It’s not enough to just put “boots on the ground” since the most sustainable solution lies in more comprehensive measures that include socio-economic support to the locals and assistance to the government in restoring its writ over the border provinces. On top of that, the host state’s security forces must be reformed in order to ensure that they can adequately respond to terrorist threats as they emerge.

The New “Syrac”

Thus far, nothing of the sort has happened on the level needed to make a noticeable difference, which is why the country continues to descend further into destabilization and is now at risk of becoming just as much of an exporter of regional terrorist threats as neighboring Mali is. [Niger](#), too, is [slowly but steadily](#) getting sucked into this black hole of chaos too, which is why the author described their tri-border region earlier this year as being the new “Syrac”. Libya used to be regarded as the greatest security threat to the continent since the 2011 NATO war, though that country has comparatively stabilized over the past year as General Haftar’s forces progressively restored law and order over vast swathes of it whereas West Africa has gone in the opposite direction. The geographic enormity of the space that’s been adversely affected by this trend is astounding and should alone imbue the international community with a sense of urgency for getting involved.

Alas, seeing as how that hasn’t yet happened, the dire prediction can be made that this regional security crisis will continue to worsen over the next year until it attracts enough attention to finally become the global issue that it deserves to have been in the first place. There’s no ideal solution for dealing with it because the security challenges are so asymmetric and involve a mix of terrorism, insurgency, rebellion, and the disastrous socio-economic and political conditions that exacerbate all of the aforementioned. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that a process of so-called “nation-building” is needed, though not at all in the form that the word has come to embody since the end of the Old Cold War. What’s meant by this is that the locals in each afflicted community and the nations as a whole that they’re a part of must come together to decide what exactly is needed to restore stability and to what extent they should rely on foreign assistance to this end.

The Time For Non-Traditional Partners Has Arrived

It's difficult to imagine this campaign succeeding if it's waged without any international support whatsoever, though therein lies one of the most pressing questions, and that's whether or not the regional states' foreign backers can be trusted to not abuse their intervention invitation to promote their own interests at their hosts' expense. History indicates that West Africa's traditional French and American partners can't be fully relied upon, which opens up the possibility of inviting non-traditional ones like [Russia](#), China, Turkey, and even [Pakistan](#) playing different roles depending on their specific expertise. None of them should commit ground forces, but they can still assist with security training, economic development, and the restoration of governance in previously terrorist-afflicted areas. Therefore, the ideal solution would be if the West Africa region prioritized reaching out to those multipolar countries for support instead of their traditional partners.

That's not to say that those previously mentioned states will necessarily succeed with this gargantuan effort — whether individually, collectively, or jointly — but just that it presents the best chance for changing the dynamics for the better after it's been proven that French and American support has hitherto been ineffective in countering regional security threats. Doubling down by requesting even more assistance from their traditional partners could very well be counterproductive because they have a track record of failure that indirectly contributed to worsening the regional crisis. It's debatable why they haven't yet succeeded, but the fact of the matter is that they simply haven't, so it's time to explore other options if the regional stakeholders are serious about dealing with this crisis. They certainly seem to be, so it'll remain to be seen what relevant developments might occur on this front next year.

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