

Civilians on the Front Lines of (Counter-)Terrorism: Lessons from the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland in Burkina Faso

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Abstract

In the wake of the lethal attack conducted in Solhan, northeast Burkina Faso, during the early hours of 5 June 2021, debates around the use of civilian auxiliaries in the fight against violent extremism have reinvigorated. Faced with a dramatic rise in terrorist violence since 2015, national authorities have decided to arm their own citizens, allowing, since early 2020, the recruitment of nationals willing to voluntarily defend, if necessary by force of arms, their villages or places of residence. While this initiative has been generally welcomed by the population, the creation of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (*Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie*), has continued to raise serious concerns, particularly with regard to the risk of further exacerbating violence, redirecting it against civilians, and increasing intercommunal tensions. Almost two years after the promulgation of the law, this policy brief aims to confront the rationale behind this strategy with the outcomes of its implementation and the main challenges it has raised, identifying lessons learned and providing recommendations on the way forward.

Keywords: Sahel, Burkina Faso, counter-terrorism, civilians, VDP, self-defence, human rights

Introduction

The attack in Solhan, in northeast Burkina Faso, in the early hours of 5 June 2021—the deadliest since extremist violence started spreading throughout the country in 2015—has reinvigorated debates around the use of civilian auxiliaries to counter terrorist groups’ presence.¹ Extremist assailants initiated their assault by targeting a post of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland—better known under the French acronym VDP (*Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie*)—before conducting a lethal raid on the nearby village. Resulting in 132 to 160 casualties according to reports,² this raid is part of a growing trend of attacks targeting VDP forces which have increasingly found themselves on the front lines of counter-terrorism efforts.

In the face of a dramatic increase in extremist violence over the past six years, the Burkinabe government has indeed started to arm its own citizens. The “recruitment of volunteers for the defence of areas under threat” was announced in the immediate aftermath of another major attack, the targeting of a convoy of the Canadian mining company SEMAFO on 6 November 2019, which resulted in 39 deaths.³ Promulgated on 21 January 2020 with the support of all 124 members of parliament,⁴ the law establishing the VDPs—thereafter referred to as the VDP law—and implementing decree adopted a month later, allow for the recruitment of individuals older than 18 years and willing “to voluntarily serve the security interests of their village or area of residence.”⁵ These individuals are recruited for an initial period of one year, renewable for a maximum period of five years. Upon recruitment, volunteers receive a two-week training in handling weapons and learning the code of conduct, after which they are provided with a weapon. The VDP’s core mission is “to contribute, if necessary by force of arms, to the defence and protection of the people and property of his village or sector of residence.”⁶ This includes gathering and reporting information, conducting patrols, escorts and surveillance, but volunteers are also allowed to actively fight attacking forces pending the arrival of the army, thus giving them the responsibility of being the first response.⁷ While the population seems to have generally welcomed this initiative, it has also raised serious concerns, particularly with regard to the risk of further exacerbating violence, redirecting it against civilians, and increasing intercommunal tensions.

Almost two years after the promulgation of the VDP law,⁸ what impact do these civilian auxiliaries have on the overall crisis, the local conflict dynamics, and the situation faced by civilian populations in affected regions? What lessons on the role of civilians in the context of counter-terrorism can be learned from the Burkinabe experience? This policy brief will explore the rationale behind the

1 DW, “Solhan : une attaque qui relance le débat sur les supplétifs civils des armées en Afrique,” L’Arbre à Palabre, 11 June, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/fr/solhan-attaque-forces-suppl%C3%A9tifs-arm%C3%A9es-afrique/av-57834056>

2 UN News, “Protection call for Burkina Faso civilians after terror attack leaves 132 dead,” 7 June, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1093492>; TV5 Monde, “Burkina Faso : le bilan de l’attaque de Solhan s’alourdit à 160 morts,” 6 June 2021, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/burkina-faso-une-centaine-de-civils-executes-dans-le-nord-est-du-pays-411598>

3 Message to the nation from the President of Faso following the deadly attack on a convoy of the mining company SEMAFO SA, 7 November 2019. <https://www.presidencedufaso.bf/message-a-la-nation-du-president-du-faso-suite-a-lattaque-meurtriere-dun-convoy-de-la-societe-miniere-semafo-sa/>

4 Summary record of the plenary session of Tuesday 21 January 2020, <https://www.assembleenationale.bf/spip.php?article1162>

5 Decree on the status of the Volunteer for the Defense of the Homeland, Ouagadougou, 24 February, 2020, N°2020-0115/PRES/PM/MDNAC/MATDC/MSECU/MINEFID, <http://ekladata.com/Va7Pci2rc1q53C7yjYwf4tPLIPA.pdf>

6 Ibid.

7 Matthieu Vendrely, “Au Burkina Faso, qui sont les Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie ?” TV5Monde, 7 June, 2021. <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/au-burkina-faso-qui-sont-les-volontaires-pour-la-defense-de-la-patrie-411863>

8 This policy brief was written in September 2021, therefore any events that took place after this time are not accounted for.

government's decision to turn to civilians in the fight against violent extremism. Building upon the objectives initially assigned to armed volunteers, it will then aim to assess the outcomes of this strategy, while identifying the main challenges it has raised. As Burkinabe authorities have recently announced a reconfiguration of their military deployment on the ground,⁹ it will finally provide recommendations on the way forward.

The Rationale

Coping with a dramatic rise in terrorist violence

While initially spared from the spread of violent extremism that followed the breakout of the Malian conflict in 2012, Burkina Faso has witnessed a striking increase in extremist violence since 2015.¹⁰ Since then, the country has become one of the worst affected by terrorist deaths worldwide, ranking just behind Afghanistan and Nigeria in 2019.¹¹ Arguably even more worrying than the number of deaths in absolute terms has been the rapidity of the increase, with the country having recorded the largest increase in deaths from terrorism globally in 2019, with 593 deaths, representing a six-fold increase as compared to 2018.¹² The violence seen in Burkina Faso has continued, with 2020 being even more deadly than 2019 and with 2021 on track to see even more deaths.¹³

Located at the junction between deeply-affected and unstable Sahelian states to the north and at-risk Coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea to the south, this landlocked West African country occupies a highly strategic but all too delicate geographic position which has proved “central to jihadist groups’ strategies to establish, strengthen or expand their influence in the Sahel.”¹⁴ Bordering regions, including the Burkinabe Sahel, East and Centre-North, have been severely impacted by the spill over of violence from neighbouring Mali and Niger. But far from being the sole result of an external threat, violent extremism has found a fertile ground in these poorly developed, largely ungoverned and remote regions.¹⁵ Terrorist groups, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the al-Qaeda-affiliated *Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM), and the domestic group Ansarul Islam founded by the Burkinabe preacher Ibrahim Malam Dicko in late 2016,¹⁶ have been able to embed themselves in the local context. Exploiting longstanding grievances against a largely absent central state and perceptions of corruption among local

9 Yaya Boudani, “Burkina Faso: vers une nouvelle organisation des forces de défense et de sécurité,” *RFI*, 28 August, 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210828-burkina-faso-vers-une-nouvelle-organisations-des-forces-de-d%C3%A9fense-et-de-s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9>

10 The first incident related to terrorism recorded on Burkinabe soil was the abduction of a Romanian national in Tambao, at the border with Niger and Mali, on 4 April 2015 (William Assanvo, “Security alone won’t save Burkina Faso from extremism,” *ISS Today*, 11 April, 2017. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/security-alone-wont-save-burkina-faso-from-extremism>). It was followed, on 15 January 2016, by the attack against the Splendid Hotel and nearby Cappuccino cafe in Ouagadougou, causing 30 deaths (BBC News, “Burkina Faso attack: Foreigners killed at luxury hotel,” 16 January, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35332792>).

11 Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism,” November 2020, p.12. <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-2.pdf>

12 *Ibid.*, p.2.

13 Héni Nsaibia, “The Sahel: Insurgency and fragile politics at the center of an unabated crisis,” *Mid-Year Update: 10 conflicts to worry about in 2021*, ACLED, August 2021. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ACLED_MidYear-Update-10-Conflicts-to-Worry-About-in-2021_August2021_WebFinal.pdf

14 Assanvo, “Security alone won’t save Burkina Faso from extremism”

15 International Crisis Group, “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North,” *Africa Report N°254*, 12 October, 2017. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/254-the-social-roots-of-jihadist-violence-in-burkina-faso-s-north.pdf>

16 Morgane Le Cam, “Comment est né Ansarul Islam, premier groupe djihadiste de l’Histoire du Burkina Faso,” *Le Monde*, 11 April, 2017. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/04/11/comment-est-ne-ansarul-islam-premier-groupe-djihadiste-de-l-histoire-du-burkina-faso_5109520_3212.html

elites, these groups have moreover been able to build upon social divides and intercommunal tensions, particularly between (semi-)nomadic herders and sedentary farmers.¹⁷ In this context, under-equipped and insufficiently trained security and defence forces have proved incapable of countering the threat posed by violent extremist groups, giving rise to the practice of using civilian self-defence militias.

Making up for national forces' deficits

The deterioration of the security situation, and the subsequent creation of the VDPs, are also to be seen in light of the “slow and problematic reconstruction of the security apparatus” in the aftermaths of the fall of former Burkinabe President Blaise Compaoré in October 2014.¹⁸ Already weakened by the mutinies of 2011 and the subsequent dismissal of more than 500 military,¹⁹ national security and defence—especially intelligence—capabilities, which had long been dependent on strong individuals close to the president rather than solid institutions—were significantly impacted by the fall of the regime.²⁰ A failed coup attempt in 2015 led to the dissolution of Compaoré’s presidential security regiment (*régiment de sécurité présidentielle, RSP*), a special force in charge of counter-terrorism, and whose development had been largely prioritised over other units, creating tensions that still remain.²¹

Attempts to restructure the security apparatus, including through the creation of a National Intelligence Agency, have not yet had the desired effects.²² Terrorist attacks have not only been carried out in rural or remote areas, where intelligence-gathering is arguably more difficult, but also in the capital city Ouagadougou.²³ Military posts and patrols have been subject to multiple large-scale assaults, such as the series of lethal attacks carried out in the last months of 2019.²⁴ National forces have also had trouble covering vast and remote areas under threat, a situation that has getting worse in the past two years, with many localities having been deserted by state security forces.²⁵ Even when present, they have been strongly criticised for the time needed to intervene after being alerted about an attack. Delays are often exacerbated by the fact that state security personnel deployed in affected areas are most of the time unfamiliar with the

17 International Crisis Group, “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North,” p.9.

18 Ibid, p.11.

19 Rinaldo Depagne, “Burkina Faso’s Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence,” International Crisis Group Commentary, 5 March, 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-fasos-alarming-escalation-jihadist-violence>

20 Pascal Airault, “Comment le Burkina Faso est devenu le maillon faible de la sécurité au Sahel,” L’Opinion, 15 November, 2019. <https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/comment-burkina-faso-est-devenu-maillon-faible-securite-sahel-203014>

21 Depagne, “Burkina Faso’s Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence”

22 Airault, “Comment le Burkina Faso est devenu le maillon faible de la sécurité au Sahel”

23 Observers have notably seen in the large-scale attack carried out against the Burkinabe army headquarters and the French Embassy in Ouagadougou on 2 March 2018 a sign that national intelligence has remained rather weak. See: Depagne, “Burkina Faso’s Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence.

24 This series included the attacks against a military base in Arbinda on 24 December 2019 (Le Monde, “Au Burkina Faso, l’Etat islamique revendique l’attaque de la base militaire d’Arbinda,” 28 December, 2019.

https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/12/28/burkina-faso-l-etat-islamique-revendique-l-attaque-de-la-base-militaire-d-arbinda_6024251_3210.html), against a military patrol in Hallalé on the night of 24-25 December 2019 (RFI, “Burkina Faso : une nouvelle attaque contre les forces armées fait 11 morts,” 26 December, 2019. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20191226-burkina-faso-une-nouvelle-attaque-contre-forces-armees-fait-11-morts>), and against a gendarmerie post in Djibo on 31 December 2019 (RFI, “Burkina Faso: la gendarmerie de Djibo ciblée par une nouvelle attaque,” 2 January, 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200102-burkina-faso-gendarmerie-djibo-ciblee-une-nouvelle-attaque>).

25 RFI, “Burkina : dans la région du Sahel, des forces de police fatiguées et inquiètes,” 16 September, 2019. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190916-inquietudes-police-burkina-attaques-sahel>

local terrain, while “the fighters of armed jihadist groups are recruited locally and have a better knowledge and understanding of the territory than army personnel.”²⁶ Often not native to these regions, national forces are usually regarded as ‘strangers’ by local populations, who are rather reluctant to share information, making intelligence-gathering much more difficult.

Against this backdrop, the recruitment of locally-based civilian volunteers, who are better-integrated into communities and have a deeper knowledge of the local terrain, has aimed to provide a timelier and more effective response to terrorist groups’ violence. The VDPs’ creation is thus clearly entrenched into the government’s attempt to make up for the security apparatus and national forces’ deficits. And in practice, civilian auxiliaries may indeed allow state forces to collect strategic information to identify terrorist groups’ members and supports within communities. The idea of outsourcing security to the local level is however not new in the country; rather, this mechanism enshrines in law a longstanding practice that has not come without considerable risks.

Enshrining longstanding (questionable) practices in law

Faced with increasing levels of violence that national forces have struggled to contain, and in context where local security initiatives are generally viewed as “a legitimate expression of communities’ self-reliance,” local populations did not wait on the government’s action to take security in their own hands.²⁷ Community-created initiatives, including vigilante groups and self-defence militias, such as the Koglweogo²⁸ and the Dozo,²⁹ have flourished throughout the country. Initially formed to combat ordinary banditry on the rise in rural areas, the Koglweogo (“the guardians of the bush”) in particular have progressively become important parties to the ongoing conflict.³⁰ Thus, while the creation of the VDPs might, at first glance, appear as contravening the state’s monopoly on the use of force, it may actually represent an attempt to (re-)establish state authority over practices that have largely developed outside of its control.³¹

This strategy however poses significant risks. The security crisis in Burkina Faso, as in other Sahelian states, has progressively taken on an intercommunal angle. Terrorist groups’ strategies of exploiting frustrations and feelings of injustices to recruit among marginalised segments of the population, especially among Fulani herders, has led to the stigmatisation of these marginalised groups.³² Mainly composed of sedentary Mossi and Foulse communities, Koglweogo have notably been accused of targeting civilians from the Fulani herding communities, which have become perceived as sympathetic to violent extremist groups, often solely based on the fact

26 Rose-Marie Bouboutou-Poos, “Violences djihadistes : pourquoi le Burkina Faso a du mal à vaincre les groupes armés ?” BBC News, 8 June, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-57385879>

27 Ornella Moderan, “Proliferation of Armed Non-State Actors in the Sahel: Evidence of State Failure?” Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) Commentary, 3 March, 2021. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/proliferation-armed-non-state-actors-sahel-evidence-state-failure-29329>

28 Romane Da Cunha Dupuy, and Tanguy Quidelleur, “Self-Defence Movements in Burkina Faso: Diffusion and Structuration of Koglweogo Groups,” *Noria Research*, November 2018. <https://noria-research.com/self-defence-movements-in-burkina-faso-diffusion-and-structuration-of-koglweogo-groups/>

29 The Dozo are traditional hunters present in Burkina Faso, but also in Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea and Mali that have increasingly turned into self-defence groups in the face of growing insecurity.

30 International Crisis Group, “Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence,” *Africa Report N°287*, 24 February, 2020, p.9. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/287-burkina-faso-spiral-of-violence.pdf>

31 Antonin Tisseron, “Pandora’s box. Burkina Faso, self-defence militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, March 2021, p.6. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/17590.pdf>

32 Modibo Ghaly Cissé, “Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies Spotlight*, 22 April, 2020. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>

that they share the ethnicity of some members of terrorist groups.³³ Institutionalising the use of civilian auxiliaries through the creation of the VDPs, which are likely to at least partially integrate members of pre-existing groups such as the Koglweogo, could provide an opportunity to exercise enhanced control over these local security actors' behaviours, and ensure more accountability especially as regards their compliance to human rights. But given the government's inability to ensure its own national forces' respect for human rights,³⁴ many observers have warned against the risk of providing greater support and means to groups likely to continue with the same violative practices.

The Outcome

An opaque and criticised implementation

To what extent can these actors represent an alternative—or at the least a complement—to state forces' efforts to counter violent extremist groups active throughout the country? What impact does it have on civilians living under threat? Answering these questions first requires to look more in depth into the concrete implementation of the VDP law, which unfortunately remains surrounded by opacity. First, the number of VDPs actually recruited since 2020, and currently in service, remains largely unknown.³⁵ In June last year, a parliament report estimated that more than 2000 had been recruited,³⁶ but this number likely does not reflect the situation on the ground as reports indicate that “military units continue to hire people who have not trained as VDPs and do not have official VDP status as auxiliaries.”³⁷

It also remains uncertain to what extent civilian auxiliaries receive actual support from the government, with some observers pointing to “the inadequacy of resources allocated to train, supervise, care for and administer VDPs.”³⁸ While the law foresees a two-week training, the provision of equipment, including weapons, as well as a financial support of 200,000 CFA francs (approximately 300 euros) for each group of volunteers formed per village, some volunteers report not having been trained and/or provided with any equipment.³⁹ By extension, observers underline a lack of cooperation with and operational support received from national forces.⁴⁰ While the timeframe and precise modalities of the operationalisation of the VDP law has varied across

33 The Koglweogo have notably been accused of the “Yirgou massacre” which resulted in at least 200 deaths on 1st January 2019 (Henry Wilkins, “How has Burkina Faso changed since the ‘insurrection?’” *Al Jazeera*, 21 November, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/21/how-has-burkina-faso-changed-since-the-insurrection?fbclid=IwAR3AmEAUG3gXvRCeTmn-XD5iMc9MaY0tKYsVrWjOZChltw1dCdPLK40HN9s>; Lamine Traoré, “Au moins 210 morts lors du massacre du 1^{er} janvier, selon un collectif,” *VoA*, 4 February, 2019. <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/au-moins-210-morts-lors-du-massacre-du-1er-janvier-selon-un-collectif/4771648.html>)

34 Amnesty International, “Sahel: Soldiers rampage through villages killing people under guise of anti-terror operations,” 10 June, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/sahel-soldiers-rampage-through-villages-killing-people/>; Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso: Security Forces Allegedly Execute 31 Detainees: Impartially Investigate Apparent War Crime in Djibo,” 20 April, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/20/burkina-faso-security-forces-allegedly-execute-31-detainees>

35 Vendrely, “Au Burkina Faso, qui sont les Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie ?”

36 Le Point Afrique, “Burkina Faso : les attaques se multiplient dans l'Est,” 4 May, 2021. https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/burkina-faso-les-attaques-se-multiplient-dans-l-est-04-05-2021-2424914_3826.php

37 Tisseron, “Pandora's box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism,” p.25.

38 *Ibid.*, p.7.

39 Amanda Coakley, “Self-declared hunter trades big game for jihadists in Burkina Faso,” *The Irish Times*, March 9, 2021. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/self-declared-hunter-trades-big-game-for-jihadists-in-burkina-faso-1.4504571>

40 Tisseron, “Pandora's box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism,” p.28

regions, including as regards the organisation of the command structure,⁴¹ overall “the capacity of [Burkina Faso’s] already understaffed army to effectively supervise volunteers” appears rather limited.⁴² In this context, discontent seems to have grown within the VDPs’ ranks,⁴³ some having “expressed dissatisfaction with being considered *cannon fodder*.”⁴⁴

A debated operational impact

The aforementioned lack of transparency in the implementation of the VDP law hampers the evaluation of its precise impact on the situation on the ground which, according to many experts, is yet to be proven. According to data from ACLED, after an unprecedented rise in terrorist violence between 2018 and 2019, the pace of attacks and fatalities seems to have slowed down throughout 2020. While some acknowledge that VDPs may have played a role in containing the terrorist threat,⁴⁵ many experts seem more inclined to link this relative stabilisation to international operations in the region, increased infighting between the different terrorist organisations active in the country, and *a fortiori* negotiation efforts reportedly undertaken with violent extremist groups.⁴⁶ Moreover, despite the decrease observed starting in March that year, 2020 still represented the deadliest year Burkina Faso had experienced so far, and the first half of 2021 shows even more worrying trends (see Figure 1). Whatever efforts may be behind this temporary drop in casualties, and the exact role played by the operationalisation of VDP units, the impact was thus short-lived.

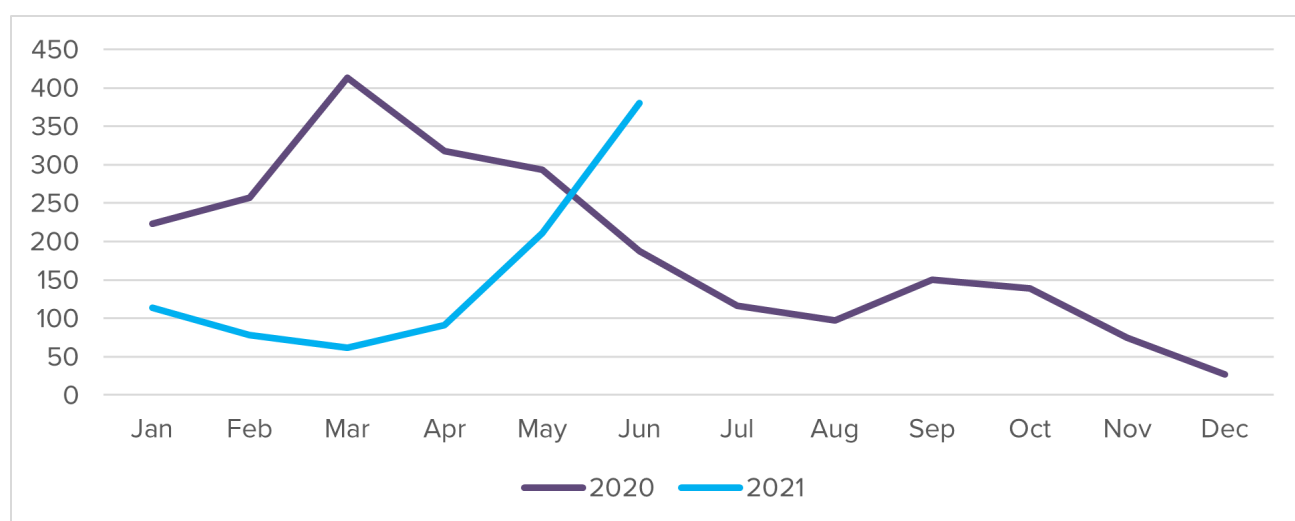


Figure 1. Reported fatalities in Burkina Faso from January 2020 to June 2021
(Source: ACLED data)⁴⁷

41 Reports indicate that the implementation of the VDP law has been faster in the North than in Western and Eastern regions of the country. While in the North, groups of VDPs are regrouped under a section within which someone serves as a liaison with the unit to which they are attached or the coordination and supervision committee, in the East, each group is under the direct responsibility of the detachment commander or, failing that, the commander of the local gendarmerie brigade. (Ibid.)

42 International Crisis Group, “Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence,” p.22.

43 In a video released in June 2021, volunteers notably affirm not having received the compensation provided by the state in exchange for their commitment and call upon the government for help. (Sophie Douce, “Au Burkina Faso, la colère monte au sein de la population face à la multiplication des attaques,” *Le Monde*, 29 June, 2021. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/06/28/au-burkina-faso-la-colere-monte-au-sein-de-la-population-face-a-la-multi-plication-des-attaques_6086077_3212.html)

44 Tisseron, “Pandora’s box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism,” p.28.

45 Jérémie Yisso Bationo, “Lutte contre le terrorisme : FDS et VDP à la manœuvre,” *Faso 7*, 17 May, 2020. <https://faso7.com/2020/05/17/tribune-lutte-contre-le-terrorisme-fds-et-vdp-a-la-manoeuvre/>

46 Henry Wilkins, “What is behind the sharp drop in deaths in Burkina Faso’s war?” *Al Jazeera*, 7 April, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/7/armed-violence-in-burkina-faso-declines-in-past-year>

47 Based on ACLED data, this graph shows the evolution of reported fatalities from battles, violence against civilians, explosions and remote violence in Burkina Faso from 1 January 2020 to 30 June 2021.

Another indicator of the (limited) efficiency of this strategy are the severe losses that VDPs themselves have suffered since their creation. While terrorist groups active in the country had previously directed most of their attacks against state forces and representatives, with more than 290 soldiers killed since 2015, civilian auxiliaries seem to have become primary targets since 2020.⁴⁸ The recent attack in Solhan provides a telling example of how volunteers have become “the first security lock to be broken for armed groups,”⁴⁹ with assailants reportedly targeting the VDPs’ post before conducting a deadly attack on the village.⁵⁰ The closest army position was located in Sebba, around ten kilometres away, but troops only arrived hours after the attackers’ departure. While this delay has been attributed to the difficulties of accessing the localities, the lack of roads and the presence of IEDs on the way towards Solhan,⁵¹ researchers have also underlined the possibility that it reflects a disengagement of security and defence forces. Reports indeed indicate that the national forces have increasingly “resorted to air strikes rather than ground offensives after deadly attacks, suggesting that regular troops are less willing to engage in more dangerous ground combat.”⁵² Between January and June 2021, the number of fatalities among civilian volunteers surpassed the number of Burkinabe soldiers killed during the same period, suggesting that “volunteers have replaced the army on the front lines.”⁵³ According to some estimates, around 200 VDPs were killed from January 2020 to May 2021.⁵⁴ The Solhan attack had, for instance, been preceded by another attack conducted the same day in Tadaryat, causing 14 fatalities including one VDP, and yet another incident one week earlier which had caused the death of two other volunteers (see Appendix 1 for a non-exhaustive list of recent attacks against VDP forces).⁵⁵

Civilian populations at risk

Besides its impact on the overall crisis, the possibility that the adoption of the VDP law would redirect terrorist violence against civilians was a major concern considered at the time of the law’s adoption.⁵⁶ While at first these fears appeared unproven, with civilian casualties peaking in early 2020 before decreasing during the latter part of 2020, the first half of 2021 has seen a reversal in this trend, with a rise in both the number of attacks carried out against and the number of fatalities among civilian populations (see Figures 2 & 3).

48 Sophie Douce, “Au Burkina Faso, le désarroi de l’armée face à la menace terroriste,” *L’Express*, 30 April, 2021. https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/au-burkina-faso-le-desarroi-de-l-armee-face-a-la-menace-terroriste_2149921.html

49 Rodrigue Kone, cited in: Bouboutou-Poos, “Violences djihadistes : pourquoi le Burkina Faso a du mal à vaincre les groupes armés ?”

50 Vendrely, “Au Burkina Faso, qui sont les Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie ?”

51 Grégoire Sauvage, “Burkina Faso : ‘Les massacreurs ont pu opérer leur œuvre de mort sans être dérangés,’” *France 24*, 6 June, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210606-burkina-faso-les-massacreurs-ont-pu-op%C3%A9rer-leur-%C5%93uvre-de-mort-sans-%C3%AAtre-d%C3%A9rang%C3%A9s>

52 Nsaibia, Héni, and Jules Duhamel, “Sahel 2021: Communal Wars Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines,” *ACLED*, 17 June, 2021. <https://acleddata.com/2021/06/17/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines/>

53 Ibid.

54 Le Point Afrique, “Burkina Faso : les attaques se multiplient dans l’Est”

55 Ibid.

56 Vendrely, “Au Burkina Faso, qui sont les Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie ?”

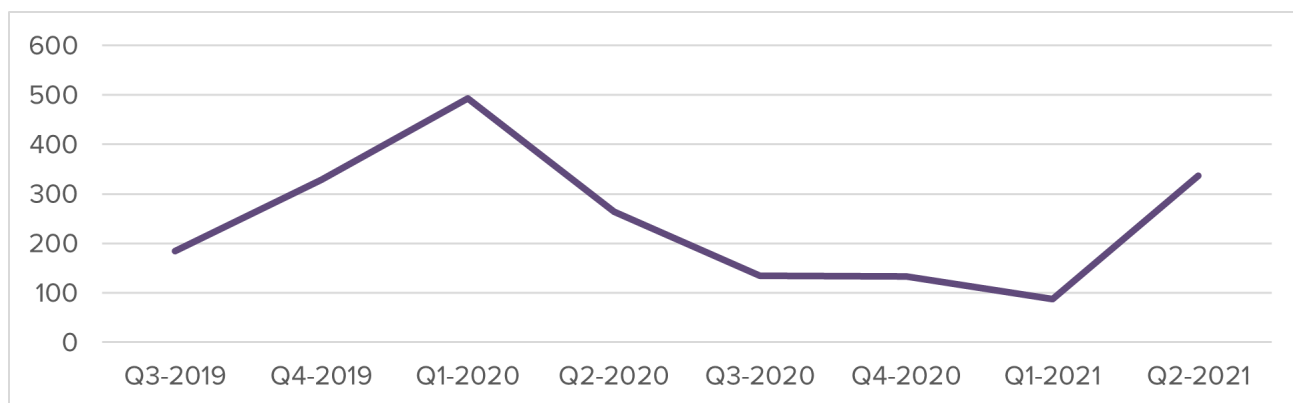


Figure 2. Violence against civilians - number of fatalities from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2021 (Source: ACLED data)

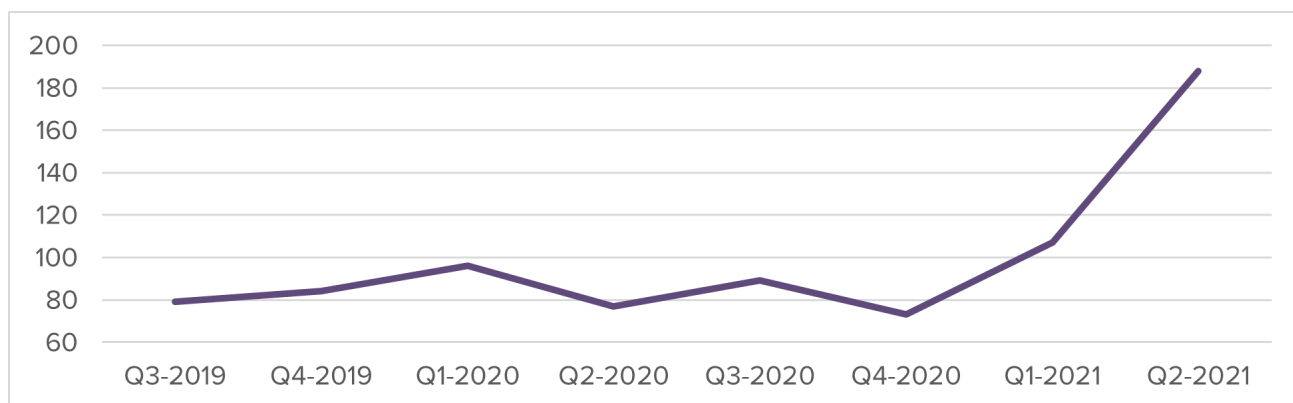


Figure 3. Violence against civilians - number of events from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2021 (Source: ACLED data)

If the first year of deployment of the VDPs has thus coincided with a decrease in violence against civilians, this trend may not maintain over the longer term. Following the Solhan attack, another large-scale assault against a civilian convoy escorted by security forces and VDPs near Arbinda resulted in 80 more deaths, including 59 civilians.⁵⁷ While a causal link cannot be formally established between VDPs' deployment and the evolution in terms of civilian casualties, the volunteer programme certainly further blurs the lines between civilian combatants and non-combatants.⁵⁸ In this context, any civilians may be suspected of being an informant to Burkinabe authorities, thereby providing a convenient justification for VEOs' targeting of local populations—which they had initially refrained from doing in order to gain local support. Large-scale terrorist attacks carried out against civilians and mass killings may be “a message to prevent the population from massively adhering to this dynamic”—detering locals from collaborating with the VDPs and the state.⁵⁹ Reports indicate that some attacks may have indeed been conducted as “a reprisal for

⁵⁷ Thiam Ndiaga, “Death toll from Burkina Faso attack rises to 80,” *Reuters*, 20 August, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/death-toll-burkina-faso-attack-rises-80-2021-08-19/>

⁵⁸ Moderan, “Proliferation of Armed Non-State Actors in the Sahel: Evidence of State Failure?”

⁵⁹ RFI, “Attaque de Solhan : “L'utilisation des Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie expose les civils,” 6 June, 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210606-attaque-de-solhan-l-utilisation-des-volontaires-pour-la-d%C3%A9fense-de-la-patrie-expose-les-civils>

the presence of VDPs” in certain localities.⁶⁰ But, as the following section will show, terrorist organisations are far from bearing the sole responsibility of civilian deaths, as VDPs, along with national security and defence forces, have also been regularly accused of serious human right abuses against local populations.⁶¹

The Challenges

A lack of oversight and accusations of human right abuses

Early on in the process of creating volunteers’ units, experts warned against the danger of “abuses, settling of accounts between villagers and communities whose existence is often linked to old conflicts that have nothing to do with the situation that these militiamen are supposed to help resolve.”⁶² Some provisions inserted in the VDP law aimed at mitigating such risks, with volunteers being subject to a code of conduct whose violation would expose them to sanctions and eventual exclusion from the volunteer programme.⁶³ VDPs are also supposed to operate in their home areas or places of residence, a measure that is believed to help deter abuses, as “offenders will be more easily identified and shamed among their own people, facing potentially long-lasting consequences.”⁶⁴ In practice, enforcing these safeguards and overseeing VDPs’ actions on the ground have proved challenging in a context where state security and defence forces themselves have been repeatedly accused of extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances and human right abuses on civilian populations. VDP forces have indeed been accused of committing exactions and abuses against civilian populations by various civil society organisations, including Human Rights Watch,⁶⁵ the Collective Against Impunity and Stigmatization of Communities,⁶⁶ and the West African Human Rights Defenders Network.⁶⁷ For instance, VDPs were accused of being involved in the arbitrary arrest and extrajudicial executions of twelve men in Tanwalbougou in May 2020 (see Appendix 2 for a non-exhaustive list of alleged cases of abuses committed by volunteers).⁶⁸ While precise figures remain difficult to find, some sources indicate that at least 95 deaths resulted from VDPs’ violence against civilians.⁶⁹ These dynamics are particularly problematic, as they risk triggering grievances, fuelling violent extremist groups’ narratives, and boosting their ability to recruit within disillusioned local communities.

60 Tisseron, “Pandora’s box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism,” p.28.

61 Human Rights Watch, ““We Found Their Bodies Later That Day”: Atrocities by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso’s Sahel Region,” 22 March, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/22/we-found-their-bodies-later-day/atrocities-armed-islamists-and-security-forces>; Amnesty International, ““They executed some and brought the rest with them”: Human rights violations by security forces in the Sahel,” 9 June, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr37/2318/2020/en/>

62 Bouboutou-Poos, “Violences djihadistes : pourquoi le Burkina Faso a du mal à vaincre les groupes armés ?”

63 Claire Zutterling, “Armer les civils : la loi des Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie au Burkina Faso,” *Groupe de Recherche et d’Information sur la Paix et la sécurité (GRIP)*, 30 October, 2020. <https://grip.org/https-grip-org-arter-civils-burkina-faso/>

64 International Crisis Group, “Double-edged Sword: Vigilantes in African Counter-insurgencies,” *Africa Report N°251*, 7 September, 2017, p.24. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/251-double-edged-sword.pdf>

65 Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso : Events of 2020”, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/burkina-faso>

66 Henry Wilkins, “Government-backed Militias in Burkina Faso Accused of Abuses,” *VoA News*, 6 July, 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/government-backed-militias-burkina-faso-accused-abuses>

67 Human Rights Institute of South Africa, “Lomé, 25 May 2020: The West African Human Rights Defenders Network (WAHRDN) denounces a counter-terrorism imbued with a silent genocide on the Fulani people in Burkina Faso,” 26 May 2020, <https://hurisa.org.za/lome-25-may-2020-the-west-african-human-rights-defenders-network-wahrdn-denounces-a-counter-terrorism-imbued-with-a-silent-genocide-on-the-fulani-people-in-burkina-faso/>

68 Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso: Credibly Investigate Apparent Executions,” 20 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/20/burkina-faso-credibly-investigate-apparent-executions>

69 Wilkins, “Government-backed Militias in Burkina Faso Accused of Abuses”

A lack of inclusivity and the exacerbation of intercommunal violence

Poor oversight of VDPs' actions on the ground, when combined with a lack of inclusivity, moreover has the potential to further aggravate intercommunal tensions, most often taking the form of conflicts between sedentary farmers and (semi-)nomadic herder communities in this area. According to the VDP law, recruitment is intended to take place “at village-level or at their residence area on a voluntary basis, and with the approval of the village development committee or the municipal council.”⁷⁰ This process has reportedly led to an under-representation of “pastoralists and nomads, and people that are less well connected to village or regional authorities.”⁷¹ In addition, many observers have argued that (former) members of existing self-defence militias, including Koglweogo and Dozo, have been “absorbed into the volunteer program,”⁷² further reinforcing sedentary communities' prevalence within VDPs' ranks. Enjoying very little representation, pastoral Fulani communities have reportedly been particularly targeted by the civilian units, some reports indicating that “89% of their attacks against civilians in 2020 were against Fulani civilians.”⁷³ As such, “the fear of many observers that arming civilians would escalate the conflict and deepen cleavages along ethnic fault lines—between mainly Fulani pastoralists and sedentary communities such as the Mossi, Foulse, and Gourmantche—has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”⁷⁴

The long-term challenge of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration

In addition to these immediate challenges, a longer-term issue is linked to the demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) of former VDPs. The Burkinabe government has created yet an additional type of armed actor that will eventually need to be disarmed and demobilised. Even if formally contracted for a period of up to five years, according to the VDP law, it is reasonable to doubt whether this regulation will be upheld, given the little control the government seems to have exerted on these units thus far. The questionable extent to which central authorities have been able to monitor VDPs' recruitment, member registration, and accounting for their weapons may potentially further complicate any future DDR efforts.

However, designing an effective exit strategy is crucial. In a region plagued with diverse types of trafficking, if not provided with any alternative opportunities, there is a reasonable likelihood that some of these individuals will embrace criminal paths, which has “the potential to destabilize, fuel crime and weaken state authority.”⁷⁵ In particular, this possibility poses the risk of seeing even more illicit arms proliferating throughout the region.⁷⁶ Any attempt to dissolve the VDP framework might moreover trigger tensions against state authorities and risk “alienating actors whom they would like to demobilise on the ground,” as observed with the Dogon self-defence militia Dan Na Ambassagou in Mali.⁷⁷ After having been officially dissolved by national authorities

70 Amnesty International, “Burkina Faso: Witness testimony confirms armed group perpetrated mass killings,” 20 March, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/burkina-faso-witness-testimony-confirms-armed-group/>

71 Anna Schmauder, and Annabelle Willeme, “The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland,” *Clingendael Institute*, 9 March, 2021. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/volunteers-defense-homeland>

72 Nsaibia, and Duhamel, “Sahel 2021: Communal Wars Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines”

73 Schmauder, and Willeme, “The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland”

74 Nsaibia, and Duhamel, “Sahel 2021: Communal Wars Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines”

75 Tisseron, “Pandora's box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism,” p.7.

76 Tanya Mehra, Méryl Demuynck, Colin Clark, Nils Duquet, et al., “Cashing in on Guns: Identifying the Nexus between Small Arms, Light Weapons and Terrorist Financing,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, March 2021, p.22. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/03/SALW-Chapter-2.pdf>

77 Célian Macé, “Au Burkina Faso, ‘la mobilisation des volontaires est venue amplifier le risque de tueries de civils,’” *Libération*, 11 March, 2020. https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2020/03/11/au-burkina-faso-la-mobilisation-des-volontaires-est-venue-amplifier-le-risque-de-tueries-de-civils_1781231/

in mid-2019, following multiple accusations of abuses against civilians, the militia has not only continued to operate throughout central Mali, but has more directly opposed the government, accusing national forces of having bombed their positions on several occasions—a stance, which seems to have earned the group increased popular support.⁷⁸

Conclusions and Recommendations

While reasons behind the Burkinabe government’s decision to recruit civilian auxiliaries appears very clearly when considering recent developments in the country’s political history and the rising terrorist threat that national forces are struggling to counter, many uncertainties still surround the implementation and overall impact of the VDP legislation on the security situation. If turning to civilians to support counter-terrorism efforts may help gather intelligence and provide a time-liner response in the event of an attack, it also raises important short- and long-term challenges. Increasingly replacing state forces on the front lines, VDPs have not only become primary targets for violent extremist groups, but their presence may even put the broader population at risk. Even more problematic have been the multiple accusations of human right abuses allegedly committed by VDPs against civilians and the risks of exacerbating intercommunal tensions. In this context, discontent has been growing among the local population, with demonstrations having gathered thousands of people in several cities across the country in late June and early July 2020 to denounce the state’s inaction in the face of the rising violence.⁷⁹ After having dismissed the Ministers of Defence and Security, in response to growing public pressure, state authorities have recently announced a reconfiguration of their military deployment on the ground.⁸⁰ While no further details has been communicated at the time of the writing, this may provide authorities with an opportunity to reconsider their approach towards civilian volunteers, including by:

- **Addressing the issue of human right abuses:** alleged cases of abuses and exactions against civilians committed not only by the VDPs, but by all parties to the ongoing crisis, including state security and defence forces, should be investigated and prosecuted. Additionally, safeguards provided by the VDP law and implementing decree, including conditions surrounding their recruitment, training and areas of operations, should be effectively enforced. International partners could moreover promote accountability by more systematically denouncing abuses, publicly urging national authorities to investigate alleged cases of abuses committed by VDP forces, as done following the allegations of mass atrocities by security forces in Djibo in June 2020.⁸¹ Further research may also help understand the role that local governance actors could play in overseeing local security initiatives and ensuring compliance with human rights.

78 International Crisis Group, “Reversing Central Mali’s Descent into Communal Violence,” *Africa Report N°293*, 9 November, 2020, p.14. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/293-enrayer-la-communautarisation-de-la-violence-au-centre-du-mali>

79 Douce, “Au Burkina Faso, la colère monte au sein de la population face à la multiplication des attaques”; France 24, “Burkina Faso : des milliers de manifestants contre “l’aggravation” de la situation sécuritaire,” 3 July, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210703-burkina-des-milliers-de-manifestants-contre-l-aggravation-de-la-situation-s%C3%A9curitaire>

80 RFI, “Burkina : remaniement gouvernemental, les ministres de la Défense et de la Sécurité limogés,” June 30, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210630-burkina-remaniement-gouvernemental-les-ministres-de-la-d%C3%A9fense-et-de-la-s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9-limog%C3%A9s>; Boudani, “Burkina Faso : vers une nouvelle organisation des forces de défense et de sécurité”

81 Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso : Events of 2020,” <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/burkina-faso>

- **Ensuring more inclusive mechanisms:** any preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives, mechanisms or efforts targeting and/or involving local populations, be it the use of civilian auxiliaries or other types of involvement, should place particular attention on inclusiveness. In order to avoid reinforcing ethnic fault lines and exacerbating intercommunal tensions, it is crucial for the latter to include all segments of society, including marginalised communities.
- **Providing adequate support and supervision:** not having adequate means and equipment to perform their assigned functions is likely to create frustrations within auxiliary forces' ranks, increase grievances against central authorities perceived as unsupportive and reinforce incentives to acquire necessary means by force. Although the outsourcing of counter-terrorism efforts to civilians is not desirable over the longer-term, providing volunteers with adequate support and training, as long as they remain in operation, is susceptible to help deter their involvement into banditry and reduce indiscriminate violence.
- **Developing an effective exit strategy:** the potential longer-term consequences of the volunteer programme, especially as regards the proliferation of arms and further development of crime, should be anticipated and effectively addressed through the design of a comprehensive exit strategy ensuring the DDR of former volunteers. Necessary first steps, including, *inter alia*, the proper registration of VDP members and their respective weapons, should be undertaken to ensure the effectiveness of future DDR initiatives.
- **Looking beyond security-focused approaches:** the creation of and reliance on civilian auxiliary forces furthermore represents a symptom of a deeper strategic challenge. It provides a compelling illustration of how security-focused counter-terrorism approaches, despite having shown their limits in Burkina Faso, as in the broader Sahel region and elsewhere in the world, too often overshadow the need to address the root causes of the crisis. Despite the deployment of various armed forces, terrorist groups have continued to expand territorially and to conduct lethal attacks. Military interventions have even often aggravated already tenuous situations, fuelling grievances and animosity among local communities, a factor that violent extremist groups are then able to exploit to their advantage. Efforts and funds should be redirected towards interventions aiming to addressing the various socio-economic factors that underpin the spread of violent extremism in Burkina Faso, the only likely to produce sustainable results.
- **Rethinking the role and involvement of civilians in P/CVE efforts:** local civilian populations certainly have a key role to play in preventing and countering violent extremism. While civilian participation in combat is not desirable on the long-term, as it not only exposes populations to greater threat, but also risks furthering existing tensions and violence, local populations can play a crucial role in, *inter alia*, intelligence-gathering, awareness-raising, and early-warning. Greater consultation of the local population, and enhanced cooperation between local communities and security forces, may also help design more adequate security provision mechanisms that address people's needs, and improve acceptance and effectiveness of such measures.

Appendices

Appendix I: Selected recent attacks targeting VDP forces⁸²

Date	Incident(s)
4-5 Jun 2021	After an initial assault targeting the post of the VDPs in Solhan, in the Sahel region, attackers conducted a lethal raid on the village inhabitants, resulting in at least 132 deaths. An attack conducted in Tadaryat moreover killed thirteen civilians and one VDP. ⁸³
4 Jun 2021	Suspected terrorists carried out an attack on a VDP unit in Titao, in the North region, killing one volunteer. ⁸⁴
30 May 2021	Armed men attacked national armed forces and VDPs in Kelbo, in the Sahel region, causing two deaths among the VDPs. ⁸⁵
18 May 2021	Following an attack by unidentified militants in Firka, in the Centre-North region, four VDPs went missing. ⁸⁶
16 May 2021	An attack against a VDP position in Palségué, in the Centre-North region, claimed by JNIM resulted in around ten volunteers being killed. ⁸⁷
3 May 2021	An attack allegedly conducted by JNIM in Kodyel, in the East region, caused the death of two VDPs, twelve civilians and eleven attackers. ⁸⁸
14 Apr 2021	An ambush was allegedly conducted by ISGS against a VDP patrol in Boul-eye-Siguidi village, near Gorgadji, in the Sahel region, killing at least eight volunteers. ⁸⁹
6 Apr 2021	Suspected JNIM militants killed one VDP in Koulwoko, in the Centre-North region. ⁹⁰

82 These non-exhaustive lists of incidents and alleged cases of abuses against civilian populations were put together by the author based on local and international media reports. Given the nature and location of the incidents, it is difficult to verify details with regard to the accuracy of attacks and the damage caused.

83 Le Monde, "Une centaine de morts dans une attaque au Burkina Faso," 5 June, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/06/05/au-moins-14-personnes-tuees-dans-l-attaque-d-un-village-au-burkina-faso_6082999_3212.html; UN News, "Protection call for Burkina Faso civilians after terror attack leaves 132 dead," 7 June, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1093492>; TV5 Monde, "Burkina Faso : le bilan de l'attaque de Solhan s'alourdit à 160 morts," 6 June 2021, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/burkina-faso-une-centaine-de-civils-executes-dans-le-nord-et-du-pays-411598>

84 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," June 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=21&date_range=custom&from_month=06&from_year=2021&to_month=06&to_year=2021

85 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," May 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=21&date_range=custom&from_month=05&from_year=2021&to_month=05&to_year=2021

86 Ibid.

87 Nadia Chahed, "Burkina Faso : le GSIM revendique l'attaque du 16 mai dans le Centre-Nord," Anadolu Agency, 21 May 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/burkina-faso-le-gsim-revendique-l-attaque-du-16-mai-dans-le-centre-nord/2250319>

88 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," May 2021; Burkina 24, "Attaque de Kodyel au Burkina Faso : 2 VDP et 11 assaillants tués," 4 May 2021, <https://www.burkina24.com/2021/05/04/attaque-de-kodyel-au-burkina-faso-2-vdp-et-11-assaillants-tues/>

89 AFP, "Au moins 8 supplétifs civils tués dans le Nord burkinabè," VoA, 14 April 2021, <https://www.voafrique.com/a/burkina-au-moins-8-suppl%C3%A9tifs-civils-tu%C3%A9s-dans-le-nord/5853313.html>

90 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," April 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=21&date_range=custom&from_month=04&from_year=2021&to_month=04&to_year=2021

5 Apr 2021	An attack conducted by suspected JNIM fighters against a mixt VDP-army patrol in Tanwalbougou, in the East region, resulted in six VDPs and three gendarmes being killed. ⁹¹
1 Apr 2021	An ambush by suspected ISGS militants in Dou village, near Dablo, in the Centre-North region, killed six VDPs and injured one other. ⁹²
20 Mar 2021	Clashes between VDPs and suspected jihadists killed one VDP and five militants in Gorgadji, in the Sahel region. ⁹³ On the same day, clashes between suspected jihadists and VDPs caused the death of one volunteer and six militants in Ourfaré, in the Centre-North region. ⁹⁴
10 Mar 2021	Suspected ISGS militants clashed with the army and VDPs in Tin-Agadel, in the Sahel, resulting in the death of two terrorists and one civilian. ⁹⁵
5-6 Mar 2021	Suspected JNIM fighters conducted an attack against a security forces-VDP convoy near Kourao, in the Centre-North region, during which five volunteers and one soldier were reportedly killed. ⁹⁶
1 Mar 2021	Suspected ISGS militants conducted an attack on Poussoumpoudou mining site, in the Centre-North region, causing the death of two VDPs and one other civilian. ⁹⁷
18 Feb 2021	Unidentified armed assailants conducted an ambush on transport vehicles on the Markoye-Tokabangou axis, in the Sahel region, reportedly killing one VDP and nine civilians, while injuring ten others. ⁹⁸
10 Feb 2021	A clash between suspected ISGS fighters and VDPs in Kogowendé village, in the Centre-Nord region, resulted in two civilians being killed. ⁹⁹
4 Jan 2021	Unidentified assailants conducted a raid on the village of Loumbila, in the Plateau-Central region, causing the death of six people, including two VDPs. ¹⁰⁰ Suspected Katiba Macina militants conducted an attack in Koumbri, in the North region, killing two VDPs and four civilians. ¹⁰¹

91 Lefaso.net, "Attaques de Tanwalbougou : Les assaillants sont déterminés à prendre le contrôle de la zone, confie une source," 6 April, 2021, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article103822>

92 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," April 2021; Nadia Chahed, "Burkina Faso : six mort dans une attaque armée dans le nord," Anadolu Agency, 2 April, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/burkina-faso-six-morts-dans-une-attaque-arm%C3%A9e-dans-le-nord/2196072>

93 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," March 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=21&date_range=custom&from_month=03&from_year=2021&to_month=03&to_year=2021

94 Lassaad Ben Ahmed, "Burkina Faso : une dizaine de présumés terroristes abattus dans deux attaques », Anadolu Agency, March 21, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/burkina-faso-une-dizaine-de-pr%C3%A9sum%C3%A9s-terroristes-abattus-dans-deux-attaques/2183356>

95 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," March 2021.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid

98 Mamadou Zongo, "Sécurité nationale : 9 morts et 10 blessés dans une attaque terroriste sur l'axe Markoye-Tokabangou," Info H24, 19 February 2021. <https://www.infoh24.info/securite-nationale-9-morts-et-10blesses-dans-une-attaque-terroriste-sur-laxe-markoye-tokabangou/?cn-reloaded=1>

99 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," February 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=21&date_range=custom&from_month=02&from_year=2021&to_month=02&to_year=2021

100 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," January 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=21&date_range=custom&from_month=01&from_year=2021&to_month=01&to_year=2021

101 Ibid.

Appendix II: Selected alleged cases of abuses committed by VDP forces

Date	Incident
2 Jun 2021	VDPs are suspected of having killed an ethnic Fulani woman in Nasséré village, in the Centre-North region. ¹⁰²
17-22 May 2021	VDPs are accused of having abducted five individuals in just a few days in Ouahigouya, in the North region. ¹⁰³
11 Apr 2021	Volunteers are suspected of having executed a member of the Fulani community in Pentiangou, in the East region. ¹⁰⁴
9 Mar 2021	VDPs are accused of having summarily executed a presumed terrorist in Solhan, in the Sahel region. ¹⁰⁵
7 Mar 2021	VDPs from the municipality of Solhan, in the Sahel region, allegedly injured two inhabitants for not respecting the curfew. ¹⁰⁶
19 Feb 2021	VDPs are accused of having illegally arrested and extorted seven minors among the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ramensé, in the North region. ¹⁰⁷
12-25 Feb 2021	VDPs of the Sebba village are accused of having beaten civilians, injuring some of them, and set fire to shops in the gold mining site of Malleri in Tankougounadie village, in the Sahel region. ¹⁰⁸
7 Jan 2021	Suspected VDPs have allegedly abducted two civilians at the camp for internationally displaced persons (IDPs) in Koumbri. ¹⁰⁹
4 Nov 2020	VDPs are accused of having abducted four Fulani youths in Barga, in the North region, who were eventually freed by national security and defence forces. ¹¹⁰
17 Sep 2020	VDPs are suspected of having killed three Fulani individuals in retaliation for an ambush conducted by suspected jihadists on the Fada-Nagré axis that killed three volunteers the same day. ¹¹¹

102 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso," June 2021.

103 UNHCR, "Rapport de monitoring de protection de la région du Nord," May 2021, p.5, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/87315>

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13 Sep 2020	Volunteers are accused of having tortured and attempted to assassinate an IDP in Demniole, near Gorgadji in the Sahel region. ¹¹²
1 Sep 2020	VDPs allegedly abducted a member of the Fulani community on the Fada-Pama axis, in the East region, whose dead body was found a week later. ¹¹³
7 Aug 2020	Local sources accuse VDPs of being responsible for the attack in Namougou, near Fada N’Gourma in the East region, that was officially attributed to “unidentified gunmen” and cost the lives of 24 people. ¹¹⁴
4 Jul 2020	The security and defence forces and the VDPs are accused of having abducted twelve civilians, and killed seven among them, in Tanwalbougou, in the East region. ¹¹⁵
31 May 2020	Local sources consider that VDPs may be behind the attack perpetrated in Kompienbiga, in the East region, which left between 30 and 50 people dead according to sources, and was officially attributed to terrorists. ¹¹⁶
11 May 2020	National security and defence forces and elements from the VDPs are accused of having arbitrarily arrested and executed twelve civilians, all from the Fulani community, in Tanwalbougou, in the East region. ¹¹⁷
4-5 May 2020	VDPs allegedly arrested three inhabitants of Barsalogo, in the Centre-North region, who were then found shot and killed. ¹¹⁸
3 May 2020	Men identified as volunteers from Namissiguima, in the North region, are accused of having executed nine people around the well of Boulsi-Baogo. ¹¹⁹
26 Apr 2020	VDPs are accused of having killed four civilians in Korko village, near Barsalogo in the Centre-North region. ¹²⁰

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