

# POLICY BRIEF



## Liptako-Gourma

Escalating violence and insecurity in Liptako-Gourma, Central Sahel  
(Triangle-border region of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)

The Liptako-Gourma, the triangle-border region of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, has been embroiled in heightened violence and conflict since 2015.<sup>1</sup> The region covers eight administrative regions of Burkina Faso (Ouagadougou, Tenkodogo, Manga, Kaya, Fada N’Gourma, Ziniaré, Ouahigouya and Dori), four regions of Mali (Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal) and two regions of Niger (Tillabéri and Tahoua), together with the metropolitan area of the Nigerien capital Niamey.<sup>2</sup> It includes nomadic and sedentary populations as well as a diversity of ethnic and socio-professional groups, mainly farmers, herders, traders and fishermen. The Liptako-Gourma region is a significant transhumance

area wherein livestock are moved from one grazing area to another in a seasonal cycle. However, the decrease in grazing areas, the decline of water and fodder resources have impacted the way of life of local populations.<sup>3</sup>

Characterized by extreme levels of poverty, the Liptako-Gourma is a highly vulnerable area in central Sahel affected by a complex crisis of diminishing resources, unemployment and lack of economic opportunities, militant Islamist violence, and the absence of state institutions and basic services.<sup>4</sup> Many non-state armed groups, including militias and/or self-defence groups and

<sup>1</sup> [issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf](https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/rapport\\_final\\_16\\_feb\\_2021\\_final\\_eng\\_0.pdf](https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/rapport_final_16_feb_2021_final_eng_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> [reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/situation-central-sahel-liptako-gourma-and-coastal-countries-dtm-monthly-dashboard-49-may-2024](https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/situation-central-sahel-liptako-gourma-and-coastal-countries-dtm-monthly-dashboard-49-may-2024)

violent Islamist groups, cause the population to live in fear.<sup>5</sup> The rise in insecurity is attributed mainly to armed conflict and inter-communal violence driven by militant Islamist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).<sup>6</sup> These groups operate with impunity. Escalation in violence has forced more civilians than ever to leave their homes. The origins of the current conflict can be traced back to 2012, when Islamist militants returning from Libya took hold of northern Mali, capitalizing on the chaos caused by both the Tuareg rebellion and the political crisis that followed. The conflict gradually extended into parts of the Liptako-Gourma region in both Niger and Burkina Faso.<sup>7</sup>

This grievous state of instability and violence has affected every person residing in Liptako-Gourma but the Christian community is particularly targeted for their beliefs and remains extremely vulnerable to the incessant deadly attacks. In areas under jihadists' control, Christian women and girls are forced to wear veils, and schools that teach non-Islamic curriculum are compelled to shut down due to threats of violence.<sup>8</sup> Christians are forbidden from gathering together and praying in churches, or playing musical instruments during church service.<sup>9</sup> Christians are intimidated with death threats by the militants if they refuse to convert to Islam. Extreme interpretation of the Sharia law is used to punish those who are perceived to have broken the law, including stoning and severing limbs.<sup>10</sup> While there are functional churches in big towns, most churches in rural areas have been closed down or destroyed by the jihadists.<sup>11</sup>

## Deteriorating security situation

Liptako-Gourma is described as the epicenter of violent conflict and terrorist activity in the Sahel. There were 3,064 reported civilian fatalities in the first six months of 2024 alone.<sup>12</sup> Due to the lack of effective state presence, this region has been the hub of intensified banditry and looting, intercommunal

violence, and attacks by jihadists.<sup>13</sup> This climate of impunity is further exacerbated by the proliferation of military grade weapons owned by non-state armed groups operating in the area. Weak and ineffective state border control mechanisms fuel smuggling and trafficking of small arms and light weapons in the region. Additionally, the jihadists also get their weapons by looting the military barracks they attack.<sup>14</sup>

Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and the ISGS are the main jihadist coalitions in Liptako-Gourma. JNIM, an umbrella coalition of al-Qaeda-aligned groups, aims to impose its version of Islamic law, while ISGS (local branch of the Islamic State) has gained influence in the area by gathering support among disadvantaged communities. These coalitions took advantage of the resentment towards state actors to provoke inter and intra-community hostilities to enhance their presence and influence in the region and generate support, especially among the nomadic communities – Fulani and Tuareg.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence of the violent Islamist ideology spread by both JNIM and ISGS, Christians and traditional religionists are often compelled to abandon their faith by terror groups. Those that do not adhere to the jihadist groups' decrees are either assassinated or forced to flee, abandoning their belongings including their homes and farms.<sup>16</sup> In areas like Niger's western region of Tillabéri and Mali's central region of Mopti, Christians are forced to pay extremely high levels of taxation in the form of Jizya, imposed by the militant Islamists. Refusal to pay results in forced takeover and closure of churches, or forced conversion to Islam.<sup>17</sup>

Security crisis in the region was further aggravated by poorly trained and ill-equipped state security forces of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Led by military junta leaders, the three countries exited the G5 Sahel<sup>18</sup> by end of 2023, withdrew from ECOWAS<sup>19</sup> in 2024 and signed a security pact to form their own block named the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) with the objective of supporting each other from external aggressions and internal security challenges. As a

<sup>5</sup> sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/rapport\_final\_16\_feb\_2021\_final\_eng\_0.pdf

<sup>6</sup> globalr2p.org/countries/mali

<sup>7</sup> globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Liptako-Gourma-Study-March-2019-WEB.pdf

<sup>8</sup> state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/547499-MALI-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/USCIRF%202024%20Annual%20Report.pdf

<sup>11</sup> As per information provided by Open Doors' partners in the countries.

<sup>12</sup> acleddata.com/2024/08/14/the-sahel-mid-year-metrics-2024

<sup>13</sup> globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Liptako-Gourma-Study-March-2019-WEB.pdf

<sup>14</sup> issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/OCWAR-T-paper-6-eng.pdf

<sup>15</sup> globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Liptako-Gourma-Study-March-2019-WEB.pdf

<sup>16</sup> Information provided by Open Doors' partners

<sup>17</sup> acnuk.org/news/jihadists-demand-crippling-religious-tax-from-christians and Open Doors sources

<sup>18</sup> The Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) was founded in 2014 as a regional, intergovernmental organization. It provided an institutional framework to promote development and security within its five member countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. More info: [interpol.int/es/Delitos/Terrorismo/Proyectos-de-lucha-contra-el-terrorismo/G5-Sahel](https://interpol.int/es/Delitos/Terrorismo/Proyectos-de-lucha-contra-el-terrorismo/G5-Sahel)

<sup>19</sup> Economic Community of West African States – a regional political and economic union of fifteen countries of West Africa. More info: [ecowas.int/](https://ecowas.int/)

result, the cessation of operations and departure of MINUSMA,<sup>20</sup> other international forces (including from France and the European Union), created a security vacuum that was exploited by the jihadists.<sup>21</sup>

## Mass-scale forced displacement

The conflict in Liptako-Gourma has forced millions of people to flee their homes, either preventatively or after an incident, looking for safety, protection, and access to basic goods and services. As of September 2024, around 3 million people were displaced including a little over 2 million individuals located in Burkina Faso, almost 450,000 in Mali and 352,718 in Niger.<sup>22</sup> Those who were forced to flee often abandoned their livestock and fields, which were their primary sources of livelihood, thereby becoming entirely dependent on humanitarian aid and hosting communities to survive.<sup>23</sup> Scarce state service provision along with the lack of adequate humanitarian aid in rural areas on the borders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso has forced civilians to generally relocate to urban areas, but also to relocate across



borders. The risk of their properties being destroyed or captured as spoils of war or inhabited by others makes it improbable for displaced persons to return to their homes. The areas their homes reside in are still largely insecure and subject to additional terrorist attacks.

## Urgent humanitarian crisis

Mass displacement due to high levels of conflict has resulted into widespread acute food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition in the Liptako-Gourma region. Disruptions caused by violence and insecurity have grievously damaged agricultural and pastoral practices, market operations, and the distribution of humanitarian aid.<sup>24</sup> Over the years the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported that the population affected by the conflict was in urgent need of emergency water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services.<sup>25</sup> OCHA has also highlighted that malnutrition due to fragile food systems, and limited access to basic social services was also a significant concern in the region.

The humanitarian response to life-saving protection interventions for internally displaced persons, and refugees is insufficient. These vulnerable groups of people often live in unsafe conditions, overcrowded camps, or informal settlements, with inadequate shelters in areas prone to natural calamity.<sup>26</sup> Women and girls are susceptible to greater risk of gender-based violence in such settings. Local Faith Actors (LFAs) have been a source of support for many communities affected by the violence and forced displacement in the Liptako-Gourma region. Many local churches or church-based organizations, although under threat by the jihadists themselves, are actively engaged in providing emergency response, psycho-social trauma counselling to victims of violence and sexual assault, building safe and resilient communities, and providing basic necessities to IDPs. They are also connected with various local peacebuilding initiatives with different faith groups. However, scarcity of resources often affects the work of these LFAs, decreasing the scale of achievable impact.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali – UN peacekeeping mission

<sup>21</sup> The security forces of the three countries have been alleged to have conducted extra-judicial killings of civilians raising questions about their accountability.

<sup>22</sup> dtm.iom.int/reports/west-and-central-africa-liptako-gourma-crisis-monthly-dashboard-53-september-2024

<sup>23</sup> globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Liptako-Gourma-Study-March-2019-WEB.pdf

<sup>24</sup> fightfoodcrises.net/articles/acute-hunger-and-malnutrition-worsen-west-africa-and-sahel-50-million-require-food

<sup>25</sup> unocha.org/publications/report/burkina-faso/2024-sahel-humanitarian-needs-and-requirements-overview

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

# Recommendations:

To stop the continuous and severe violations of fundamental rights of civilians living in the Liptako-Gourma region, and to restore stability in the Central Sahel, Open Doors makes the following recommendations:

## 1 To address the alarming security situation in the Liptako-Gourma region:

- The International Community, including the African Union and members of the ECOWAS, should maintain diplomatic ties with the AES countries and consider security cooperations primarily through providing capacity training, and expert advice;
- The International Community including the African Union should support the governments of AES countries in establishing a system to track, collect and destroy illegal weapons; exert every effort to disarm members of violent militant groups;
- The AES countries should implement the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre's Border Security and Management Program to strengthen their security forces' capacities to prevent the cross-border movement of terrorists and stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters;

building projects amongst the internally displaced, and trust-building between civilian populations and security forces;

- The International Community should promptly put in place programs providing aid and **support to those forcefully displaced**. Support should include water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH) and food, locally appropriate psychosocial care, and should be **carried through established and trusted organizations**, which can provide impartial assistance in helping victims of violence, including women, children and IDPs.
- The International Community should **recognize the role of Local Faith Actors as a critical component of humanitarian response** and **incorporate flexible funding opportunities into their programming** to allow credible non-partisan Local Faith Actors to carry out their work including emergency food and aid distribution, psychosocial trauma care for victims of violence including sexual assault, providing assistance to IDPs living outside camps and with host families and/or in host communities;

## 2 To address the immensely high level of forced displacement and the ensuing humanitarian crisis affecting millions:

- The International Community should increase funding to the UN Secretary General's Peacebuilding Funds for Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Such investments should be channeled to projects by local government or civil society organizations aiming to make peace sustainable through socio-economic integration of youth at risk of radicalization, peaceful resolution of natural resources conflicts, reconciliation and community-

## 3 To augment local and cross-border peacebuilding initiatives and prevent radicalization and extremism leading to terrorism, the governments of AES countries should frame policies to promote interfaith dialogues at local level, and find innovative ways to train religious leaders primarily focusing on community development and social cohesion.