

## IN BURKINA FASO, AN EXTREMIST FULANI STRUGGLE SPROUTS

By Dr. Ashley N. Bybee

After years of relative peace and stability, Burkina Faso has recently been affected by the sort of Islamic extremism that has more commonly been associated with violence in neighboring Mali and Niger. Since early 2015, Burkina Faso has experienced numerous [attacks](#) in the form of targeted killings, assassination attempts, kidnappings, village incursions, and complex assaults on military targets. Initially, the perpetrators were radical jihadist groups based in Mali. Since 2016, however, a Burkina Faso-based organization called Ansarul Islam has become increasingly active, and its leader, Malam Ibrahim Dicko, has established himself as a threat to stability in the north of the country. He has characterized the group as being inspired by a long-standing struggle of the Fulani ethnic group to reconquer and rebuild the ancient Fulani Kingdom called [Djeelgodji](#). While Dicko is an advocate of [radical Islam](#), his appeal to ethnic pride creates a [narrative](#) much different than that of other violent extremist groups in the region. [more...](#)



Burkina Faso and neighboring countries. (Source: "Burkina Faso," The World Factbook, CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uv.html>.)

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Two highly publicized terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS) resulted in the deaths of 60 mostly European tourists in Tunisia in 2015. Tunisia's tourist industry, which [accounts for](#) 8 percent of gross domestic product and 300,000 jobs in a country of 11 million people, was hit hard. Tourism [decreased](#) by about 1.5 million visitors annually (about 36 percent in revenues) between 2014 and 2016. The fall in revenues [contributed to](#) a slowdown in economic growth from 2.3 percent in 2014 to 0.8 percent in 2015; sluggish growth continued in 2016, with a 1.3 percent increase. How were the 2015 attacks perceived, what actions has the government taken to boost tourism, and what are the prospects for 2017 and beyond? [more...](#)



A guard stands at the entrance of the Tunisian hotel where foreign tourists were massacred in 2015, as it reopened Tuesday May 2, 2017, in Sousse. The hotel has been renamed the hotel Kantaoui Bay. (Source: AP Photo/Sami Boukef.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## A Significant Rise in Islamic Extremism in Burkina Faso

In April 2017, Burkina Faso's Minister for Security, Simon Compaoré, [observed](#) that about 20 terror attacks had killed 70 people in his country since April 2015. The highest profile of these was on January 15, 2016 when Takfiri terrorists (Muslims who accuse other Muslims of apostasy) linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and [al-Mourabitoun](#) stormed the Splendid Hotel and nearby Cappuccino Café, took 176 hostages, injured 56, and ultimately left 28 people dead. The same group was responsible for the attack on the Radisson Hotel in Mali's capital in November 2015, which killed 27 people. AQIM said in a subsequent [statement](#) that the attack was "revenge against France and the disbelieving West," designed to "punish the Cross-worshippers for their crimes against our people in Central Africa, Mali and other lands of the Muslims."

Another high-profile attack occurred on December 12, 2016, when 12 army soldiers and gendarmes (part of the elite *Groupe Forces Anti-Terroriste*, or GFAT) were killed by militants in a raid on a military post in the Nassoumbou commune (in the northern Soum province.) The relatively new Ansarul Islam, led by Ibrahim Dicko, [claimed](#) responsibility for this attack, which solidified its status as a terrorist threat in northern Burkina Faso. The sophistication of the attack also raised questions regarding possible financial support from a larger organization such as Mali-based [Ansar Dine](#). Another attack on Burkinabe security forces took place on [February 27, 2017](#), with simultaneous raids on two police posts in Soum by approximately 12 Jihadists on motorbikes. Most recently, on March 14, Ansarul Islam took responsibility for an attack on a primary school in [Baraboule](#) in Soum.

## Who is Ibrahim Dicko?

[Ibrahim Dicko](#) is a radical Muslim preacher originally from the Muslim-majority Soum province. He gained prominence as an influential radio preacher who joined forces with like-minded preachers in [Mali](#), particularly those affiliated with Ansar Dine's [Katiba Macina](#). Amadou Kouffa, who leads the Fulani Macina Liberation Front and played a central role in the takeover of northern Mali in 2012, is [purported](#) to have radicalized Dicko. Dicko established an Islamic association called [Al-Irshad](#) and created his own Koranic school in 2012. He was [arrested](#) in September 2013 by the French army near Tessalit, Mali, with 20 of his students, along with a significant amount of cash. Malian authorities suspect he was in Mali to join



Ansar Dine. He was imprisoned in Bamako until 2015 when he returned to Soum in northern Burkina Faso and resumed leadership of Al-Irshad, which he subsequently renamed Ansarul Islam. He has been successful in recruiting [several hundred](#) fighters (who the Burkinabe government claims are supporters of the [former government](#) deposed in a coup in 2015). In December 2016, Dicko claimed [responsibility](#) for the attack on Nassoumbou against the Burkinabe army and gave himself the title of “[commander of the believers](#).”

## **The Ancient Fulani-Peulh Kingdom: The Tie That Binds Burkina and Mali**

Ansarul Islam operates in the northern Burkinabe province of Soum, which is directly adjacent to the Mopti region of central Mali. This region had been the historic “Fulani Islamic Emirate of Central Mali” and is also known as the “Macina Empire.” Several Fulani-led extremist groups operate in this region, including the Ansar Dine-affiliated groups Katiba Macina and Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid. Dicko has [stated](#) that his goal for Ansarul Islam is to advance the “Fulani Struggle” to rebuild the ancient Macina Empire, which was figuratively lost as a result of French colonization in the late 19th century.

The current Fulani struggle, which appeals to Fulani’s ethnic pride, also has a practical aspect. Fulani are semi-nomadic herders who have been affected by desertification and the resulting competition for scarce resources in the Sahel. As they move around the region in search of water and land for their cattle to graze, inter-communal conflicts have occurred with local farmers inhabiting the region. Dicko’s call to arms among the Fulani communities in the region may therefore be inspired as much by economic struggle as by ethnic and religious factors.

## **Looking Ahead**

The recent expansion of violent extremism in northern Burkina Faso is the result of several factors. First, the location of attacks on the Mali-Burkina border and the relationships between Ansarul Islam and Mali-based extremist groups suggest that groups operating in Mali may have inspired and in some cases helped radicalized Burkina-based groups. Second, Dicko has thus far been a seemingly effective leader, advocating for the return of the ancient Fulani-Peulh Kingdom to its original glory by taking up arms against those who threaten it. Third, the [Fulani Crisis](#), which is economic in nature but portrayed by extremists as a [religious and ethnic struggle](#), resonates with local communities. Underdevelopment of northern Burkina Faso by the government has strengthened this narrative.

To address underlying economic grievances, the Burkinabe government needs to deliver on its promise to develop the north and prevent a situation in which marginalized Fulani communities become sympathetic to extremist rhetoric. President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré has promised to improve the livelihoods of citizens living in the north through better integration, development, and socioeconomic inclusion of rural areas, but to date has [failed](#) to do so.

To address the growing security threat, the government has already taken some preliminary steps. The Army has deployed the GFAT to the northern part of the country to patrol the porous border with Mali. In addition, President Kaboré appointed [Colonel Major Oumarou Sadou](#) to be the Army Chief in December 2016 in part due to frustration with the former army chief, Pingrenoma Zagré, who was criticized for failing to address terrorism in the north. Oumarou Sadou is from Djibo, where Ansarul Islam is based. One of his first actions was to direct the elite GFAT unit to launch a [raid](#) on an Ansarul Islam base close to the Malian border on March 27, 2017. Eighteen jihadists were killed, although the army was unable to locate Dicko himself. The Burkinabe government has also entered into a military agreement with Mali and Niger to create the [Liptako-Gourma](#) regional task force to counter what has become an increasingly transnational threat. It remains to be seen if the task force can provide a military solution to this regional threat. If the Burkinabe government fails to effectively address the threat from regional and homegrown terrorist groups such as Ansarul Islam, there will be potential for public outcry and political protest.

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## The 2015 Terrorist Attacks

Besides the capital, Tunis, much of Tunisia's tourist industry centers around beach resorts on the northeast Mediterranean coast. The March 2015 terrorist attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, which killed 22 and wounded 50 mostly European visitors, was [depicted by some](#) as a "one off"—an anomaly in an otherwise peaceful vacationland. The June 2015 attack on the Imperial Marhaba seaside resort in Sousse, however, confirmed that European tourists were indeed the primary targets. Europeans are [described by IS](#) as "subjects that make up the crusader alliance fighting the state of the caliphate." Thirty of the 38 killed were Britons. European governments quickly restricted travel to Tunisia, resulting in a precipitous fall in tourism. Over 200 hotels [shuttered](#), and many related businesses cut back or closed, exacerbating Tunisia's [14 percent](#) unemployment rate.

Even worse for Tunisia, families of the deceased are suing the Marhaba tour operator in British courts. The British judge/coroner [ruled](#) that victims had been killed "unlawfully," [describing](#) the Tunisian police response as "at best shambolic and at worst cowardly." The investigation [revealed](#) that one hotel security guard fainted when confronting the attacker and another removed his shirt to conceal that he was a guard. The inquest also [found](#) that police units deliberately delayed arrival at the hotel, allowing the killer more time to attack vacationers.

The Tunisian government disputed the results, [claiming](#) "Tunisia is as safe as London." Some Tunisians interpret the British travel ban as a victory for terrorists and believe their country has been [treated unfairly](#), a "cruel and disproportionate economic penalty on a whole country for the crimes of a few extremists."

## Tunisia Resets Its Tourism Sector

Tunisia has implemented [meaningful changes](#) to prevent a repeat of the Marhaba massacre. Hotel enhancements now include metal detectors and monitored security cameras; under-car mirror inspections; and armed police in uniform and plain clothes working 24 hours each day. The government has also hired consultants to produce a security manual for tourist hotels and museums. Tunisia's Interior Minister, Hedi Majdoub, [explained the changes](#): "We have changed the strategy and decided the best way to combat terrorism is ... to be aggressive and proactive. ... There has been a whole plan for tourist security in towns and hotels."

Tunis has negotiated an ["open skies" agreement](#) with the European Union to expand flights to and from Europe and Tunisia. In an effort to diversify its customer base, it has also marketed Tunisia tourism in specific countries, including China, Russia, and Persian Gulf states. For example, to encourage tourism, Tunisia has [exempted](#) entry visas for Chinese citizens. In the case of Russia, Tunisia was a fortuitous beneficiary of changes in Russian policy. [Russia restricted](#) its citizens from visiting Egypt following the IS downing of a Russian charter aircraft in October 2015. Similarly, [Russia restricted](#) its citizens



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from visiting Turkey following that nation's attack on a Russian, Syria-deployed military aircraft in December 2015. Many Russians sought alternative destinations in 2016, and Tunisia experienced a [1,000 percent increase](#) in tourism from Russia. Tunisia has [adapted](#) to the influx of Russians by offering Cyrillic restaurant menus, offering Russian-language courses to hospitality workers, and opening a tourist bureau in Moscow. Russia lifted travel restrictions to Turkey in June 2016 and Egypt in February 2017, and it remains to be seen if Russians will continue to frequent Tunisia in the long term.

Tunisia is marketing [new or rebranded products](#) in specific subsectors to further diversify its tourist industry:

- Organic foods.
- Medical tourism—including cosmetic surgery and dental care.
- Well-being—including spas, thermal baths, and thalassotherapy.
- Sports—emphasizing golf.
- Culture—festivals, museums, and archeology.
- Enology—emphasizing Tunisian wines.
- Jewish tourism—revitalizing the [Jewish pilgrimage](#) to the “Ghriba” (on the island of Djerba), Africa's oldest synagogue. It is believed to have been founded in 586 BC by Jews fleeing the destruction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. (Note: This event, which attracted 8,000 pilgrims in 2001, now attracts fewer than 2,000; attendance was affected by an al-Qaida suicide bombing near the site in 2002.)

The Tunisian Ministry of Tourism launched a “[Discover Tunisia](#)” campaign in 2017 that it plans to market digitally in nine languages. The campaign employs both traditional and social media, including bus shelter displays in Paris, Berlin, Milan, Brussels, and London, and “#TrueTunisia” on Twitter. Last year, the ministry recruited foreign bloggers, dubbed “[web influencers](#),” to become tourism ambassadors on social media as part of its “#RiseTunisia” campaign.

## Prospects for 2017 and Beyond

[Independent research](#) projects that Tunisia's tourism sector will grow by 3.8 percent in 2017 and 3.9 percent per annum through 2027. Figures for early 2017 are promising, with a [10 percent](#) rise in tourist entries in January compared with the same time in 2016. The Tunisian government [projects](#) the tourist sector will “grow by 30 percent compared to last year . . . [reaching] at least 6.5 million tourists”—up from 5.7 million in 2016. Several European countries, including France and Germany, have already lifted travel restrictions. The United States does not restrict travel to tourist areas in Tunisia. The Netherlands, Ireland, and Denmark maintain restrictions. The United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has [extended](#) restrictions several times; the latest extension runs through May 16, 2017. A representative of the Tunisian National Tourist Office [noted the importance of FCO decisions](#): “Everybody is watching the UK . . . even a partial lifting of the ban—including key resorts like the island of Djerba, Hammamet and Port El Kantaoui [near Sousse] . . . would be a symbol of hope that might encourage governments around the world to do the same.”

It is likely the UK will lift restrictions, if not in May 2017, then not long afterward, especially given the passage of time since the judge/coroner's statements in the Sousse inquest were made public. Some British tourists seem ready to return; [1,500 Britons](#) ignored their government's advice and traveled to Tunisia in January 2017, attracted by low prices. If the FCO modifies its position, it will take time for British tourism to approach 2014's [425,000 visitor mark](#). Large travel companies like [Thomas Cook](#), which canceled all holiday bookings in 2017, would require time to ramp up again.

The key variable in the tourist equation, though, is not policy; it is security. Will Tunisia's security enhancements be adequate to deter an attack and make tourists feel safe enough to return? For this, only time will tell.

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