



THE CURRENT

The Spectre of Interethnic Conflict, Regional Instability, and Terrorism: Burundi's Challenges

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Burundi's persistent spectre of interethnic conflict requires transparent governance, rule of law, and genuine reconciliation efforts. By strengthening stability, promoting regional cooperation, and effectively countering terrorism, Burundi will realize its full potential.

INTRODUCTION

Burundi, a small country with an agricultural-based economy, nestled in the heart of the Great Lakes region of Africa between Tanzania, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), stands at a precarious crossroads. While enjoying a post-conflict period of apparent calm, the nation continually confronts a complex security landscape that en

compasses a range of potential threats, including economic hardship, resource scarcity, cross-border criminality, armed groups, and climate change. As with other developing countries, the lack of economic opportunity, the weakness of some state institutions, and the prevalence of corruption can undermine the rule of law and destabilize the economy and social order.

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Among a multitude of potential disruptors, Burundi's history has been most profoundly shaped by recurring cycles of interethnic conflicts, exacerbated by regional instability and, increasingly, the looming threat of terrorism. While other challenges may contribute to overall instability, these three challenges pose the most immediate and significant threats to Burundi's long-term security and require urgent and focused attention. Past episodes of mass violence have been [directly linked](#) to ethnic tensions, and regional conflicts have frequently spilled over Burundi's borders, [impacting](#) its internal stability. Furthermore, the [increasing presence](#) of extremist groups in the wider East African region, such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), creates a vulnerability that can be exploited, potentially leading to devastating consequences for Burundi's peace.

These interwoven challenges demand a comprehensive and multifaceted strategy to safeguard Burundi's security and foster sustainable peace. Burundi's stability hinges on addressing the deep-seated issues of ethnic division, navigating the complexities of regional armed-conflict dynamics, and proactively countering the rising risk of violent extremism. This article will delve into each of these threats, examining their root causes, all while considering the influence of geography, historical relationships, economic interdependence, cultural ties, military capabilities, external actors, and diverse threats. The article will then propose specific policy recommendations for mitigation.

THE PERSISTENT SPECTRE OF INTERETHNIC CONFLICTS

In 1890, Burundi was colonized by Germany, and then occupied in 1916 by Belgians who established an ethnic power hierarchy to facilitate colonial rule. The Tutsi minority [held power](#) over the Hutu majority, granting them [preferential access](#) to resources and power. Consequently, following Burundi's independence in 1962, the country witnessed a series of violent episodes, such as the 1972 genocide, that contributed to lasting interethnic distrust. The perpetual cycle of violence culminated in the

devastating 1993–2005 civil war, a conflict that [claimed](#) an estimated 300,000 Burundi lives. This conflict exposed the deep-seated ethnic cleavages and the abject failure of successive governments to address the underlying structural causes, both of which ensure the persistent spectre of recurring interethnic conflict.

Spectre is [defined](#) as a “visible disembodied spirit” or “something that haunts/perturbs the mind.” In this context, the term “spectre” refers to violent events of the past that persistently haunt populations and threaten future stability. Indeed, the spectre of past conflicts and unresolved grievances linger, shaping present-day realities and constraining potential, improved futures. The [divide-and-rule](#) strategy, a common colonial tactic, sowed the seeds of resentment and inequality that continue to germinate today. The cause of state fragility in Burundi can be [traced](#) back to these divisive practices introduced by the colonial power, which have since been [perpetuated](#) by post-colonial elites.

Several factors have contributed to the perpetuation of interethnic conflicts in Burundi. Political fragility—marked by weak governance, corruption, and a lack of transparency—undermines [trust](#) and fosters ethnic polarization. This profile of political instability and violence that is immune to accountability means that each conflict [leaves](#) many victims with grievances that remain unaddressed, [keeping](#) Burundi in a conflict trap. Even with periods of relative peace, spoilers frequently operate, undermining stability. These [spoilers](#), encompassing hardline factions, beneficiaries of the status quo, or external actors with vested interests, can trigger renewed violence, even against the will of the majority.

TOWARD PEACE

To break the cycle of interethnic conflicts, Burundi's leaders should undertake key initiatives across the spectrum of governance, including:

- *Strengthening inclusive governance.* Implement consociational power-sharing arrangements to ensure representation and minority

rights. Increase citizen participation and accountability through transparent governance mechanisms.

- *Reforming the justice system.* Strengthen the rule of law by reforming the justice system, ensuring accountability, and promoting access to justice for all citizens. Establish transitional justice mechanisms to address past grievances and promote reconciliation.
- *Fostering reconciliation and dialogue.* Support reconciliation efforts through truth-telling initiatives, memorialization projects, and facilitated interethnic dialogue programs.
- *Building social capital.* Invest in community-based programs that foster trust, cooperation, and social cohesion. Utilize social capital theory to promote collaboration across ethnic lines.
- *Empowering women.* Integrate women into all peacebuilding processes and ensure their active participation in conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts.
- *Prioritizing sustained peacebuilding.* Develop and implement long-term peacebuilding strategies that address the root causes of conflict and promote sustainable development.

By implementing these recommendations, Burundi can move toward a more stable and peaceful future, addressing the persistent spectre of interethnic conflict.

REGIONAL INSTABILITY AND ARMED GROUPS

Burundi's stability is deeply intertwined with the turbulent dynamics of the Great Lakes region. Endemic conflicts, political volatility, and transnational criminal networks—particularly those [operating](#) from the DRC—continue to [pose](#) persistent security challenges. At least 120 groups are [still operating](#) in the eastern DRC. At the same time, refugee influxes, [small arms proliferation](#), and cross-border crimes undermine Burundi's security.

External actors, including neighboring states, great powers, and international organizations,

have varied interests in the region, ranging from economic and political influence to security concerns. The interplay of neighboring countries, international organizations, and armed groups significantly molds Burundi's security landscape. Fluctuations in the relationships between Burundi and its neighbors, such as the [growing](#) tensions with Rwanda, can destabilize the region through support for opposing factions in DRC. In addition, armed groups continue to pose a direct threat, disrupting economic activities on the border with DRC.

For instance, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-DRC (known locally as the ADF, which originated in Uganda but is active in the DRC) and March 23, both based in DRC, could launch cross-border attacks in support of Burundian armed groups such as Red-Tabara, also based in DRC. Following the current armed conflicts in DRC, the flow of refugees—around 100,000 since February 2025—strains Burundi's resources, potentially exacerbating internal human security. Consequently the Great Lakes region experiences the [widespread availability](#) of small arms that fuel violence. Furthermore, transnational criminal networks—including drug trafficking and human smuggling—[exploits](#) porous borders in the Great Lakes region, hindering economic development and undermining governance.

TOWARD REGIONAL STABILITY

Given Burundi's reciprocal relationship with regional instability and the presence of active and thriving armed groups, Burundi's leaders should take meaningful regional security steps together with the DRC and with regional stakeholders, including

- *Strengthening regional cooperation.* Establish joint security initiatives and intelligence-sharing programs with neighboring countries through platforms such as the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region and the East African Community. This will enhance collective threat assessment and response capabilities.
- *Supporting peacebuilding in the DRC.* Actively engage in bilateral agreements

with the DRC and support regional/international peace efforts. This includes contributing to conflict mediation and stabilization initiatives to prevent conflict spillover.

- *Enhancing border security.* Implement comprehensive border management strategies, including improved surveillance and cross-border cooperation, while ensuring humane treatment of refugees.
- *Undertaking proactive diplomacy.* Engage in proactive diplomatic efforts with regional actors to address root causes of instability and advocate for peaceful conflict resolution.

THE RISING RISK OF TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM

Although counterterrorism efforts continue, sub-Saharan Africa “[accounts](#) for nearly 59 percent of all terrorism-related deaths globally. . . The threat persists as terrorist groups, such as Al-Shabaab in Somalia, the ADF in DRC, and Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama in Mozambique, continue to unleash horrific violence.”

Consequently, as the threat from terrorism evolves, so must our cooperation. While grappling with internal vulnerabilities and regional instability, Burundi actively contributes to regional counterterrorism efforts, notably through its participation in the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia, demonstrating a [commitment](#) to combating terrorism beyond its borders.

Burundi itself faces a rising threat from terrorism and extremism, primarily linked to the complex web of the interconnected extremist movements [operating](#) throughout sub-Saharan Africa. These groups, especially the ADF and other regional actors, [pose](#) a direct and evolving threat to Burundi’s security. The porous borders shared with the DRC, a region plagued by instability, [facilitate](#) the movement of operatives, the flow of arms, and the potential for cross-border attacks and recruitment of Burundian nationals. The ADF’s demonstrated links to terrorist activities heighten the urgency of addressing this growing risk.

Several socioeconomic factors create fertile ground for the spread of extremist ideologies. Poverty, particularly among the youth population, breeds a sense of disenfranchisement and vulnerability, making young people susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups promising economic opportunity or a sense of belonging. These issues, combined with existing sociopolitical grievances, can be exploited by extremist groups seeking to gain a foothold in the country. Those groups are not only terrorizing communities, but they also are committing sexual and gender-based violence, assaulting children, and forcibly recruiting children into their ranks.

TOWARD INTERNAL STABILITY

Burundi must undertake a multipronged approach to effectively address the escalating threat of terrorism and extremism including:

- *Strengthening governance and rule of law.* Implement robust anticorruption measures, promote transparent governance, and ensure equal access to justice to build societal resilience against extremist ideologies.
- *Enhancing regional security cooperation.* Foster joint security operations, intelligence-sharing platforms, and coordinated border management strategies with neighboring countries to address transnational terrorist threats.
- *Implementing targeted counterterrorism measures.* Bolster law enforcement capabilities, enhance border security protocols using advanced technology, and actively disrupt terrorist financing networks. This includes strategic military action when deemed necessary.
- *Investing in inclusive education.* Develop and implement educational programs that foster tolerance, critical thinking skills, and responsible citizenship to counter extremist narratives and cultivate a culture of peace.
- *Promoting civil-military cooperation.* Establish mechanisms for effective cooperation between civilian authorities and the military, built on mutual trust, accountability, and respect for human rights, to minimize unintended consequences and community alienation.

CONCLUSION

Burundi's security challenges reflect a complex interplay of internal issues, regional instability, and the rising threat of terrorism. Moreover, geography plays a role, as Burundi's landlocked position and porous borders make it vulnerable to external threats.

The key threats identified in this article necessitate addressing the persistent spectre of inter-ethnic conflict through transparent governance, a commitment to the rule of law, and genuine reconciliation efforts. Regional stability can be fostered through enhanced cooperation with neighboring countries, joint security initiatives, and diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts. Counterterrorism measures should focus on strengthening intelligence gathering, enhancing border security, and addressing the root

causes of extremism, such as poverty and social exclusion. Furthermore, investing in education and promoting civil-military cooperation are crucial for building a more resilient and secure Burundi.

Burundi's future hinges on its ability to proactively address these challenges and sustain peacebuilding efforts. By strengthening stability, fostering regional cooperation, and effectively countering terrorism, Burundi can create a more secure and prosperous future for its citizens. The international community has a crucial role to play in supporting these efforts by providing financial assistance, technical expertise, and diplomatic support. Only through a collective and sustained commitment can Burundi overcome its challenges and realize its full potential. ~ Σ

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Callixte Niyongabo serves as protocol and administrative officer to the office of the Minister of National Defense for Burundi. A graduate of the University of Burundi, the Burundi military academy, National Command and Staff College and the 2025 George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies Program on Regional Security Studies, he holds a robust understanding of regional security dynamics. He is completing an MA in gender, institutions, and societies, and his interests span conflict resolution, security sector reform, and the intersection of gender dynamics and organizational culture in fostering stable security environments.