

North of the countries of the Gulf of Guinea

The new frontier for jihadist groups?

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At a glance

In 2020, armed jihadist groups in Sahel faced increased pressure in their strongholds in Mali, Niger and Burkina.

While the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS) clashed violently throughout 2020 for control of certain territories (Gourma in Mali, the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border region, and the Sahel and East regions of Burkina Faso), national and international armed forces increased their sweep operations. This temporarily hindered their territorial expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea countries and their desire to extend their influence beyond Sahelian countries.

After establishing insurgent strongholds in central Mali in January 2015, and in northern Burkina Faso in late 2016, Islamist fighters have continued to gain ground, giving the impression that they intend to move further south. Today, the southern borders of Burkina seem to be in their sights.

They have been spreading into eastern Burkina Faso since 2018. A large part of the region is no longer under the control of state authorities, who have lost their foothold in all the wooded areas, particularly the Arli and W parks, as well as along certain key roads. Apart from a few attempts to impose their rules in some villages, the jihadists do not seem to have any ambition to extend their governance to the majority of the population. All indications would show that they have turned this region into a refuge for fighters from northern Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, or even into a financing area. During the same period, attempts to establish themselves in the south-west of the country have multiplied: in the Cascades and the Upper Basin as well as in the south-west and mid-west. So far, the insurgents have failed to establish themselves in a fully effective way.

Neighbouring countries are viewing developments in southern Burkina Faso with concern. Both Benin and Côte d'Ivoire feel threatened:

the authorities believe that the unrest on their northern borders will eventually spill over into their territory. No attacks have yet been carried out on Beninese soil, but incursions by suspected jihadists are on the increase. Côte d'Ivoire was first attacked in the north in June 2020. Jihadists have bases there, particularly in the north-east, bordering Burkina Faso and Ghana. The jihadists do not currently have any hegemonic ambitions in those two countries. Rather, they seem to want to use them as transit areas (especially when moving towards the Nigerian front) and for withdrawal purposes.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the attacks made in Kafolo and Kolobougou on 29th March 2021 and the planting of an IED (improvised explosive device) a few days later in the Kafolo area can be seen as signalling an offensive against one of West Africa's most important coastal countries, and perhaps as a desire to establish a foothold there. It is too early to anticipate the jihadists' ability to settle there permanently, but what the late Prime Minister Hamed Bakayoko feared seems about to happen: "Planting the black flag in Côte d'Ivoire would be a resounding success for the jihadists".

Burkina Faso's southern border is likely to be a highly coveted area because of the large number of forested areas that can provide safe havens for hiding, training and recruiting. These forests are a source of frustration for the local inhabitants because of the many prohibitions imposed by authorities aimed at protecting wildlife or private interests. When they take over, the jihadists lift all these bans, thus gaining supporters. From this point of view, the WAP complex, encompassing the Arli, W and Pendjari forests and spanning the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, represents a possible refuge for the insurgents. The situation in northern Benin is particularly worrying: the northern populations are strongly impacted by the presence of the W and Pendjari national parks, where all human activity is prohibited. In recent years, this unique situa-

tion has led to increased competition for access to natural resources and to rising tensions between several communities.

Burkina Faso's southern border is also of interest to the jihadists because it is a very profitable area for all kinds of trafficking. Both to the east and west, this border has been known for several years as an epicentre for the illicit trade in arms, gold, drugs, ivory, or goods such as cigarettes and motorbikes. For the time being, the jihadists are not controlling this trade. But they can take part in it and therefore secure considerable sources of funding.

Although jihadist groups have easily established themselves in eastern Burkina Faso, it will be more difficult for them to gain territory and supporters further west, due to the vigilance of the local population and the presence of traditional hunters (Dozos). Similarly, they will no longer be able to take the coastal countries' security services by surprise. Like the local populations, the Gulf of Guinea states are on the alert. Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have placed particular emphasis on intelligence and have reviewed their military arrangements.

However, these efforts are still not enough. In addition to operational or material flaws in the security network, there is also a weakness in terms of political and military doctrine. Since jihadist insurgencies have developed in the Sahara-Sahel region, no state has yet found an adequate response to contain them. Priority is given to the fight against terrorism, often to the detriment of dialogue with communities and the search for local solutions.

Two different experiences, one in Burkina Faso and the other in Benin, illustrate the difficulties in finding the right balance between the security response and socio-economic solutions in a crisis or pre-crisis context. The first initiative demonstrates that involving citizens in the fight against terrorism – the path chosen by Burkina Faso – is no guarantee of success. On the contrary, it fuels inter-community tensions and violence against civilians. The experience in Benin, where the state is trying to engage in local issues together with the African Parks Network (APN), a nature conservation NGO, and in particular support the local populations living near the natural parks, shows that interesting results can be produced.

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1. A border, but for how long?

Armed jihadist groups in Sahel faced increased pressure in 2020. The national armies of Niger, Mali and Burkina increased their sweep operations, with the support of the French Barkhane force, which saw its numbers increase after the Pau summit (13th January 2020), and carried out numerous ground and air operations, particularly in the "three-border" area (Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso). From February–March 2020, the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM) [*Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans (GSIM)*] and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) [État islamique au Grand Sahara (EIGS)]* also clashed violently for the control of certain territories in Mali and Burkina Faso, breaking the tacit non-aggression agreement that had prevailed until then. This fighting, in which dozens of men were reportedly killed, had a significant impact on them. The situation has probably slowed down their territorial expansion and their desire to extend their influence beyond Sahelian countries.

After establishing insurgent hotbeds in central Mali in January 2015, and in northern Burkina Faso in late 2016, Islamist fighters have continued to gain ground, giving the impression that they wanted to move further south, probably as much to gain territory useful to them¹ as to reduce military pressure in their strongholds. Today, the southern borders of Burkina seem to be in their sights.

Since 2018, they have moved into eastern Burkina Faso. A large part of the region is no longer under the control of state authorities, who have lost their foothold in all of the numerous and extensive wooded areas, especially in the border area with Niger, Benin and Togo. These areas are now partly occupied by armed men, including jihadists linked to the JNIM and ISGS. These fighters have also taken control of some major roads, including the one linking Fada N'Gourma, the regional capital, to the border with Benin. Apart from a few attempts to impose their rules in some villages, they do not seem to have the ambition to extend their governance to the greatest number. There is every

reason to believe that they have turned the region into a refuge for fighters from northern Burkina, Niger and Mali, and even into a financing facility.

During the same period, the number of attempts to establish themselves in the south-west of the country increased: in the Cascades and Hauts-Bassins (those two regions were studied in a January 2020 publication by Promediation, devoted to the Mali-Burkina-Côte d'Ivoire tri-border region²), and also in the south-west and centre-west. Taking advantage of the many forests in this border area with Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, the jihadists carried out several attacks on security force positions in 2018 and 2019. But so far, they have failed to gain a permanent foothold. Some of their bases have been dismantled.

Neighbouring countries are watching the developments in southern Burkina Faso with concern. In Cotonou, the general feeling among Beninese authorities is that disorder in eastern Burkina Faso will eventually spill over into their territory. No attacks have yet been carried out on Beninese soil. Few instances of preaching have been recorded (mainly in the areas of Monsey, Karimana and Malanville in northern Benin) and immediate threats are diffuse or even not very credible to date. But incursions by suspected jihadists are increasingly numerous. They seem to show that Benin is considered by the jihadists, for the time being, as a passageway linking two fronts – that of Lake Chad and that of the central Sahel – or even as a supply zone, and not as a land to be conquered. However, intimations that armed jihadist groups are wishing to settle there are multiplying (passage of armed men, setting up of logistical networks, establishment within communities, etc.). At this stage, does this mean that they are using these areas as simple fallback bases, or are the armed groups intending to establish themselves there durably and make them operational zones for their territorial extension? Many elements seem to confirm the second option, and the breeding ground looks fertile.

Like Benin, Côte d'Ivoire is also seeing the threat coming closer. On the night of 10–11th June 2020, the country suffered its first attack in the north. Some thirty armed men stormed the joint gendarmerie and army post in Kafolo. Nobody claimed responsibility for the attack, but the investigation showed that the attackers belonged to a group linked to the JNIM. The response of the Ivorian and Burkinabe armies led to the dismantling of a cell. But suspicious movements are increasingly numerous in this area, where the jihadists seem to have set up fallback bases.

1.1. Eastern Burkina Faso: a safe haven outside state control

A large part of the eastern region of Burkina Faso³ is now beyond state authority control. This is not new: this part of Burkina Faso has long been a “lawless” area. In the 2000s, criminal gangs took advantage of the state’s weak presence in this region, in particular of the security forces, to multiply the number of robberies: poaching (of elephants in particular, for ivory), gold panning, thefts and looting on the roads. The forests provide retreats difficult to access for security forces. Very quickly, the roads in the East gained a reputation as being cut-throats. The road cutters became organised and professionalized, so much so that by the late 2000s it was almost impossible to travel at night. “They were very violent and equipped with weapons of war. There were a lot of injuries, amputations, and deaths”, noted a human rights activist in 2018.⁴ The situation worsened in the early 2010s. On the road between Niamey and Fada N’Gourma, attacks were frequent. “When the victims called the gendarmerie, they did not come. The bandits were the masters of the road”, said an elected official in the region in 2018.

During the same period, businessmen took advantage of the situation to set up illegal gold panning and poaching businesses⁵, especially in protected areas. The region also became a major area for illegal trafficking – arms and drugs in particular – on the routes linking the coastal south to the Sahelian north.

Relative calm returned with the arrival of the Koglweogo (“the guardians of the bush” in the Mooré language) in 2015.⁶ In the east, a militia called Tinkoubitidogou (or Tin Kubi u dogu: “Let us guard our cities” in the Gourmantche language), linked to the national Koglweogo movement and supported by traditional chiefs, was particularly effective. Active in the five eastern provinces, it claimed 21,000 members in 2018 and had a record of 600 thieves arrested. Very quickly, its actions helped to curb insecurity. The roads became safer. But the arrival of new armed men in the area in early 2018 changed the situation significantly.

The first attack described as “terrorist” by Burkinabe political authorities in the eastern region was recorded in February 2018. On 14th February, a patrol of the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) was attacked in Natiaboani, on Route Nationale 18 towards Pama: one policeman was killed and two others were injured. The attacks increased thereafter, and were never claimed. Initially, the armed men targeted anything that might symbolise the state.⁷ This resulted in the weakening of an already weak authority in the area: very quickly, the police and gendarmerie limited their patrols, even when they were called out on an emergency basis; Water and Forestry agents, who no longer dared to venture into the bush, were reduced to technical unemployment; and even teachers and health workers no longer dared to return to their place of assignment. Outside the towns, the field was left open to armed gangs – except when the FDS was conducting operations. Attacks on the FDS, which were regular in 2018 and 2019, particularly through the planting of IEDs, are less frequent today. This is partly related to the fact that the army is limiting its movements.

In a second step, the jihadists attacked civilians whom they considered an obstacle to their establishment: imams, marabouts or local elected officials who had taken a position against them; “collaborators” or informers of the army, etc. Most of the time, those people were abducted and murdered. In 2020, three personalities from Pama were abducted on the road: the president of the economic and financial affairs commis-

sion within the municipal council, the head of the civil status department and the director of the Caisse Populaire bank. The first two are still missing. The third was released after being held for a month by the jihadists. The mayor of the district escaped an attempted kidnapping at his home in October 2020.

Teachers are also prime targets. In a report published in March 2020, the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented several attacks on teachers in the country, particularly in the east. One of those was the village chief of Nadiabonli in Tapoa province, who was shot dead in his home in December 2019. The man had been teaching children in the village as schools in the area were closed by the jihadists and teachers fled under threat. “We, the family, know that this [attack] was related to education, because he was the only intellectual in the village... and he was teaching those who needed help... and [the armed Islamists] were against that”, said a relative quoted in the report. Between 2017 and March 2020, HRW documented 28 attacks targeting teachers, schools or students in the east of the country. By March 2020, insecurity had led to the closure of 556 schools in the eastern region.

Over the past three years, the FDS have carried out several military operations, during which dozens of people were arrested or even shot. But they have not enabled the state to “clean up” the area, or even take back lost territories. Today, the authorities have lost their foothold in all wooded areas, which are very numerous and extensive, especially in the border area with Niger, Benin and Togo. In this region, the Water and Forestry Department has eleven hunting concessions (10 are managed by private concessionaires, the eleventh being the so-called “presidential” hunting zone, managed by the State) and two national parks: the Arli Park and the W Park. All hunting areas have been closed for two years for security reasons. Almost all of the camps that housed tourists there have been destroyed by armed men who have set up shop nearby. As for the two parks, they have been abandoned. For security reasons, Water and Forestry agents have withdrawn to the larger towns (mainly Diapaga and

Fada). Today, forestry officers no longer enter the Arli Park. And if they do patrol the W Park, they do not venture further than 25 km inside. “It would be too dangerous”, said an official from the Water and Forestry Department. “The foresters are not in a position to deal with the jihadists, who have set up bases in these two parks and move around regularly”.⁸ These areas are now partly occupied by armed men, particularly jihadists, but also by herders who graze their livestock there, gold panners, farmers and poachers. According to several sources, armed groups control 80–90 % of these parks.⁹ They have temporary bases there, which they move regularly. Witnesses mention camps consisting of a few huts and inhabited by a few dozen armed elements, who are sometimes accompanied by their families.¹⁰ However, such “control” is quite relative: these groups have neither the human nor logistical means to administer these territories, but their very presence, and the threat it represents, forces those who venture there to place themselves under their authority.

The forests are not the only areas outside state control. Today, armed groups have taken control of some roads, including the once busy road from Fada N’Gourma, the regional capital, to Pama – Route Nationale 18. This road leads to Benin.

“From Natiaboani to Pama, it is the jihadists who are there”, explained an elected official in the area. “It is a road that is bordered by wooded areas where they have settled. They regularly set up roadblocks, stop the vehicles and check the identity of passengers. Sometimes they catch them: they blindfold them and take them to the bush for questioning. Some are released on the roadside, others are killed, and their bodies are left along the road”.¹¹ Among the people targeted by the jihadists are policemen, gendarmes, foresters, as well as local elected officials and sometimes even ordinary people, sought simply because they belong to a village considered “recalcitrant” by the jihadists. In early 2020, 20 young people from the district of Madjoari who were heading towards Fada were arrested by armed men on this route. They have not been seen since.¹² A few weeks earlier, the jihadists had sent the message that the inhabitants of Madjoari would now be considered

enemies because of the presence of the army in the town and the population's alleged collaboration with the military.

Many of the Pama area inhabitants we interviewed in the course of this study say they no longer take this route. Now, to reach Ouagadougou or even Fada, they pass through Togo, then enter Burkina Faso via the border town of Cinkansé, and take the road to Koupèla.

The Pama-Madjoari axis (Nationale 19) is also out of state control. "Even the military no longer dare use it because they are afraid of mines", said a local elected official.¹³ In 2019, a military detachment was sent to this particularly isolated district, located in the heart of the Arly reserve, near the border with Benin. However, the soldiers only patrol the interior of the town and no longer use the main roads. They are relieved by air.

Several villages that are relatively far from urban centres are also left to themselves – and often subject to the rules imposed by jihadists. This is particularly true in the villages of Logobou, Tansarga or Botou, in the far east. "The jihadists are based in the forests nearby. As security forces are absent, they can easily impose their own law. All the schools in these villages have been closed"¹⁴, said a local elected official. In these three villages, the town halls and several other public buildings were burnt down. Elected officials were forced to take refuge in better secured urban centres. In the Madjoari area, all the villages except the towns of Madjoari and Tambarga are under the yoke of jihadists. The same is true in the Matiakoali area, where several remote villages have to deal with armed men hiding in the surrounding forests. "The first time they came to Ouro-Seyni [a village in this area, Author's note], they told us that from now on they were in charge", said a citizen of the village. That was in 2018. "They told us that we could stay, but that those who opposed them would be treated as enemies. They abducted and killed many people".

In particular, jihadists require men to wear beards and short trousers cut at the ankles, and women to wear veils. They have also demanded the closure of so-called "French" schools.

*"Those who stayed are forced to follow their rules. The others have fled."*¹⁵

A map published by the LAM-CNRS laboratory illustrates the failure of the state in the East. Based on the number of polling stations that were not open on the day of the first round of the 22nd November 2020 presidential election, the research laboratory notes that "the provinces considered the most insecure – according to the criterion we have used, that of polling stations not being open – are not in the Mali-Niger-Burkina tri-border area, but in another tri-border area (Niger-Benin-Burkina) for which there is usually less concern".¹⁶

The jihadists' footprint in this area is not as heavy as in northern Burkina Faso or in Liptako-Gourma, on the border between Burkina, Niger and Mali. Their influence is in no way comparable to that of the Macina and Serma katiba (battalion) in central Mali. However, the armed groups seem to have become relatively well established in the area. Several local sources believe that it will now be difficult to dislodge them.

In a previous study devoted to this area in 2018, Promediation mentioned two possible scenarios: that of an ephemeral settlement, like the Khalid Ibn Walid katiba in southern Mali in 2015¹⁷; and that of a lasting establishment, even to the point of governing certain areas, like the Macina katiba in central Mali. The first scenario is already out of date. But it is difficult to say whether the second will be implemented.

Apart from a few attempts to impose their rule in certain villages, the jihadists active in eastern Burkina do not seem to have the ambition to extend their governance to the greatest number. "We often see them, they come by to buy products, get information or preach, but this is rare. They have never tried to set up in a populated area, and they prefer to live hidden in the forests", said a local elected official.¹⁸ Unlike in central Mali, the jihadists in eastern Burkina do not administer justice and are not in contact with traditional chiefs to "co-administer" the area. They do not make speeches to the population

suggesting that they wish to impose governance based on Sharia law, even if they urge those they meet to follow their example.

"Everything leads us to believe that they have made the east a refuge or rest area for fighters coming from the north of Burkina, Niger and Mali, or even a fallback area if necessary, and possibly for financing. But they don't seem to want to go any further", said a senior Burkinabe official.¹⁹ This strategy would explain the decrease in attacks against the FDS observed in 2020 – and more particularly during the second half of the year. "Now that they have conquered the territories they wanted to conquer, namely the forests and strategic axes, they are on the defensive. This leads us to believe that they do not have political aims in this area", said a security official.²⁰ This is supported by a notable fact: no attack carried out in eastern Burkina has ever been claimed – not even the ambush directed against a convoy of the mining company Semafo in November 2019, some 40 km from the Bounkou mine.²¹ This absence of claims tends to demonstrate that jihadist groups present in the area have neither hegemonic ambitions nor political projects. It also blurs the line between jihadist groups and criminal gangs.

While most violent acts (attacks, assassinations and kidnappings) are attributed by default to jihadists, some may be the work of bandits who take advantage of the insecurity and absence of state control to engage in looting and score-settling. "They too have no interest in the return of the state", said a senior official.²²

Moreover, it is not clear to which groups the fighters active in eastern Burkina are linked. Security sources in the region believe that the two main Sahelian jihadist groups – the Al Qaeda-linked Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), linked to the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) – have elements there. In the war between the two groups in 2020, during which dozens of jihadists were killed, several battles were fought in the area – notably near Sebba, Gayéri and Diapaga. Those battles, most of which were won by the JNIM, led to movements of fighters and changes in positions.

However, according to several sources, the "demarcation" observed in 2018 still seems to be in place. JNIM elements seem to be based further south, on the border with Benin, in the provinces of Tapoa and Kompienga. Their stronghold is believed to be in the Arli Park. ISGS elements are believed to be located further east, in the border area with Niger, particularly in the vicinity of Gayéri, as well as in the W Park, both in Burkina Faso and Niger. The links between the jihadists operating in this area and those fighting further north, particularly in the so-called "three-border" area, are close. According to information gathered by Promediation, the W Park regularly shelters ISGS fighters active in the regions of Tillabéri (Niger) and Menaka (Mali), including chiefs, who come there to recharge their batteries.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of fighters there. Estimates vary between 600 and 1,200, depending on the source. Among them are a majority of Burkinabe, from all communities (Fulani, Gourmanthce, Mossi, and others), but also nationals of all the sub-region countries. Bandits and former Koglweogos may have joined them.

1.2. Northern Benin, an area on borrowed time?

Seen from Cotonou, the situation in eastern Burkina Faso is perceived as a direct threat to the country. One only has to open a map to understand the concern of Beninese authorities: almost the entire border between the two countries (306 km long²³) is out of Burkinabe security forces' control, and the forests that are found from east to west and are "crossed" by the border are all occupied by jihadist groups. Beninese security officials emphasise the great porosity of their borders with neighbouring countries (Burkina, Niger and Nigeria). These borders are mostly marked by rivers that can be forded during the dry season. The general feeling among Beninese authorities is that the disorder observed in neighbouring Burkina Faso will inevitably spill over into their territory.

“The question is not whether they will come to us, but when”, said a security source.²⁴ Several scenarios are envisaged. “For the moment, we don’t think they will attack us with the aim of extending their jihad to Benin. What we fear is that they will be forced to come to us if the pressure from the armies further north, and in particular from France in the tri-border area, increases”, said the same source.

The threat not only comes from Burkina Faso. Information gathered by Promediation indicates the presence of a katiba in the heart of the W Park, in Niger territory. Linked to the ISGS, the Usman dan Fodio katiba is said to have around forty members and to be led by a Beninese by the name of Abdallah. This Yoruba was born on the border between Benin and Nigeria. He left to fight in Mali in 2012 and joined the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA).

So far, no attacks have been carried out on Beninese territory.²⁵ The jihadists have no established base there, including in the two national parks of W and Pendjari – the authorities are formal on this point. But alerts have multiplied over the past two years. The first dates back to 1st May 2019, when two French tourists were kidnapped and their Beninese guide killed in the Pendjari Park, on the border with Burkina Faso. The two men were released a few days later following an intervention by the French army in northern Burkina, when they appeared to be destined for northern Mali in the company of two other hostages (an American and a South Korean). Whether the kidnapers belong to a jihadist group is still a matter of debate in northern Benin. Some believe that they were bandits who took advantage of the opportunity to sell them to a jihadist group. Others put forward conspiracy theories implicating French services or Beninese political figures.²⁶

Prior to this high-profile abduction, which prompted France to list northern Benin as a red zone (“strictly inadvisable”) on its travel advice map, the Beninese authorities had received reports of “suspicious” individuals going from Niger to Burkina across the river and the W Park in Benin. According to testimonies passed on to

security forces, the groups of individuals observed were men who seemed to know the area.²⁷

Since then, other suspicious movements have been reported in the vicinity and in the two national parks of W and Pendjari. The most “spectacular”, which shook the authorities, took place in June 2020. On 9th June, a team of rangers from the African Parks Network (APN²⁸) on a mission in the W park came across twelve men with turbans and Kalashnikovs, riding on six motorbikes and equipped to live in the bush. One of them carried a large radio in a bag on his chest, the others walkie-talkies. According to the rangers’ testimony, they spoke Arabic and only one spoke French. Other security sources said they spoke Hausa and a Fulani person who came into contact with the group found that one of them spoke Fula. They were looking for their way and reportedly said they had no problem with Benin and were just passing through. Immediately alerted, the APN management took defensive measures and informed the authorities, who tried to locate the convoy but failed to intercept it despite African Parks’ air assets (microlight and helicopter).²⁹

During two days, the twelve men travelled through part of northern Benin. After leaving the W Park at Boiffo, they crossed the national road (RN2) that links Kandi to Malanville (and leads to Niger) and headed for Nigeria. Taking care not to be spotted, they moved through wooded areas. During their journey, they regularly asked locals for directions, repeating that they had nothing against Benin, and that they were not there to do harm. They were seen near several villages or hamlets in the districts of Malanville and Segbana. According to a municipality agent, they preached in the Fulani camp of Gouba, north of Segbana, before crossing the border and heading towards Lake Kainji National Park.³⁰ Beninese security sources indicate that the men were intercepted and some were killed by the Nigerian army. Other sources doubt that they were intercepted in Nigeria.³¹ They point out that Lake Kainji National Park is probably home to an ISWA base (Shekaw tendency) and that these comings and goings demonstrate the threat that this movement also poses to Benin.

This incursion has caused great concern. It suggests that Benin is one of the passageways for jihadists linking two fronts: the Lake Chad front and the Central Sahel front. There are several indications that operational links have been activated in recent months between the EIAO (ISWA), whose stronghold is in the Lake Chad region of northern Nigeria, and the ISGS, which is particularly active in northern Burkina, western Niger and eastern and central Mali. According to information gathered by Promediation, around 15 pick-up trucks loaded with dozens of fighters were sent by the first group in June 2020 to support the second in its war against the JNIM. Most of the reinforcements spoke Hausa. In October 2020, several dozen ISWA fighters were reported to have travelled from Lake Chad to the tri-border area to reinforce the ISGS. The radical jihadist group actually managed to recapture many lost areas in the space of three months, and by January 2021, the ISGS had regained a foothold in the Malian Gourma, from which it was largely driven out in the first half of 2020.

According to several sources, this is taking place at the same time – in addition to the abduction of the Kankara schoolchildren – as Boko Haram and/or ISWA are expanding or at least have a foothold in the north-western regions of Nigeria.

For Benin, the brief June 2020 intrusion was also a reminder of how weak the Beninese security system was and how unprepared the security forces were to deal with a possible attack. Several shortcomings were observed during this episode: slow mobilisation of the FDS, deficient means of communication and transport, and above all, the absence of the army’s own airborne resources³² and insufficient strike force. Security officials are half-heartedly acknowledging that there was no real desire to intercept the twelve men and that it was preferable to let them cross the border. “We can’t confront them, they are better armed”, admitted a police official.³³

This episode seems to confirm the analysis that, for the time being, Benin does not appear to be a territory targeted by jihadists – as they themselves told those they met. “We believe that they have no

interest in attacking us at the moment. This would open a new front that could weaken them, while they already have a lot to do in their strongholds”, said a security source.³⁴

However, there are several counterbalancing elements to this analysis. After the June 2020 incursion, other suspicious movements were observed, still towards the tri-border area between Burkina, Niger and Benin, in the W Park. In July 2020, a group coming from the park was spotted towards Bongnami, a village located in the Monsey area (district of Karimama). They reportedly said to the villagers before crossing the river into Niger territory: “Don’t tell anyone you’ve seen us”.³⁵ Individuals described as suspicious (turbaned, armed and dressed in military uniforms) had already been seen by local residents in this district in February 2019, at the level of Tilawa, a border village located at the confluence of the Mekrou and Niger rivers.³⁶ In May 2019, there were rumours that the police had managed to find them. In May 2019, rumours that attacks could be launched in Niger by jihadists from Burkina Faso who had transited through Benin alerted the authorities. In particular, fishermen from a village on Beninese territory, in the same Monsey area, claimed to have seen armed men travelling on motorbikes towards Niger. They spoke Zerma, Hausa and French, they said.³⁷

According to a representative of the Fulani community in the Alibori department, the information reaching the authorities is far from complete: “The herders tell us that they see them regularly. But they don’t always say so. We can see that they are not from here and that they are just passing through. Moreover, they say so to those they meet”.³⁸ The Monsey area, squeezed between the Niger River and the W Park, is very isolated and poorly served. It takes several hours on a track to reach Monsey from National Road 2 – in the rainy season, the tracks are almost impassable and much of the area is flooded. In addition, the Beninese telephone network does not reach all areas: most inhabitants can be reached via the Nigerian telephone network. The police officers present in the area have few means of moving around and communicating. All this makes Monsey a zone of

interest for armed groups who would like to transit, or even settle, there. But their presence has only been temporary so far, and there never were any threats.³⁹

Recent reports suggest a more permanent presence of armed jihadist groups in northern Benin, particularly the Usman Dan Fodio katiba, affiliated to the ISGS, and led by one Abdullah, a Yoruba Beninese born on the Benin-Nigeria border. This marabout went to Mali in 2012 with elements of Boko Haram, then joined the MUJAO and the Islamic police of Gao headed by Abdul Hakim (current leader of the ISGS in Gourma). Abdullah and Aly Lankoande, a young Gurman from the eastern region of Benin, are said to have taken part in the fighting against Malian and French forces in Gao and the Adrar des Ifoghas. They are said to jointly lead Usman Dan Fodio's katiba, which operates in the W Park area and constitutes operational zone 5 of the ISGS. This area is reportedly essentially a fallback zone. ISGS presence is suspected in particular in the district of Karimama: in Gorouberi, Mamassi-Fulah, Karimama centre, Bogo-Bogo, Garbey, Koara and Kompanti. In the district of Malanville, near Karimama, ISGS presence was reportedly detected in the locality of Wollo Château. The leader of this area is reportedly called "Monsieur Shangania".

On 14th February 2021, "activists" equipped with weapons presumably obtained during the Tapoa attack on Burkina Faso territory entered the Point Triple Hotel, located on the border between Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso. Just a few hours after the owner's return, armed men attacked the hotel, looting and ransacking it. The owner managed a close escape. The Beninese armed forces then adopted a defensive posture outside the hotel complex. The radical activists eventually left the premises later that night before returning on 17th February to set fire to the hotel and threaten the Beninese military posted nearby.

This episode has alerted Togolese and Beninese authorities. The countries of the Gulf of Guinea perceive the specific threat posed by these border and woodland areas to their respective security and are organizing themselves bi- or multilaterally.

As part of the Accra Initiative, several joint operations have been carried out over the past two years in Burkina Faso, on the Beninese-Togolese borders and in Côte d'Ivoire. Discussions are also underway between Togo, Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso to carry out new cross-border operations and try to curb a still intangible but growing threat. These states are increasingly convinced that they will, at some point, be hit by attacks from armed jihadist groups. The possibility of carrying out preventive operations first, with the aim of curbing their establishment, is increasingly discussed within and between the Gulf of Guinea states. Whether in the context of the Accra Initiative or through bi- or multilateral agreements, plans for joint military operations between Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso and, more marginally, Togo, have intensified since October 2020. The stated objective is to regain effective control of the WAP complex on the borders of the three countries.

The jihadist footprint remains relatively small in northern Benin for the time being. No school closures, no threats to local officials or security agents have been observed and, with the exception of Monsey, no preaching has been reported. However, small-scale incursions do occur, particularly in Tanguiéta, where suspected men regularly come for treatment at the St John of God Hospital, which is renowned throughout the region for its quality of care. In September 2020, suspected jihadists wanted in Burkina Faso were seen there, before they were arrested. This town on the edge of the Pendjari Park is located about fifty kilometres from the border with Burkina. This is a cause for concern for local authorities as well as for the management of the hospital centre.⁴⁰

1.3. Unsuccessful attempts to establish a foothold in the south and south-west of Burkina Faso

The rise of jihadist groups in Burkina Faso affects the whole country. After establishing insurgent hotbeds in the north and east, they seem to be moving further south. In a previous report, Pro-mediation documented their expansion strategy in the Boucle du Mouhoun and in another

"three-border" area between Burkina, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, notably in the Haut-Bassin and Cascades regions.⁴¹ The jihadists are like scouts. Comparable to scouts, fighters destined to become brigade leaders later on are charged, on behalf of the JNIM, with identifying possible hideouts, especially in wooded areas, recruiting local people, sending them to training camps, and then attacking police and gendarmerie posts to secure war material. Several forests in south-western⁴² Burkina are now infiltrated by armed men: Deux Balés, Boulon-Koflande, Comoe-Leraba, Dida, etc. In these areas, attacks increased in 2019. There were fewer attacks in the border regions of the South-West and Centre-West⁴³, but attempts by jihadists to establish themselves there were also observed.

In the Centre-Ouest, armed men tried to gain a foothold in the "Ponasi" complex, which includes three listed forests: the Tambi Kaboré national park, the Nazinga hunting reserve and the Sissili forest. As usual, the alleged jihadists initially attacked the security forces. Suspicious movements had been reported since January 2019, but it was only in July that they took action. They first attacked the Koumbili forestry post, located on the edge of the Nazinga ranch (Guiaro district). Four foresters were injured. Then they ambushed a gendarmerie patrol in the village of Kadro, 25 km from Pô. Two gendarmes were killed and two others injured.

After these attacks, the foresters fled the area. "They had a real desire to establish themselves in this area. They were elements linked to the Macina katiba", said a Water and Forestry official.⁴⁴ But a military operation put an end to this attempt. On 28th November 2019, six armed men were killed during a military operation in the Tambi Kaboré park, including the group's alleged leader. Equipment was also seized. In the following weeks, the eco-guards of the NGO "Les anges gardiens de la nature" [Nature's Guardian Angels] (AGN), in charge of surveillance of the complex, combed the area with the support of the army. Several suspected jihadists were killed or arrested. "Today, the area has been cleared", said the Water and Forestry official already mentioned.

"We have taken advantage of this to chase away the gold panners and herders who were in the forest."

Armed men also carried out attacks in the South-West region in 2018 and 2019: against the customs post in Batié, a town located a few kilometres from the border with Côte d'Ivoire, on 22nd August 2018 (one customs officer killed); against the Galgouli police post, located on the border with Côte d'Ivoire, on 1st September 2018 (one wounded); against the Nako gendarmerie brigade on 19th August 2019; etc. During some of these attacks, the assailants reportedly shouted "Allah Akbar". According to a security source, "each time they came from Côte d'Ivoire and returned".⁴⁵ In 2018, intelligence services also noted the presence of suspicious elements in the Trimbio forest, located near the town of Loro-péni. According to a local source, the jihadists had set up a base there. But it was dismantled by the Dozos in the area.⁴⁶ The Dozos also noted suspicious movements towards the border with Ghana in late 2019. In December of that year, a Fulani chief in the area said he had received a threatening call from suspected jihadists. "They told me that as a chief I should join them to defend the religion," he said.⁴⁷

Further west, a presence was noted in the vicinity of the town of Ouou, located on the road linking Gaoua to Banfora. On three occasions, the gendarmerie post was attacked, on 5th August 2019, 5th January 2020 and 9th February 2021. On 13th December 2019, a police post located at a mining site in Kouéré, on the Ouou-Sideradougou axis, was stormed. In addition, several attacks were carried out in the Sideradougou area, including two against the gendarmerie post.

However, there has been a lull in recent months. No attacks were recorded in the two regions of Centre West and South West in 2020, and there are fewer suspicious movements. There has been no preaching or threats against elected officials, teachers or traditional leaders. A security source believes that "the jihadists have understood that they would have difficulty settling here". Since the failure of the Halid Ibn Walid katiba in southern

Mali in 2015⁴⁸, which probably served as a warning to them, the JNIM has moved forward with caution. Its “scouts” avoid formalising their presence through overt signs such as the black flag, or demand/advocacy texts. They have learned to be patient before launching large-scale attacks. This does not mean that the group has given up on the idea of establishing itself in the sector, interesting in more ways than one: there are many wooded areas, trafficking as well, and the borders with Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire are very porous.

1.4. North-eastern Côte d’Ivoire in focus

On the night of 10–11th June 2020, Côte d’Ivoire suffered its first attack in the north of the country.⁴⁹ Some thirty men armed with Kalashnikovs, PKM machine guns and RPGs stormed the joint gendarmerie and army post in Kafolo, a town a few kilometres from the border with Burkina Faso. The attack, carried out from three different directions, lasted nearly an hour. According to a security source, the attackers were very well organised. Some went back to Burkina from where they had come. Others headed towards the Comoé Park. The toll was heavy: fourteen dead among the gendarmes and soldiers and six injured.

The attack was not claimed, but the investigation showed that the attackers belonged to a group linked to the JNIM, commanded by a Burkinabe, Rasmane Dramane Sidibé, aka “Hamza”. This group, made up of about fifty elements according to a security source (mostly Fulani, some of whom were from the region), had established itself on both sides of the border. On the Burkinabe side, a suspicious presence had been reported a few months earlier to the north of Kafolo, near the town of Bolé – an area difficult to access, full of forest galleries ideal for hiding.⁵⁰ In mid-June, a response by the Ivorian army after this attack (“Operation Rétorsion” [Retaliation]) led to the arrest of around thirty presumed jihadists, including Ali Sidibé, aka “Sofiane”, a man presented as a lieutenant of “Hamza” and the “brain” of the Kafolo attack.

“Sofiane”, a shepherd, was well known in Kafolo, where he occasionally passed by to sell oxen. The jihadists had several accomplices in and around the town, who provided them with food and informed them of the movements of the security forces.⁵¹

This attack came a few weeks after the launch of a joint operation by the Ivorian and Burkinabe armies on both sides of the border. Launched in May 2020, “Operation Comoé” (named after the river that marks the border between the two countries, but also the vast listed forest in which jihadist cells have been reported for the past two years) resulted in the dismantling of a jihadist base located near the Burkinabe village of Alidou-gou. Several suspected fighters were killed or arrested on both sides of the border, and equipment was seized. Was the attack on the Kafolo post carried out in retaliation for this operation? This is a hypothesis considered credible in Abidjan. According to the elements collected during the investigation, “Hamza” did not want to carry out an offensive on Ivorian territory, which he wanted to turn into a fallback zone.

The attack on Kafolo was a feared outcome, and it was deemed inevitable by the Ivorian authorities because of the increasing pressure exerted by jihadist groups in the area. “There is no reason why they should not come to us”, said an administrative official in Ouagolodougou in 2019.⁵² Their proven presence in several forests in southern Burkina and suspicious movements reported towards Ouagolodougou in 2019 had alerted the authorities, who took measures to try to contain the threat: in July 2019, Côte d’Ivoire launched an operation called “Frontière étanche” [Tight Boundary] along its northern borders; mixed patrols (army, gendarmerie, police, Water and Forestry) were regularly organised.

In 2021, this area was again targeted by suspected JNIM gunmen. On 29th March, dozens of fighters carried out a double attack on an army outpost near the border with Burkina Faso and on the gendarmerie post of Kolobougou, located further east in the department of Tehini. In both cases, the attack was repelled, but two soldiers and

a gendarme were killed and five others injured, according to an official report. Three assailants were reportedly killed and four others arrested.⁵³ For the authorities, there is little doubt that this was a jihadist attack.

Suspicious movements have been reported for several months in the north-east of the country, in the border area with Burkina and Ghana. The authorities mention “pockets” north-east of the town of Bouna, as well as in the vicinity of the towns of Doropo and Tehini. Jihadists are also said to have settled in the heart of the Comoé National Park, which serves as a refuge area where fighters come to rest. Like the other forests in the area, this reserve is of particular interest to the jihadists: the forest is dense and the state has historically had little presence there.

“They don’t have a permanent base. They regularly move back and forth across the border to avoid detection. Some are with their families”,

a security source said.⁵⁴ Intelligence services have identified the presence of supporters of jihadist groups on both sides of the border between Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. Suspicious movements have also been reported further west, towards Tengrela, on the border with Mali. Armed men were seen by residents there; they reportedly ordered the residents not to go.

The border is a godsend for these groups. “When the Burkinabe put pressure on them, they come to us, and when we put pressure on them, they go to the Burkinabe side”, said a security source.⁵⁵

However, the jihadist footprint remains very low in this region. The lives of Ivorians are not in any way affected by their very discreet presence. “There are rumours, but nothing concrete”, said a local elected official.⁵⁶ For the time being, the jihadists seem to want to make Côte d’Ivoire a refuge or even a supply zone.

- 1 The territorial objectives of armed groups seem to be mainly related to their movements and to ensuring the continuity of their logistical lines. These insurgencies are essentially rural in origin, controlling rural areas, and do not appear to aim for effective control of cities. Similarly, controls over rural areas are sometimes loose or tight, depending on what appears to be the groups' imperatives: security, movement, logistical lines, populations.
- 2 "Une nouvelle 'zone des trois frontières' ? L'extension de la menace djihadiste aux frontières du Burkina Faso, du Mali et de la Côte d'Ivoire" [A New "Tri-border Area"? Jihadist Threat Extension to the Borders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire]. Promediation Analysis Report, January 2020.
- 3 The East is one of the thirteen administrative regions of Burkina Faso. It comprises five provinces: Gnagna, Gourma, Komondjari, Komienga and Tapoa; 27 departments; 5 urban districts and nearly 800 villages. Its population was estimated at 1,615,640 in 2015. All five provinces have been affected by the wave of violence observed since 2018, albeit in different proportions.
- 4 This paragraph is partly based on information gathered during a previous survey conducted in 2018 in eastern Burkina Faso by Promediation.
- 5 In 2016, a poaching ring was arrested by the authorities. According to a source in the Water and Forestry Department, they had killed around 45 elephants in the WAP complex.
- 6 After the fall of Blaise Compaoré's regime in October 2014, self-defence militias, the Koglweogo, set about occupying the space left vacant by the state in villages and on the roads to ensure security and hunt down thieves. The practices of these militias, which have little or no state supervision, are open to criticism: they torture those they arrest, levy taxes, act illegally, etc. However, they won over part of the population because they achieved results fairly quickly, thus making the authorities aware of their own shortcomings.
- 7 On 15th March 2018, a forester was killed in the attack on the Nassougou post. On the night of 16–17th June, a policeman was killed in Nadiagou. During the night of 1st to 2nd July, the Arly forest post was attacked (no victims). During the night of 23–24th July, a gendarme was injured in Matiakoali. On 1st August, 3 FDSs were injured in Natiaboani. On 9th August, five gendarmes and a civilian were killed by a mine explosion in Boungou. On 28th August, eight FDSs were killed by a mine explosion on the road to Pama. On 5th September, two FDSs were killed and five injured in a mine explosion in Kabonga. On 4th October, 6 FDSs were killed in Foutouri. None of these attacks was officially claimed.
- 8 Interview with an official of the Water and Forestry Department, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 02/12/20.
- 9 Interviews with the head of an NGO, Ouagadougou, 27/11/20; an administrative authority, Ouagadougou, 02/12/20; a herders' representative, Fada, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 10 Interviews with inhabitants and elected officials of the districts of Pama, Madjoari, Diapaga, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20 and 01/12/20.
- 11 Interview with a local elected official, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 02/12/20.
- 12 Interviews with inhabitants of Madjoari, Fada, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20 and 01/12/20.
- 13 Interview with a local elected official, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 14 Interview with a local elected official, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 15 Interview with a traditional chief, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 16 "Élection présidentielle au Burkina Faso :les cartes et le territoire" [Presidential Election in Burkina Faso: Maps and Territory]. Christian Bouquet, 7th January 2021. <https://the-conversation.com/election-presidentielle-au-burkina-faso-les-cartes-et-le-territoire-152116>.
- 17 In 2015, the Ansar Dine group, led by Iyad Ag-Ghaly, had "sponsored" the establishment of an affiliate in southern Mali, in the Sikasso region, not far from the border with Côte d'Ivoire: the Khalid Ibn Walid katiba. This katiba carried out several attacks, before being partially destroyed by a Malian army offensive in the Sama forest, and disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. For more details, see "A new 'Tri-border Area'? Jihadist Threat Extension to the Borders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire]. Promediation Analysis Report, January 2020. [Note 2]
- 18 Interview with a local elected official, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 19 Interview with a senior official, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 02/12/20.
- 20 Interview with a military official, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 02/12/20.
- 21 This attack is currently the deadliest attack ascribed to jihadist groups in the region. 39 people were killed and around 60 were wounded.
- 22 Interview with a senior official, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 02/12/20.
- 23 In total, Benin shares 1,989 km of land borders with neighbouring countries, including 306 km with Burkina, 266 km with Niger and 773 km with Nigeria.
- 24 Interview with a security official, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 25 On 9th February 2020, the police post of Kérérou, located in the W Park, some 20 kilometres from the border with Burkina Faso, on the banks of the Mekrou River, was attacked at dawn. One policeman was killed, the others managed to escape. The theory of a terrorist attack was not accepted. Very quickly, suspicion turned to bandits, who are very active on this road, or poachers. Today, police officials in the area admit that they still do not know the perpetrators of the attack or the motives, but they assured us that it was not a jihadist attack. Interviews with police officials, Banikoara, Benin, 28/10/20 and 29/10/20.
- 26 Interviews with guides and residents of Pendjari Park, Kandi, 25/10/20, Natitingou, Benin, 04/11/20.
- 27 Interviews with several security sources, Cotonou, Benin, July 2019 and October 2020.
- 28 African Parks Network (APN) is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2000 in Johannesburg "in response to the dramatic decline of protected areas due to poor management and lack of funding". It now manages 19 national parks across the African continent. In Benin, it has been managing the Pendjari Park since 2017, and the W Park since 2019.
- 29 APN incident report sent to authorities.
- 30 The information in this paragraph is drawn from several security and local sources.
- 31 Interviews with security officials, Cotonou, Benin, October 2020.
- 32 The only air assets mobilised were those of APN.
- 33 Interview with a police official, Kandi, Benin, 26/10/20.
- 34 Interview with a security source, Cotonou, Benin, 23/10/20.
- 35 Interview with a security source, Kandi, Benin, 26/10/20.
- 36 Police report, February 2019.
- 37 Police report, May 2019.
- 38 Interview with a Fulani community representative, Malanville, Benin, 27/10/20.
- 39 Interview with a local elected official, Malanville, Benin, 28/10/20.
- 40 Interview with an administrative official, Natitingou, Benin, 03/11/20.
- 41 "A new 'Tri-border Area'? Jihadist Threat Extension to the Borders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire]. Promediation Analysis Report, January 2020. [Note 2]
- 42 This refers to the South West as a geographical area, not as an administrative entity.
- 43 These are administrative regions, therefore proper names, hence the use of capitals. In the rest of the report, we will mark the difference between geographical area and administrative entity by respectively using small letters or capitals.
- 44 Interview with a Water and Forestry Department official, Ouagadougou, Benin, 02/12/20.
- 45 Interview with a police official, Gaoua, Benin, 03/12/20.
- 46 Interview with a local elected official, Gaoua, Benin, 04/12/20.
- 47 Interview with a traditional leader, Gaoua, Benin, 04/12/20.
- 48 Named after Halid Ibn Walid, also known as "Ansar Dine South" by the Malian intelligence services, this katiba, directly linked to the leader of Ansar Dine, had set up in the Sama forest, located in the far south of Mali, close to the border with Côte d'Ivoire. It carried out two attacks: on 10th June 2015, against the military camp in the town of Misseni, located a few kilometres from the border with Côte d'Ivoire; and on 28th June, in the town of Fakola, located further west in Malian territory, some 20 kilometres from the border with Côte d'Ivoire. The group was quickly dismantled in July 2015 following a military operation in the Sama forest.
- 49 The country suffered a first jihadist attack on 13th March 2016, but this one targeted the seaside town of Grand-Bassam in the south. All victims were civilians (19 dead, 33 injured). The attack was claimed on the same day by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).
- 50 See note 53.
- 51 Interview with a security source, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 07/12/20.
- 52 Interview with an administrative official, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, December 2019.
- 53 Communiqué of the General Staff of Armed Forces, 29/03/21.
- 54 Interview with a security source, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 07/12/20.
- 55 Interview with an intelligence official, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 08/12/20.
- 56 Interview with a local elected official, Abidjan, 08/12/20.

2. The “El-Dorado” of protected areas

The southern border of Burkina Faso is probably a target for jihadist groups because of the large number of wooded areas that can be used as safe bases. The interest of these forests is manifold. First of all, they make good hiding places. Some of these forests are very dense, which makes them difficult to access, especially for an army. It is possible to rest, or even to train there. In addition, most of them are listed forests, which means that human activity is partially or totally forbidden. Those who venture there do so to carry out illegal activities. This ensures a certain degree of discretion. Finally, these forests, which are a source of frustration for the local populations because of the prohibitions imposed by the government, are places of recruitment. When they take them over, the jihadists lift all the bans and thus gain supporters.

From this point of view, the situation in northern Benin is particularly worrying. The populations of the north are all strongly affected by the presence of the two national parks of W and Pendjari, where all human activity is prohibited. However, what was acceptable two or three decades ago, when the bans were put in place, is no longer acceptable today, particularly because of population growth, climate change and certain public policies that favour the development of extensive agriculture. This leads to strong competition for access to natural resources, and in particular an intense competition for land, which creates community tensions and a feeling of abandonment – even stigmatisation – by the state that jihadists can use to attract local sympathy.

If the southern border of Burkina is of interest to jihadists, it is also because it is an area of trafficking of all kinds, favoured by porous borders, a weak presence of public authorities and close family ties on both sides of the border. In the east as in the west, this border has been known for several years as an epicentre of trafficking in

arms, gold, drugs, ivory or legal goods such as cigarettes or motorbikes. Even though the jihadists do not control this traffic, they can take part in it, and thus find sources of financing essential to their development.

2.1. Ideal bases for hiding, resting and recruiting

The southern border of Burkina Faso – and therefore the northern part of neighbouring countries – is a target for jihadist groups largely because it contains a large number of forested areas that can provide difficult-to-access bases for armies. For years, Sahelian insurgent movements have understood the value of colonising forests: the Wagadou forest on the Mali-Mauritania border has long been used as a retreat by groups operating in northern Mali; in central Mali, the forests on the Mali-Burkina border provide living bases and training camps; in eastern Mali, the Ansongo forest is where the ISGS established its main base; in 2015, members of the Halid Ibn Walid katiba set up camp in the Sama forest in southern Mali; in the same year, bandits linked to jihadist groups operating in northern Mali were spotted by Nigerian intelligence services in the W Park, where they had tried to settle.⁵⁷ In the last three years, the forests of southern Burkina as well as of Côte d’Ivoire have been targeted by the jihadists. And there are many of them. In eastern Burkina, a large part of the surface of the Kompienga and Tapoa provinces is occupied by hunting areas or parks. In the South-West, a relatively small area, there are no less than four listed forests, totalling 133,700 hectares, almost one tenth of the total area of this administrative region.

As noted in Chapter 1, the jihadists occupy all the forests in eastern Burkina. This is where they set up their bases when they arrived in early 2018, and from where they launched their first attacks.

In the South-West and Centre-West, as well as in the Cascades and Hauts-Bassins, each of their attempts to set up a base was made from a forest.

The interests of forests are many. First of all, wooded areas make good hiding places. Some of these forests are very dense. Regulars say that it is difficult to move around on foot – and therefore impossible to move around in a tank or 4x4 – and that the vegetation makes it fairly easy to protect oneself from air threats (helicopters or drones). Dozos, eco-guards and forestry officers all report the same difficulties in controlling such areas. “If you don’t know and if you are not accompanied by someone who knows the tracks, you will never be found”, said a Dozo from the Gaoua region.⁵⁸ A soldier posted in the same area admitted that it is almost impossible for the armed forces to venture into these forests: “We would get lost. The Dozos do it better than we do”.⁵⁹

These forests are all the more interesting for the jihadists as most are listed. Human activity is partially or totally forbidden. There are no villages, apart from a few clandestine hamlets, and the men who venture there do so to carry out illicit activities (wood trafficking, artisanal gold panning, livestock rearing, poaching): they will therefore think twice before informing the authorities of a suspicious presence. The forestry officers who are supposed to protect these areas do not have sufficient means and are not enough to carry out their mission. Moreover, as one of them reminded us, “we are neither armed nor trained to deal with seasoned fighters”.⁶⁰

In addition to providing protection from the outside world, these forests can sometimes be sustainable – if austere – places to live. Opinions on this point differ. On the Beninese side, several people who know the W and Pendjari parks well believe that it is impossible to stay there for too long, particularly because of the threat of wild animals – the fauna is numerous, especially in the Pendjari park.⁶¹ Some people, however, feel that it is possible to live there properly. “These are ideal resting areas. They have everything they need: water, meat, shade, and villages nearby where they can get supplies”, noted an eco-guard

who knows the forests of eastern Burkina well.⁶² Indeed, three years after their installation in this region, the jihadist groups are still there. In the areas of Pama and Madjoari, they refuel in some villages. They also make agreements with certain “users” of the forest to get food.

According to several testimonies collected in Benin and Burkina, an agreement was made between Beninese poachers and the jihadists. The former, who no longer have access to the Pendjari Park because of the stricter surveillance exercised for three years by the new manager, African Parks Network, have negotiated with the latter the right to come and hunt in the Arly Park and in the hunting areas of Pama, on Burkinabe territory. In exchange, they supply the jihadists with basic foodstuffs (oil, cereals, sugar) and fuel, which they transport on their motorbikes from their country. They may also pay a tax to the jihadists or give them part of their booty. Most of these poachers come from the district of Materi. In August 2020, seven people from two villages in this district were killed by the Burkinabe FDS as they were crossing the border into the forests.

This tacit agreement could be described as “win-win”: it allows the poachers to continue their activities and offers the jihadists a way to refuel and secure financing, as well as to benefit from the hunters’ perfect knowledge of the terrain, and perhaps even to entice some of them. Beninese authorities are worried about such opportunistic collaboration. According to several local sources, the jihadists ask the poachers to adopt their way of life – short trousers, beard, etc. – and to learn their religious practices, such as praying with their arms crossed. According to local elected officials, some of them have changed their behaviour. “If the jihadists were to come one day to our area, they would certainly go through these poachers”, said a military source.⁶³

Beyond the sanctuary it can represent, the forest is also a place of recruitment. The listed woodlands in West Africa are a source of frustration. You cannot graze your cows there, you cannot cultivate, you cannot hunt and sometimes you cannot fish or gather plants. These prohibitions

are at best incomprehensible to and at worst angering the local population.

This issue is particularly sensitive in eastern Burkina and northern Benin, where the WAP complex is theoretically off-limits to all human activity – indeed, to all human presence except for eco-guards, researchers and tourists. In eastern Burkina, the proliferation of protected areas and private hunting zones in recent decades has not been well understood by local people. The reserves occupy almost 25 % of the area of Tapoa province. The hunting concessions in Pama cover a total of 276,000 hectares, hundreds of kilometres of tracks and almost 80 ponds. “Traditionally, people live from hunting and fishing in this area. But because of the concession of hunting areas to private individuals, often foreigners, and the listing of protected areas, they are prohibited from doing so. Those who poach get arrested or even killed. This causes a feeling of frustration”, explained a researcher specialising in the area in 2018.⁶⁴ For the inhabitants, the state is responsible for this situation. And those privatisations do not benefit local residents, or benefit them very little.⁶⁵ The hunting activity does provide jobs; but in the balance, these weigh little in relation to the constraints imposed on the populations.

“If we had more money, people would accept these nature parks because they know that this is a legacy we will leave to our children. But how do you explain to these people that it is for their own good if they cannot farm or hunt, and on top of that, they do not see the money coming into the district’s coffers?” asked a local politician.⁶⁶

These numerous prohibitions, together with the corruption of certain officials, notably Water and Forestry agents⁶⁷, generate dissatisfaction. The jihadists know this. When they take control of a forest, they let the local people know that they can exploit it again. “When they pass through the villages, the jihadists say that we can hunt from now on, and that we can take our animals to graze there, even in protected areas”, said a local elected official.⁶⁸ “They say: ‘Come, we won’t bother you like the administration’”, reported the head of a herders’ association.⁶⁹

In eastern Burkina, most of the forests are now occupied by gold panners, poachers, woodcutters, farmers and, above all, herders with their animals. According to an official from the Water and Forestry Department, there are now many cattle in the eastern forests: “There are thousands of head of cattle coming from all over, from Niger, Mali, Ghana... The herders know that with the jihadists, they will be able to take advantage of the forest in exchange for a tax, the zakat, which consists of taking a few head of cattle from the herd”.⁷⁰ This zakat is sometimes considered excessive, but it is often better accepted than the taxes imposed in the past in an arbitrary manner by forestry officials.⁷¹

All these people who benefit from the presence of jihadists are potential recruits. “Their words work. The jihadists have gained supporters in the village”, said a resident of Madjoari.⁷² They have also attracted herders from more or less distant places. In Fada, herders’ representatives have noticed a phenomenon that worries them: young people who leave with their father’s herd and never come back. “They say they are going to Togo or Ghana, and we don’t hear from them anymore”, explained a traditional Fulani chief. “We don’t know where they are, but it is likely that some of them have decided to join the jihadists in the forests.”⁷³

Moving westwards, the situation is different. The forests, although listed, are often already occupied by clandestine workers – mainly gold panners, but also woodcutters, poachers and herders. When they arrive, as was observed in the Cascades region, the jihadists do not endanger these activities. On the contrary: by scaring off the foresters, they facilitate them. Most of the time, they benefit from the sympathy of those who exploit the forest. They also find a source of recruits there, among the herders and gold panners in particular.

The former, mostly Fulani, are a “traditional” favourite target of jihadists. It is from this community that they “won” their first supporters in central Mali and northern Burkina, and that they continue to recruit in the east and north-west of Burkina, as well as in western Niger. Faced with

numerous economic difficulties, very often considered as foreigners in regions they have inhabited for several generations, racketeered by the security forces and Water and Forestry agents, oppressed by a sclerotic social hierarchy, many of them take up arms.

The latter are mostly young men from all over the sub-region who have left everything to try their luck in gold. Others only come during the dry season, when their families do not need them in the fields. Some are children. Most of them are poor and could easily be seduced by the promises of the jihadists, in the course of a discussion or even during the Friday prayer sermons. An International Crisis Group report on the issue of gold panning in the sub-region notes that “jihadist preaching calling for the respect of Sharia law on mining sites has been reported in eastern Burkina Faso or in the department of Torodi in Niger”.⁷⁴ Estimates of the number of gold panners in Burkina vary sometimes by a factor of ten: some put the number at one million (ICG), others at 140,000 (ENSO⁷⁵). Whatever the figure, this represents a significant pool of potential recruits for armed groups.

2.2. Trafficking ripe for exploitation (gold panning, arms, cattle, etc)

If the southern border of Burkina is of interest to the jihadists, it is also because it is an area of trafficking often of long standing, favoured by porous borders and close family ties on both sides of these borders, and therefore of potentially very lucrative financing. To the east and west, this border has been known for several years as an epicentre of trafficking between the Gulf of Guinea and Sahelian countries – in arms, gold, drugs, ivory or legal goods such as cigarettes or motorbikes.

In addition to the taxes that could be described as “traditional”, but also relatively residual, levied on herders, poachers or gold panners who carry out their activities in the areas they control, and which enable them to meet their daily expenses (fuel, food), jihadist groups know that they can take part in, or even control, trafficking in this area that will

enable them to finance their development, and in particular to buy arms and ammunition, motorbikes and spare parts, or the material used to make explosive devices.

Several studies have shown that illicit activities are central to their strategy. In a well-documented report on the Liptako-Gourma region, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) found that “violent extremist groups act as beneficiaries, service providers or ‘regulators’ of illicit activities [...] Notwithstanding the religious or ideological considerations that extremist groups claim – which would require them to stay away from certain activities – they are generally pragmatic and opportunistic about illicit activities”. The report showed that they are involved in arm, drug, motorbike and fuel trafficking, as well as in cattle rustling, poaching and gold panning in Liptako-Gourma.⁷⁶

They can be involved to various degrees. They may simply tax convoys of goods in the areas they control as a “right of passage”, or they may be paid (in cash or kind) for their protection. But they can also take a more active part in the process.

The ISS study showed that eastern Burkina (as well as northern Benin and western Niger) is a vital area for many traffic types. Products from the Gulf of Guinea pass through the area before being transported to what could be called the main front in Mali, Niger and northern Burkina. For example, motorbikes – vital for the jihadists, who have made them their preferred means of transport – imported from Asia via the ports of Cotonou and Lomé, pass through this region and in particular through the border towns of Cinkansé (Togo-Burkina border) and Koualou (Benin-Burkina border).⁷⁷ In June 2020, the inhabitants of Fada and Diapaga witnessed endless convoys of motorbikes heading north. One security source spoke of 600 motorbikes⁷⁸ According to a senior Beninese military official, Koualou is also a hotbed of trafficking, particularly in small arms.

Fuel trafficking, equally vital to the jihadists, uses the same routes. Smuggled out of Nigeria, the fuel is transported in tanks on dump trucks, or even tanker trucks, across Benin. This traffic is

more or less illicit – as it benefits all Beninese, the authorities turn a blind eye. Once in Koualou, it is poured into vats, then into 25-litre drums that are loaded at the rear of motorbikes. From there it can be taken to the north (Mali), east (Niger) or west (interior of Burkina). On the roads leading to Fada, it is common to come across convoys of dozens of motorbikes loaded with yellow cans of petrol, as well as cartons of cigarettes and drums of cyanide (needed for gold panning) at night. “They drive at night, sometimes on tracks, sometimes on the road when it is clear. Drivers have informants along the way to tell them where the patrols are”, explained a businessman who has investigated some of this trafficking on behalf of his company.⁷⁹

Eastern Burkina is also a route used by cigarette traffickers. Mostly manufactured in Dubai, the cigarettes pass through the ports of Benin, Togo and Ghana before being smuggled to Sahel. The process is similar to fuel trafficking. The cartons are transported in container trucks to the border with Burkina, where they are transhipped onto smaller trucks, mostly with the complicity of customs officials. Sometimes they are transported on the back of motorbikes. One of the most used routes goes through Porga, in Benin, and then Fada; the other through Cinkansé. Illegally imported into Burkina, some of these cigarettes are destined for local consumption, while others are sent to other countries, notably Niger and Mali, and even to the Maghreb and Europe. According to the businessman mentioned above, Togo and Ghana have been more vigilant over the past two years; this has helped to reduce the flow of cigarettes into their territory. But the Beninese and Burkinabe authorities seem to be in less of a hurry to put an end to it.

In a report published in 2020, UN experts obtained evidence that several brands, “exported mainly from the United Arab Emirates, entered Africa in the port of Cotonou, transited through Burkina Faso and Niger, in violation of applicable transit and re-export legislation, and were openly trafficked along the way”. In particular, the experts documented the case of seven containers “that entered Cotonou and whose contents were mixed

and transferred on board 12 trucks in the Beninese border town of Porga and in Najagou on the Burkina Faso side in March and early April 2019”.⁸⁰

It is not easy to determine the involvement of jihadists in this trade. In their final report, the UN experts note that “there is still a risk that the illicit trade in cigarettes will contribute to the financing of armed groups in Mali and elsewhere in Sahel”. It is notable that the routes used by traffickers are now in areas controlled or coveted by jihadist groups. For example, National Road 18 linking the border town of Porga, in Benin, to Fada, via Pama, is now in the hands of the jihadists.

“It is difficult to imagine that they would let convoys pass without claiming their due”, said a local politician.⁸¹ The sums involved are colossal on the scale of this region: the value of a container of cigarettes is estimated at 600 million CFA francs (XOF) [≈915,000 EUR]; the profit, if taxes are avoided, would be around 100 to 150 million XOF⁸² [≈152,500 to 228,700 EUR].

Another source of wealth that is coveted is wildlife, in particular ivory. The W and Pendjari parks have many elephants. Their population is estimated at 6,000 individuals. While they have been relatively well protected on the Beninese side since the arrival of the NGO African Parks Network (APN), they are less well off on the Burkinabe side. Regularly, elephant corpses are found without their horns. The poachers are mostly local people who hunt for the meat, which they then sell illegally on the markets, as well as for the ivory or, in the case of wild animals or crocodiles, for the skin. “These are the little guys, who hunt just to make a living. They often work for foreign sponsors whom they do not even know, and who belong to real mafia networks”, emphasised the investigator of an NGO that tracks down poachers.⁸³ As mentioned above, some of these poachers have to deal with the jihadists in order to continue their activity. There is no evidence today that jihadists are benefiting from this. But it would be surprising if they did not take their share of a juicy trade. Indeed, large sums of money are at stake: in 2018, the Beninese NGO seized 256 kilos of ivory, with an estimated value of nearly 40 million XOF⁸⁴

[≈61,000 EUR]. In the last six years, more than 700 kilos of ivory have been seized in Benin. In Burkina recently, a man was offering two lion cubs recovered by poachers for the colossal sum of 12 million XOF⁸⁵ [≈18,300 EUR].

Jihadists are also interested in small-scale gold panning, which has boomed over the past decade in West Africa, particularly in southern Burkina. ISS notes that “gold panning sites are part of the installation strategy of extremist groups, who are clearly desirous to manage them”. In a report published in November 2019, the International Crisis Group also expressed concern about this phenomenon.⁸⁶ According to Ghanaian security forces, armed groups linked to the “Macina katiba” located on the border between northern Côte d’Ivoire and southern Burkina Faso are now interested in Ghana’s Upper West region, as gold reserves have been discovered there.⁸⁷

When they took control of the forests in eastern Burkina, they very quickly reopened gold panning sites that had previously been closed by the state, notably in the presidential hunting camp of Komi-penbiga. A 2017 survey of the gold panning sector in Burkina identified 53 small-size mining sites in the East, with just over 1,600 pits.⁸⁸ Annual small-scale production in the region was put at 406 kg in 2017, with an estimated value of over 10 billion XOF [≈15,249,000 EUR]. Much of this production was then illegally exported to neighbouring countries where taxes are lower, such as Togo and Ghana.⁸⁹

Clandestine gold panning is a particularly tightly sealed sector. It is difficult to determine the role that jihadists play on these sites. Do they simply levy a tax on the gold mined or pay for the security of the sites? Do they buy it from gold panners and then sell it to traders or jewellers? Are they directly involved in mining and marketing?

In the western regions of Burkina, the situation is somewhat different. There is an abundance of gold, but the sites were being mined long before the jihadists arrived in the area. They therefore have no control over their operations. In a previous report on the Burkina-Mali-Côte d’Ivoire border area, Promediation indicated that the theory

of artisanal sites coming under the control of the jihadists was not very credible in these regions for a host of reasons.⁹⁰ “In the south of Mali, the International Crisis Group’s abovementioned report notes, the main form of security relies on the Dozo, hunters grouped in brotherhoods and generally equipped with hand-made hunting rifles. For several decades they have been called upon by the Tombolomas, a form of unofficial mine police force mobilised by the owner of a site and paid through taxes collected from operators. Representing the village chiefs on the mines, the Tombolomas ensure the security of the gold sites in the regions of Kayes, Sikasso and Koulikoro without this being contested at either local or national level. (...) In Burkina Faso, security arrangements are comparable to those in Mali, but less structured and with greater local variations. [...] In the West, gold panners call on former bandits who have been converted for the occasion or on the Dozos, who are traditionally responsible for securing rural areas in the Boucle du Mouhoun, Hauts-Bassins and Cascades regions”. This organisation deters the intrusion of new actors, even if some sources mention arrangements, probably on an ad hoc basis, between Dozos and jihadist groups in the Mali-Côte d’Ivoire border area.⁹¹ The same is true in the South-West and Centre-West.

Most sites are secured by the Dozos, or by former military personnel who are paid to do so, or even by private security companies.⁹² A major player in artisanal gold panning in Gaoua believes that the jihadists have little chance of “winning” these sites: “There are about 50 sites in the region, many of them clandestine, but we know who operates them. For the moment, the authorities leave them alone. It is therefore not in their interest to ally themselves with jihadists, as this could only cause them trouble”.⁹³

In the ENSO study already mentioned, 61 artisanal or semi-mechanised sites were identified in the South-West in 2017, for a total of almost 4,000 wells, and 14 in the Centre-West.⁹⁴ This made the South-West the second region behind the Centre-North (110 sites). But in terms of production, the South-West was well ahead, with 4.7 tonnes, far ahead of the North (2.4 tonnes).⁹⁵

This represented a colossal sum, estimated at 118.7 billion XOF [≈181,006,600 EUR].

While jihadists do not seem to be able to take control of the sites, they can find refuge there. As in the forests, they can settle there in relative anonymity, or even prepare attacks. This was the case in 2015, when elements of the Halid Ibn Walid katiba spent a few days on the gold panning sites of Kanakono and Misseni and reportedly received explosives training there.⁹⁶ The movement of people to and from these sites is a major source of insecurity. On these sites, there is a constant flow of people coming and going, and no one really knows who is who. “There is a lot of coming and going. You can’t control all the movements. These are open spaces”, explained one gold panner, who acknowledged that weapons are circulating on the sites.⁹⁷

Jihadists may also be tempted to play a role in the marketing of the mineral. Much of the gold is unregulated. A study published in March 2020 found that “the vast majority of small-scale mined gold leaves the country undeclared” to be sold in the Gulf countries or to the neighbouring Togo and Ghana.⁹⁸ “The gold trade in West Africa is a regional problem. Togo is known as a hub for gold smuggling. The country has no significant gold production, yet, according to an OECD report, it recently reported an export of 48.7 tonnes. Much of Burkina Faso’s gold leaves the region through Togo, but Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Mali are other known channels”, say the report’s authors.

According to an Ivorian security source, traffic sites in the Burkina-Ghana-Côte d’Ivoire tri-border area are numerous. One of the most important is near the village of Boly et Chache, on the border between Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. This site has become so large that it is now a security priority for Ghanaian forces in the north of the country. In Gaoua, all gold panners have an agent on the other side of the border, in Bouna or Doropo. They use the same routes to export their gold and escape the authorities’ controls. Another study reveals that gold mined in north-eastern Côte d’Ivoire is “sold almost in its entirety” in Burkina Faso – almost always in covert manner.⁹⁹

The authors of a third study, published by Small Arms Survey and devoted to arms trafficking between Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d’Ivoire, point out that during the civil war in Côte d’Ivoire between 2002 and 2011, gold mined in the north-east of the country was illegally exported to Burkina Faso¹⁰⁰, and that zone commanders (“comzones”) of the Forces Nouvelles (FN) rebel group controlled a number of economic activities, including gold panning. Once the war was over, they were appointed to important positions in the administration or the army, but they continued their activities. Among them was Issiaka Ouattara, aka “Wattao”; together with his brother Sayouba, he controlled most of the mines in the districts of Bouna and Doropo, as well as the smuggling routes. In a report published in 2014, the Group of Experts on Côte d’Ivoire noted “the presence in the area of a small number of members of the security forces and services (gendarmerie, police and Water and Forestry administration) and 200 irregular members of the army reporting directly to Issiaka Ouattara aka ‘Wattao’. They were there to protect the illegal gold mines in the region, as well as the main border crossings into Burkina Faso, namely Kouguienou (between Doropo and Galgouli) and Kalamparo (between Bouna and Batié), both of which are located on roads that the Group said are regularly used by gold traffickers”.¹⁰¹ Since Wattao’s death from illness on 5th January 2020, trafficking is said to have been taken over by his family, in particular his brother.

Gold panning often goes hand in hand with arms trafficking, said Small Arms Survey. The routes used to escape controls are often the same. The NGO’s study documented three main routes: the Bondoukou-Bouna-Varale-Doropo road, used to smuggle gold and arms, and also counterfeit medicines, drugs and motorbikes from Ghana; the Ferkessedougou-Ouangolodougou route, which leads either to Burkina (Banfora) or Mali (Sikasso); and the road through Tengréla, further west. The report mentioned other trafficking routes in eastern Burkina Faso and in the Pô region.¹⁰²

Lastly, jihadists can rely on another increasingly important occurrence in this hinterland to finance their activities: cattle rustling. This problem is not

new. It is also difficult to quantify, as no figures are available – several sources put the figure in the thousands. But according to the herders, it has ballooned in recent years. In eastern Burkina, cases have multiplied. “Before, there were simple thefts. A few animals would disappear at night. Now it is the whole herd that is taken away, in broad daylight, by armed men”, explained a herders’ representative, who spoke of downright “raids”.¹⁰³

Once stolen, the cattle are said to be sent to wooded areas, then to neighbouring countries to be sold. They are sometimes sold on local livestock markets or through professional butchers in clandestine manner.¹⁰⁴ For a number of herders interviewed during this survey, the jihadists are responsible for these thefts. But for others, it is difficult to know whether they are jihadists or simple bandits. It could just as easily be both.

In the west of the country, too, livestock breeders have noted a worrying development. Thefts have increased in the border area with Côte d’Ivoire. This occurrence is not limited to Burkina. It has been observed throughout the sub-region, particularly in Côte d’Ivoire.¹⁰⁵ This phenomenon worries the authorities. “When you talk about a

herd of 50 or 100 head, it’s a lot of money. For the jihadists, it is a fairly easy way to finance their activities. And it’s very difficult to fight against that”, explained an Ivorian official.¹⁰⁶ He pointed out that the area is full of herds, either belonging to nationals or transhumant. In the W Park alone, and more precisely in its peripheral zones – where there are supposed to be no domestic animals – the African Parks Network estimates the number of livestock at around 160,000 (99,392 cattle, 29,969 sheep and 32,884 goats). However, a large proportion of these animals move around “freely”, without being watched by a shepherd.¹⁰⁷ “If even a tiny proportion of those fall into the hands of the jihadists, they will have enough to finance themselves for years”, feared an official of the Beninese intelligence services.¹⁰⁸

These thefts are traditionally carried out between Fulani. They are sometimes considered to be specific to the community and ignored by the security forces. This is the case, for example, in the Fulani community in the Upper-West Region of Ghana, where thefts of up to 100 heads are not uncommon.

Koalou/Kourou, a “neutral” lawless zone

Located in the extreme north-west of Benin, on the border with Burkina Faso, the town of Koalou/Kourou is today an actual “dry port” for trafficking of all kinds. No one controls what is happening there, because of its delicate legal situation. The town, located in a meander of the Pendjari River, about 35 km from Pama (Burkina) and 30 km from Matéri (Benin), is the subject of a dispute between the two countries. Ouagadougou considers that the border is delimited by the river, and that Koalou, which is on the left bank, is in Burkinabe territory. Cotonou argues the opposite, relying on the border drawn by French colonisers in 1938. In 2009, the two states took the dispute, which covers an area of 70 km², to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for settlement. While waiting for the verdict, they decided to co-administer the area, which was described as “neutral”. But since 2018 and the entrenchment of a jihadist insurgency in eastern Burkina, the Burkinabe security forces have deserted the place: there are no longer any police, gendarmerie or customs. The nearest posts are in Porga on the Beninese side and in Tindangou on the Burkinabe side. As the Beninese army can only patrol there in the presence of the Burkinabe army, it cannot go there at the risk of creating a diplomatic incident. “Today, there is no longer any authority in Koalou”, said a policeman in the area.¹⁰⁹

The traffickers take advantage of this. “Everyone lives from trafficking in this town, it is a lawless area”, said a local elected official.¹¹⁰ According to several Burkinabe and Beninese sources, Koalou is the epicentre of fuel trafficking between the coast and Sahel. Trucks from Nigeria, loaded with petrol cans – when they are not tanker trucks – cross Benin and come to deposit the goods in tanks, located in warehouses visible to all. The fuel is stored there for some time, before being transferred into cans that are sent in all directions (to Togo, Ghana, Niger, etc.). Some of the traders who profit from this traffic are well established in Porga and Tanguieta (they are called “pétroliers” [oilmen]).

The town is home to other trafficking: cigarettes, motorbikes, food products. The Beninese come there to buy cereals and beans, which are cheaper than at home; the Burkinabe buy clothes, oil and solar panels. It is also possible that drugs and arms are traded there, according to a Beninese source.¹¹¹

It is difficult to determine what role the jihadists play in this trafficking. It is likely that they benefit in some way. If they have not taken control of the town, they are not far away and frequently visit it, security sources say.

2.3. Populations to be used ... or seduced

Borders are often equivalent to peripheral areas where a large part of the population feels neglected by the state. “The government has never done anything here” is an expression often used by the inhabitants, but also sometimes by civil servants from other regions. The lack of understanding is all the greater as these are generally considered to be rich areas. It is an asset for the jihadists, who, in their preaching, propose an alternative project.

This is the case in eastern Burkina Faso. Its soil is fertile and its climate favourable to agriculture. Its subsoil is rich in minerals, including gold. Its geographical position makes it a major place for trade and transhumance – and therefore for monetary flows. Lastly, the region has a strong potential for tourism: a large number of animal species, including those most prized by tourists (giraffes, elephants, lions, antelopes, buffaloes, etc.), live there.¹¹² Despite these assets, it is one of the poorest regions in the country. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Demography, the East comes last in terms of monetary wealth, access to basic services, household comfort and equipment, access to electricity and water, and health. In 2014, the literacy rate was 23.8 % in the region, compared to a national average of 34.5 %.¹¹³

“We are completely forgotten by the capital”, according to a local elected official, who believes that the East has “always been ignored, not to say despised, by the central government”.¹¹⁴ The data concerning the South-West and Centre-West regions are comparable¹¹⁵, even if the feeling of abandonment is less strong than in the East.

Across the border in Benin, the situation is much the same. In the Beninese north, which is very remote and poorly served by an inadequate road network, the literacy rate among young people is low (between 20 and 25 % in the department of Alibori, between 35 and 42 % in Atakora) compared with the national average (62 %). The poverty rate is very high (72 % in Alibori, 65 % in Atakora).¹¹⁶ A local elected official from a landlocked region near Malanville emphasised that

“the feeling of belonging to the Beninese nation is not always shared”.¹¹⁷ Another elected official in the same area believed that this feeling “is brand new”.¹¹⁸

For a long time, the inhabitants of some very remote areas were largely forgotten by the central power. “Compared to the rest of the country, border populations’ access level to basic socio-collective services is very low. The level of isolation is such that the populations have easier access to the markets of neighbouring countries than to the markets of the major consumption centres in Benin for the sale of their products”, notes a document entitled Politique nationale de développement des espaces frontaliers (PNDEF) [National Policy for the Development of Border Areas] of Benin produced in 2012.

Some of these areas have been (or still are) the subject of disputes between Benin and its neighbours. This is the case of the Koalou/Kourou district, claimed by Burkina and Benin. For years, the Beninese state did nothing for its inhabitants, while the Burkinabe government built schools and health centres there (see Focus). This is also the case, further east, on the border between Niger, Nigeria and Benin, in Madecali. For a long time, this area was ignored by Cotonou – there were no schools, police or health centres in the 2000s – so its inhabitants developed links with their Nigerian neighbours, who came to occupy land. In 2009, it was Nigeria that paved the road from Madecali to Lollo, the nearest Nigerian town. It was only when an iron deposit was discovered nearby that Beninese authorities began to take an interest in the place.¹¹⁹

To remedy these shortcomings, the government set up the Beninese Agency for the Integrated Management of Border Areas (ABeGIEF) in 2012. This agency, which has a broad remit and reports directly to the presidency, is aimed at “restoring a sense of belonging to Benin” in border area populations, by building infrastructure and implementing poverty reduction policies.¹²⁰ Since its creation, ABeGIEF has built 50 wells, 150 classrooms, markets, processing units, police stations, etc. The agency also plays a major role in the secu-

rity system: one of its key actions is the establishment of a Special Border Surveillance Unit (USSF), which has since been attached to the General Directorate of the Republican Police. Its results are praised by many local elected representatives, who admit that significant resources have been implemented and that they have changed the field’s vision of the State. However, they feel that much remains to be done.¹²¹

The feeling of abandonment by the state is generally not a sufficient reason to take up arms – at the very least it can lead some to be seduced by alternative paths, including the most radical. On the other hand, studies conducted in Mali and Niger in particular have shown that a feeling of injustice, or even insecurity, pushes groups of people to turn to armed movements that offer to “turn the tables” or simply to defend themselves.¹²² This feeling of injustice is very strong in eastern Burkina Faso, where the many prohibitions linked to protected areas are misunderstood and arouse anger, and also fear.

From this point of view, the situation in northern Benin is worrying. The six border districts in the north¹²³ (neighbouring Burkina Faso as well as Nigeria, Niger and Togo) are all strongly affected by the presence of the two national parks of W and Pendjari on their territory. In Banikoara, for example, the W occupies 49 % of the district’s area. In Tanguiéta, 3/4 of the district are Pendjari territory.¹²⁴ All human activity is prohibited in these parks. However, what was acceptable two or three decades ago, when the prohibitions were put in place, is no longer acceptable today, particularly due to population growth, climate change and certain public policies that favour the development of extensive agriculture: this fuels strong competition for access to natural resources, and in particular an intense competition for land. Two figures illustrate the insecurity of land tenure in the two northern departments, Alibori and Atakora: more than eight out of ten households do not have land titles, even though the overwhelming majority of the population (between 80 and 90 per cent) lives from agriculture, hunting or fishing.¹²⁵ “We understand the interest in protecting wildlife, but our leaders must understand

that we too must be protected”, emphasised an elected official from the Tanguiéta area.¹²⁶ Many of the people we spoke to during this survey said that the population did not understand these prohibitions. “Many people say that this land belongs to our ancestors, that they have always taken care of it, and that they do not understand why they are forbidden to enjoy it today”, emphasised a local facilitator.¹²⁷ “Saving the environment is a good thing. But what good is it if it means that humans will disappear?” asked a farmer from Banikoara.¹²⁸ A guide reminded us that these forests are often the “only heritage” of these populations: “If we take it away from them, what are they left with?”.¹²⁹

In the Pendjari, there are many frustrations: poachers, fishermen, farmers and herders have seen their activities strongly impacted by the arrival of the NGO African Parks Network (APN) as the park manager in August 2017. If the prohibitions were more or less the same before, when the park was administered by the National Centre for the Management of Wildlife Reserves (Cenagref), a public entity, “it was always possible to get along”, summarised an elected official in the area. Another mentioned a system based on “cohabitation”¹³⁰ – but also corruption. The authorities, for their part, describe Cenagref’s governance as “very sloppy”. Over time, farmers had crossed the park’s boundaries to cultivate, and poachers, fishermen and herders managed to reach an agreement with Cenagref officials to enter the park. This tolerance was necessary, according to the local population. On the Tanguiéta-Porga axis, which runs along the southern side of the park, the only source of water is the Maou River, which is located in the park. Cenagref used to allow more or less controlled access (fishing permits, controlled watering etc.) to these resources.

To put an end to these practices, the executive entrusted the management to the African Parks Network (APN) without going through a public procurement procedure. This quick decision and the lack of formality resulted in a more complicated acceptance of APN in the field: local people, members of village wildlife reserve management associations (AVIGREF¹³¹) and Cenagref agents felt

that they were being dispossessed, the former of their ancestral right to use forest resources, the latter of the power (and advantages) conferred by their status.

This feeling was heightened by APN’s first, very strict decisions. “Once we were in charge of the Pendjari, there had to be rigour and discipline”, explained a park official. “The first thing to do was to enforce the rules”.¹³² Very quickly, fishing on the Pendjari River was banned, poachers were hunted down, farmers and herders were chased out of the park, and hundreds of cattle were “vaccinated”, i.e. killed.¹³³ In 2018, an entire herd was decimated – nearly 450 head. “We were very tough”, admitted the manager; “our management was confrontational”. Another APN leader acknowledged in 2019 “a failed start”: “We missed our community positioning, we were a year and a half behind because we lacked skills”.¹³⁴ These measures caused the anger of the local population. In February 2018, demonstrators ransacked the APN offices in Tanguiéta. These incidents followed scuffles between hunters and APN rangers.

The kidnapping of the two French tourists and the murder of their Beninese guide in May 2019 marked a turning point. APN’s management realised that it had to change its governance, and in particular involve the local population, otherwise they would take up arms and perhaps even join the jihadists. From then on, the park management approached the former Cenagref agents, local elected officials and village associations for the management of wildlife reserves (AVIGREF), with which it established close collaboration. Above all, it has eased things by tolerating and accompanying the resumption of some of the activities it had banned. Fishing is now allowed, under the close control of APN agents. Cattle spotted in the park are no longer killed, only expelled, and arrested herders are no longer sent to jail.

“The park’s management realised that there was a great risk that the herders who had lost their herds would join the ranks of the jihadists or bandits”, said a herders’ representative.¹³⁵ Regular meetings are held with local people and APN funds projects to create income-generating activi-

ties – beekeeping, market gardening, fish farming and shea processing projects are supported, and some schools are subsidised. A peripheral action department now interfaces between the park and neighbouring communities. “Since APN changed its policy, the situation has calmed down”, said an AVIGREF official.¹³⁶ These measures are not appreciated by everyone in Cotonou. Some organisations would like the law to be strictly applied. But for APN, “it is out of the question to set a region on fire simply because standards are applied foolishly”.¹³⁷

However, tensions remain. Livestock farmers in the districts of Tanguiéta and Materi are impatient: APN promised the construction of eleven water points for livestock; only two boreholes had been built by the end of 2020.¹³⁸ They complain above all about the lack of land.

“The farmers have taken all the land outside the park”, said a representative of the Tanguiéta herders. “Three quarters of the district are in the park, we are stuck, we have nowhere to go. Before APN arrived, we could graze our cattle in the park. We could also take them to the ponds to water them. We managed to get along with CENAGREF. But this is no longer possible today. If we have nowhere to go, what will become of us?”¹³⁹

Such competition with farmers leads to recurrent tensions, sometimes resulting in armed clashes. In July 2020, two Fulani died in the village of Dayahoun (Materi district). The herders of this district deplore the lack of transhumance tracks, grazing areas and watering places. “What we lack is water”, explained one of them. Before, we could take our animals to drink in the park, because there are ponds. But now it’s forbidden. Our animals are dying of thirst”. They also noted that the land they occupy is increasingly coveted. “Some of us have been occupying land for 40 or 50 years. But from one day to the next, the indigenous people want it back. We can’t let ourselves be evicted like that. This leads to fights”.¹⁴⁰

In 2019, the Tanguieta herders’ representative gave the example of a Burkinabe herder he had received at his home: he had been caught in the park, sent to jail and his animals sold. “Once he goes back home to Burkina, with nothing, you can imagine what this will result in!” our interviewee exclaimed.¹⁴¹ The grievances are the same for farmers.

“We lack land, our children have nowhere to go. What’s more, the Fulani come into our fields and destroy our crops”, lamented one of them.¹⁴² In the villages along the Tanguiéta-Porga axis of the park, farmers also complain about the increasingly frequent intrusion of wild animals. A source within APN acknowledges that this is a “real problem”: now better protected, wildlife feels increasingly secure and tends to leave the park boundaries and encroach on crop fields. APN has undertaken the construction of 96 km of electrified fence to try to limit these incidents.¹⁴³ While this provision satisfies farmers, it raises ethical issues.

Cohabitation between the park and riverside communities is even more tense in the W. The park was established in 1952. For thirty years, people were more or less free to carry out activities there. It was only in the 1980s that prohibitions began to be applied. But as a farmer from Karimama summed up, “it was always possible to make arrangements” with Cenagref agents. By paying a sum that could amount to several hundred thousand XOF, herders were informally allowed to put their animals on the land, and farmers to grow cereals or cotton. When APN took over management of the park in October 2019, corruption stopped. The mistakes that had been made at the beginning in Pendjari were avoided. APN immediately approached AVIGREF and set up meetings and programmes to integrate local people into the management of the park and finance income-generating activities. Only on rare occasions did the rangers “vaccinate” cattle found inside park limits. APN also recruited local herdsmen to convince farmers to move their cattle out. Farmers with fields inside the park were able to harvest their crops before they had to move out. The park management is considering the establishment of a controlled

occupation zone within the park, in which only organic or pesticide-free farms would be allowed.

But the NGO has inherited an explosive situation. Unlike the Pendjari Park, the W has long been occupied by cattle. APN’s management has counted nearly 100,000 of them inside the park. And for good reason: as a herders’ representative pointed out, “the W is like an oasis in the desert. During the dry season, it is the only place in this region where you can find water, and therefore the only place where you can support your livestock. People are prepared to take a lot of risks to get in there”.¹⁴⁴ Today, APN admits that “the ox war is lost” and that it will be impossible to get them all out of the park.¹⁴⁵ Control is all the more illusory as the W has a large number of entrances. It is surrounded by more than 80 villages, compared to 22 in the Pendjari Park.

Demographic pressure is also very strong in this area. The population of Alibori increased from 450,000 in 1995 to almost one million in 2019 (more than half of whom are under 20). It could double in the next two decades.¹⁴⁶ According to a study commissioned by APN, nearly 400,000 people live in the districts directly adjacent to the park and its buffer zone.¹⁴⁷ Almost all of this population depends on space and natural resources. “Local cattle breeding, introduced for ploughing, now plays a considerable role in the economy and brings great pressure to the central area of the park”, notes this study. “The development of the agricultural front in the peripheral zone of the park is favoured by slash-and-burn cultivation practices and techniques, and the search for fertile land. In addition to the effects of such techniques, the growing appetite of farmers for Benin’s main cash crop (cotton) is pushing them to increase the area of land to the detriment of protected areas, including the W Benin Park”.¹⁴⁸

Over the years, the boundaries of the park have been eroded by the advancing agricultural front. The APN management estimates that 5 % of the park area is now under cultivation. In many villages, farmers have fields and even houses well beyond the buffer zone. This quest for land has also reduced the space for grazing and transhu-

mance routes. “In 1996, a buffer zone was established, but the farmers took it over. The herders therefore took refuge in the park”, said a community facilitator.¹⁴⁹ For many herders, leaving the park is like “jumping from the frying pan into the fire”: “Either you stay in the park and are chased by the rangers, or you leave and are chased by the farmers”, summarised one of them.¹⁵⁰ This leads to explosive situations, particularly in the districts of Malanville and Karimama.

Karimama is squeezed between the park on one side and the border with Niger on the other, represented by the Niger River. The populations have to live together on a strip of land about 15 km long and 5 km wide. “It’s that simple: there’s hardly any land left”, said a local politician.¹⁵¹ As population grew in recent years, as villages became towns and settlements large villages, crop fields multiplied and livestock increased in size. Herders had to adapt by grazing their cattle in the hills. But the farmers eventually colonised these hills, which pushed the herders into the park. Today, the herders are trapped. “We don’t know where to go anymore”, said a representative of the Karimama herders; “this is an old injustice that goes back to colonisation times, when everything was reserved for farmers. This continued after independence. Everything is done for agriculture. The Cenagref granted us a grazing area in the district a few years ago, but the farmers ‘ate it up’ with the support of the municipality. They say that the fields don’t move, it’s the oxen that move, but today they are the ones who come to clear the grazing areas, it’s no longer us who go to the fields, it’s them who come to us”.¹⁵² For one traditional chief, the situation is explosive, especially in the pre-harvest period (October and November), when transhumance has already begun. He spoke of a coming “war” linked to “land grab” by the farmers.¹⁵³

Tensions are also high in the district of Banikoara. Here, most farmers live from cotton. The communal union of village cooperatives (UCOM) lists 23,000 cotton farmers who produced 174,000 tonnes in the 2019–2020 season, making it the most productive district in the country. After ploughing for years below 350,000 tonnes, Benin’s

production has rocketed in recent years, due to the determination of President Patrice Talon, a former tycoon in the sector, to make his country the leading cotton producer in West Africa. In four years, production has more than doubled.

In 2019, Benin produced 712,000 tonnes, which brought in almost 13 billion XOF [≈20 m EUR] for the state. Encouraged by the government, many farmers have converted to cotton in the north. According to a UCOM official, cotton “doesn’t allow you to make a decent living, but it’s impossible to do anything else because you get subsidies for buying inputs in particular. If you grow soy or rice, who will advance you the money? Nobody”.¹⁵⁴ This dependence on aid is not the only negative effect of this national policy. As cotton requires a lot of space, it has also led to a spectacular race for land, which has reduced the space available for livestock and increased the risk of conflict between livestock farmers and agriculturists – especially as overuse of chemicals in cotton cultivation has consequences for animal health, and yield in particular.

While this phenomenon is noticeable throughout Alibori, it is particularly strong in the district of Banikoara. The herders no longer feel at home there. “Before, during the rainy season, we stayed in Banikoara. Now we have to go elsewhere, to Kérou, where there are mountains and where the animals can stay”, said a herders’ representative. In 1999, UCOPER, a communal organisation of livestock farmers, had 125,000 cattle in the district. Today, there are only 50,000.¹⁵⁵

In this context, tensions between herders and farmers are likely to escalate at any time. People talk about killings every two or three years. Each time, things start with a dispute between a farmer and a herder. The former accuses the latter of having let his oxen destroy his field. A fight ends in death. Community reprisals follow. As the study commissioned by APN and Cenagref notes, activities in this area often correspond to community membership: “Agro-herder families are mainly from the Bariba (37 % of the population of the Alibori department in 2013) and Dendi (20.1 %) ethnic groups. Agro-pastoralist families are gen-

erally of the Fulani (Foulbé) group, representing 26.5 % of the population of Alibori department in 2013. This cultural differentiation is not strict or precise, but gives an idea of the socio-economic distribution of the different riparian groups in the W Benin Park.”

When a conflict breaks out, it often takes an ethnic turn, as in Goungouon, a village on the edge of the park in the Guéné district, in June 2020. It all started with a relatively banal dispute: a Dendi farmer blamed two Fulani herdsman for letting their cattle enter his field. A fight broke out. The farmer was hit with a machete and died. In the following days, several Fulani camps were attacked by Dendi. Eight Fulani were killed. “We have many such conflicts here, especially in the buffer zone”, said a local politician. “The problem is that farmers are attracted to the fertile land in this area, while the herders were already there”. In July 2016, 17 people were killed in the village of Kangara following a dispute between a farmer and a herder. Conflicts of this kind have also led to human deaths in northwest Benin and elsewhere in the sub-region.

In March 2016, at least 33 people were killed and 52 wounded in inter-community Lobi/Fulani clashes in Bouna, north-east Côte d’Ivoire, following a dispute over cattle roaming. The killing caused the displacement of more than 2,500 people. Over the past decade, tensions have increased between Fulani herders, Lobi farmers and Koulango “natives” in the north-east. “Land conflicts have taken two interrelated forms. First, as elsewhere in West Africa, environmental change, population growth and reduced access to land have led to land conflicts in this part of Côte d’Ivoire between Fulani herders and Lobi farmers. However, conflicts between farmers and herders are also closely linked to conflicts over autochthony between Koulango and Lobi, due to the massive influx of Lobi migrants from Burkina Faso during the 20th century”, notes Jeremy Speight in a study on Bouna.¹⁵⁶

In northern Benin, as in most of southern Burkina and northern Côte d’Ivoire, community tensions are exacerbated by transhumance-related con-

flicts. In eastern Burkina Faso, herders’ associations note that transhumance tracks are not respected. Farmers are extending their fields. Sometimes the state erects buildings there. In a report on the issue in 2009, the Communication Network on Pastoralism (Recopa) noted these difficulties: “Transhumance corridors and access corridors are thus suddenly obstructed by the farmer from one agricultural season to the next without the pastoralist coming from a country or another locality being informed, so he suddenly finds himself in a sort of ‘dead end’. (...) The herder who is unable to bypass this space and sees his animals committing damage there is automatically at fault, and he has to pay damages. If he refuses to meet this obligation, he is either physically attacked or stripped of his livestock. Hence the conflicts that arise between groups: farmers on the one hand and livestock breeders on the other”.¹⁵⁷

Herders in northern Benin have made the same observation. Obstructed tracks, transhumance corridors not respected by farmers: the difficulties accumulate and lead to numerous conflicts. A number of herders believe that cross-border transhumance should be stopped¹⁵⁸ because, in their view, it is the passing herders who cause most of the conflicts. “They let their animals destroy fields, then they leave, and it is the Fulani of Benin who pay the consequences later”, said one of them.¹⁵⁹ For their part, the farmers blame the herders for letting their animals enter their fields and ruin them. “Often the transhumance takes place just before the harvest. When a herd destroys a field, a whole year’s harvest is lost”, explained one of them.¹⁶⁰ In northern Benin, transhumance is made even more complicated by the fact that it is forbidden in the two national parks of W and Pendjari. This reduces the possibilities for pastoralists and increases the risk of conflict on the tracks on the edge of parks.

In addition to the conflicts and acts of banditry that transhumance gives rise to, the authorities believe that it is a potential factor of insecurity with regard to the jihadist threat.¹⁶¹ Most transhumant herders actually come from countries experiencing jihadist insurgencies: Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. Although this was not the

main reason why Cotonou banned cross-border transhumance in 2020, it was nevertheless a factor. This decision has provoked much criticism among the Fulani. While many associations recognise that it may have been necessary, they feel that nothing was done to facilitate internal transhumance and that once again “it is the Fulani that are being singled out”. Authorities state that infrastructure has been or will be built: new, more visible beacons, grazing areas, water points, etc. But the herders say they have not noticed them. “Everything is done for the herders not to be a disturbance, but nothing is done to help them carry out their activity,” said a Fulani association representative.¹⁶²

In this context, the Fulani of Benin, like their cousins in Sahelian countries, have developed a sense of injustice and a victim discourse. Many of them feel that they are considered at best as second-class citizens, at worst as foreigners. Some use terms such as “ethnic cleansing” or “genocide”. These verbal exaggerations illustrate the fears of the Fulani community. As in other countries in the region, this community has had little education. It is relatively absent from the civil service and has few elected officials, either at national or local level. In the district of Malanville, for example, there is only one Fulani elected official. “No one represents us, so no one defends us”, said the president of a Fulani association.¹⁶³ Moreover, few Fulani have joined the defence forces.

Although there are many associations representing Fulani or herders, they sometimes have difficulty being heard by public authorities. It is not uncommon to hear grievances from the population, but also from elected representatives, who equate the Fulani with bandits, robbers and jihadists. “It is true that many of our people are involved in crime, but that is no reason to generalise about it”, said an irritated leader of a Fulani association.¹⁶⁴ Sometimes it is state representatives who make stigmatising statements about the Fulani.¹⁶⁵ “There is a big rift between the state and this community”, admitted an elected official from Alibori, who recalled that many Fulani do not have identity papers.¹⁶⁶ The management of the W Park is well aware of this: this is why it has undertaken aware-

ness-raising work with herders and is trying to find solutions with them. In particular, APN is considering establishing grazing zones at the park borders. The authorities are trying to organise internal transhumance and help herders to settle down.

The reason why so much attention is being paid to the situation of the Fulani is that there is great fear that some of them will join the ranks of jihadist groups, who have recruited extensively from this community in Mali, Niger and Burkina. Experience shows that they recruit from vulnerable populations, and that they are more likely to establish themselves in an area where there is community conflict. In central and northern Mali, western Niger, northern and eastern Burkina Faso, and the Lake Chad basin, they have demonstrated their ability to identify local conflicts and use them to recruit and establish themselves in certain communities. This is why their struggle sometimes takes the form of armed insurgencies against the central government, social or economic injustices, or traditional local governance frameworks. The struggle can also develop into a communal conflict, even if the discourse of these groups aims to overcome ethnic divisions.

The ISS study cited above notes that their attitude to local conflicts “varies according to the context”. They can be directly involved in confrontations or they can play the role of mediators. Their positioning “seems to be influenced by several parameters related to their needs and strategies, including their level of penetration within the communities, the sociological composition of the group and of the local communities, or the balance of power between the protagonists in conflict”.¹⁶⁷ Such pragmatism allows them to adapt to the different areas in which they interact. Beninese authorities fear that the same will happen in Benin. Historically, the Fulani of Benin have close links with those of Niger and Burkina. Northern Benin is also an important transhumance route for herders from Mali and Niger – as well as Nigeria. It is therefore not impossible that some of them are in contact with jihadists. For the moment, however, there is little verified information to support this theory. Most of the people we met during this survey believe that few Fulani from Benin have joined armed groups.

However, it is not only the Fulani the authorities are worried about. Jihadist groups recruit from all communities. In eastern Burkina, they have Fulani, but also Gourmantché and Mossi in their ranks. In the south-west, they have recruited from all communities. As mentioned above, poachers from Atakora have links with jihadists in Burkina and some may have adopted their ideology. But those are not Fulani.

The weight of religion in the North also attracts the attention of authorities. The vast majority of studies on the jihadist phenomenon in the Sahara-Sahel region show that religious motivations are not among the main reasons for joining armed extremist movements. It appears that most jihadists were guided by quite different convictions when they joined, and that they were often caught up in a rash choice or a bad encounter, and that some had been forced to join the insurgents.¹⁶⁸ The entrenchment of jihadist groups in eastern Burkina shows that the religious context is often secondary. In this region, Islam is certainly the majority religion, but it is far from being hegemonic: according to the 2006 census, Muslims represented 38 % of the population at the time, animists 30 % (they are particularly numerous in Tapoa) and Christians 29 %.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, radical discourse was relatively rare before the arrival of the jihadists.

However, the very essence of these groups is religious, and their aim is to establish a regime based on their own vision of Sharia law. Moreover, the first elements of a budding cell – those who are commissioned by the leaders – are often immersed in radical Salafist ideology. The environment in which they try to thrive cannot therefore be totally impervious to these considerations. Experience shows that these groups rely in particular on certain networks to recruit – the medersas are pools of potential recruits, and the talibé (schoolboys) represent an inexhaustible source of future fighters.

Radical discourse is relatively rare in Benin, where Sufism is dominant among Muslims.¹⁷⁰ Most of the religious dignitaries met during this survey are confident. For them, Islam as practised in Benin cannot lead to violence. However, they admit that

there have been tensions between the different Islamic currents in the last fifteen years.¹⁷¹ Similarly, several interviewees consider that religious coexistence is a brake on radicalisation. “Here, all religions accept each other, there is no fanaticism”, said an imam.¹⁷² However, the example of Burkina Faso, where the different religious communities have lived together for generations, and not just side by side¹⁷³, shows that peaceful coexistence of religions is not a comprehensive insurance against the emergence of armed jihadist groups.

A study commissioned by the European Union on the subject, conducted in the four northern departments (Atakora, Alibori, Borgou and Donga) in 2018, notes that “radicalisation is uniformly described as a process that grows gradually” in Benin. Quoted in the study, a religious leader in the town of Djougou notes that “among some Muslims, there is a certain fanaticism or radicalism. Either you are with them or you are not. And those who are not with them are pagans, they consider them as those who do not believe in God and are doomed to go to hell”.

These tensions are particularly acute in the towns of Malanville, Tanguiéta, Djougou and Kandi.¹⁷⁴ For the time being, the attacks remain verbal – during Friday preaching or in certain radio broadcasts. In Malanville and Kandi, they oppose the followers of the Tidjaniyya to the members of the Dan Izala movement, or Yan Izala (meaning “the people of Izala” in Hausa), in reference to the Jama atu izalatu bid’a wa iqamat al sunna (“those who reject innovations while advocating orthodoxy”), a Salafist-inspired movement founded in the north of Nigeria in the 1970s. A religious dignitary from Kandi, a member of the Izala movement, explained that he did not recognise the legitimacy of the Sufi currents practised in West Africa: “There is only one Islam, which is Sunnism. Tidjaniyya is the name of a person, Tidjani. We don’t follow a person. A thousand years separate Tidjani from the Prophet”.

As noted in the study cited above, the Izala are fewer in number, but they include the elites trained in modern universities and institutes

in Arab countries. “These elites are promoters of NGOs and engaged in humanitarian actions thanks to funding from the Arab countries where they studied. Their geographical, social and ideological proximity to Nigeria and Niger favours interconnections with their counterparts in these countries. Most Izala leaders are of Nigerian, Niger or Malian origin. The organisation of joint preaching on both sides of the three countries (Benin, Niger, Nigeria), and invitations to preachers from these countries are so many means of disseminating radicalising ideologies and attitudes. In a more general way, Arabists who have studied in the Gulf countries prepare themselves, when they return to their country, “to go to ‘holy war’ (jihad) against their elders who are considered to be misguided”, as Galilou Abdoulaye demonstrated in 2003 in a study on Beninese graduates of Arab-Islamic universities.¹⁷⁵

In Kandi, the authorities have regularly noted a rise in fever since the Izala appeared about ten years ago. “They sometimes make quite violent speeches”, said an elected official. But the main concern of local authorities is the proliferation of mosques and Koranic schools. “We are witnessing a real race to the mosque. Every neighbourhood wants its own. We are unable to control who finances them and what is said there”, deplored this same elected official.¹⁷⁶ Hundreds of mosques have been built in the country over the past three decades – the phenomenon is particularly visible in the department of Donga. Their erection is often accompanied by the construction of a school or a well. “In itself, this is a good thing. But we don’t know why these people are doing this, nor what happens and is said inside these complexes. But they attract a lot of young people, sometimes by promising them a job or a small amount of money”, said a security source.¹⁷⁷

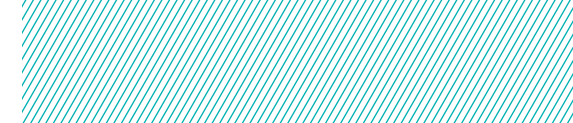
These projects are financed by NGOs from the Gulf, mainly Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, as well as Turkey, and are the work of religious dignitaries or ordinary citizens who have mostly studied in these countries. Efforts have been made to try to control these constructions. But the authorities admit that it is very difficult to know who is financing what, and especially why. X. is a figure in the Izala movement in Kandi. He never went to state school. He studied in Koranic schools and then in Islamic universities in Niger, Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates. When he returned to Benin, he could not find a job. A man he had met in the Gulf suggested that he set up a local NGO to fund the construction of mosques through sponsorship. For him, this was “a good thing”. Between 2006 and 2012, he estimated that he built around 100 mosques and 300 wells. Until the day he received a call from the bank. “They asked me where the money came from. I didn’t know. The banker told me that money is like a weapon. It made me think”.¹⁷⁸

The study commissioned by the EU notes that there is “a worrying indoctrination of young people, particularly talibés and other Koranic pupils”. Moreover, “the proliferation of the phenomenon of talibé children offers a fertile ground for indoctrination and radicalisation”. This phenomenon is particularly sensitive in Atakora, where many children are sent to Koranic schools in Togo.

In conclusion, however, the study recalls that “radicalisation does not originate from religion; it is grafted onto it in an opportunistic manner and adapts itself because of the existence of fertile ground resulting from societal disorder and/or the lack of open-mindedness of social actors”.¹⁷⁹

- 57 In November 2015, Niger security forces arrested seven men who were in contact with fighters from North Tillabéri, alleged members of what was still known as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), some elements of which have since joined the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). At the time, the authorities suspected them of wanting to make this forest their sanctuary, while offering them the opportunity to kidnap Western tourists. Military operations carried out on both sides of the Niger/Burkina border made it possible to chase them out of the area. But they returned in 2018.
- 58 Interview with a Dozo leader, Gaoua, Burkina Faso, 03/12/20.
- 59 Interview with a security official, Gaoua, Burkina Faso, 03/12/20.
- 60 Interview with a security official, Gaoua, Burkina Faso, 03/12/20.
- 61 Interviews with eco-guides, Kandi, 25/10/20, Tanguiéta, Benin, 02/11/20.
- 62 Interview with an eco-guard, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 27/11/20.
- 63 Interview with an army official, Natitingou, 04/11/20.
- 64 Interview with a researcher, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, December 2018.
- 65 According to the Water and Forestry Department, the benefits of the concession of hunting areas to private operators are distributed as follows: approximately 60 % for the concessionaires, 25 % for the state and 15 % for the population. In practice, however, the benefits are much less for the districts. The mayor of a municipality in which there are several hunting camps claims that they brought in a total of 120,000 CFA francs (XOF) [≈183 EUR] into the coffers of his municipality in 2017.
- 66 Interview with a local elected official, Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 67 Herders’ representatives refer to the very high level of corruption among state agents, particularly Water and Forestry agents and the forces of law and order (gendarmes and police), who are accused of racketeering herders. “Last May”, explained a Fulani dignitary in 2018, “a shepherd who owned thirteen oxen cut a branch. He had the right to do so because it was on a track reserved for pastoralism. But the Water and Forestry agents still demanded a fine of 450,000 XOF [≈686 EUR], and told him that if he did not pay, he would spend three months in the dungeon. If he had sold his thirteen oxen, he would have got just about 500,000 XOF [≈762 EUR]. The shepherd called me. I called the agent. I told him that it was because of this kind of practice that villagers were joining the jihadists. In the end, they took 100,000 XOF [≈152 EUR], from him. These things happen every day.” Interview conducted in Fada N’Gourma, November 2018.
- 68 Interview with a local elected official, Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 69 Interview with the office of an association working with herders, Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso, 29/11/20.
- 70 Interview with a Water and Forestry official, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 02/12/20.
- 71 Interview with representatives of livestock breeders, Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 72 Interview with an inhabitant of Madjoari, Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 73 Interview with a traditional leader, Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 74 Reclaiming the Gold Rush in the Central Sahel. International Crisis Group, Africa Report No. 282, November 2019.
- 75 National survey on the gold panning sector (ENSO), National Institute of Statistics and Demography, Ouagadougou, September 2017.
- 76 “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma”. William Assanvo, Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga. Institute for Security Studies, December 2019.
- 77 Other trafficking areas in the region: Mandouri in Togo and Bawku, Garu, Zebilla in Ghana.
- 78 Interview with a Water and Forestry Department official, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 27/11/12.
- 79 Interview with a businessman, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 28/12/20.
- 80 The experts add: “All the trucks were driven at night, well after the curfew hours, and none were under customs escort. They left in the direction of Ouagadougou or Kompiegna, to leave Burkina Faso and enter Togo. The latter hypothesis would be true for four trucks carrying Yes cigarettes and two trucks carrying cigarettes of both brands, as they were seen again in Sinkassé the next morning after leaving Niadibou during the night. Sinkassé is in the extreme north-west of Togo, on the borders with Burkina Faso and Ghana. From there, the goods entered northern Ghana, where they were unloaded at a warehouse in Widana and illegally forwarded by motorbike to locations in Ghana, Togo and Burkina Faso. It is not known whether the other six trucks followed the same route or if some went directly to Ouagadougou, like the one intercepted on 16th April 2019.” Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, whose mandate was renewed pursuant to resolution 2484 (2019).
- 81 Interview with a local elected official, Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 82 According to a confidential study conducted by an industry stakeholder, based on estimates, the volume of fraud in 2018 in the sub-region amounted to 759 containers, representing a turnover of 316 billion XOF [≈48,187,000 EUR], and tax losses of 100 billion XOF [≈152,490,800 EUR] for the states.
- 83 Interview with an NGO leader, Kandi, Benin, 28/10/20. For security reasons, we do not name the NGO.
- 84 In Benin, the price of a kilogram of ivory varies between 150,000 and 160,000 XOF [≈228 and 244 EUR].
- 85 Interview with the head of an anti-poaching NGO, Ouagadougou, 27/11/20.
- 86 “Reclaiming the Gold Rush in Central Sahel”. Africa Report No. 282, International Crisis Group, 13th November 2019. According to this study, “artisanal production now represents nearly 50 per cent of the volumes produced industrially. It is estimated to reach 20 to 50 tonnes per year in Mali, 10 to 30 tonnes in Burkina Faso and 10 to 15 tonnes in Niger, representing a global monetary value of between \$1.9 and \$4.5 billion per year, if one refers to the world price of gold. Most of it is exported to Dubai, which reports \$1.9 billion in gold imports from these countries (plus Togo). In these three countries, more than two million people are directly involved in small-scale gold panning: one million in Burkina Faso, 700,000 in Mali and 300,000 in Niger, according to Crisis Group estimates. The number of indirect jobs could be three times higher.”
- 87 Interviews with security force officials, Accra, Ghana, January 2021.
- 88 National Enquiry on the Gold Panning Sector (ENSO), National Institute for Statistics and Demography, Ouagadougou, September 2017.
- 89 See the Berne Declaration investigation published in September 2015: “A Golden Racket. The True Source of Switzerland’s ‘Togolese’ gold”. It shows how Togo is laundering Burkinabe gold and then exporting it to Switzerland.
- 90 “This hypothesis seems rather unlikely today in the area concerned by this survey, for the simple reason that these sites are most often managed by the villagers themselves, in collaboration with the gold panners, and that they derive a clear benefit from them: they therefore have no interest in losing control of them, or even in sharing them. Several sources in Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso tell the same story: men with equipment go to a site, usually on behalf of a funder, and often on the basis of information from geological surveys or search permits granted by the state to companies, and when they find gold, they report it to the chief of the village concerned; negotiations then begin between the villagers and the gold panners to share the profits, based on a percentage of the production; the one who has found the gold becomes the chief of the site, but he co-administers it with the village chief and the Dozos, who are also paid on a percentage basis to ensure its security”, we wrote in 2020, in “A new Tri-border Area? Jihadist Threat Extension to the Borders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d’Ivoire”. [Note 2]
- 91 Interview with a security official, Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, November 2020.
- 92 “The function of these guards, in reality, is said to be that of an ‘economic police’: they are recruited to defend the interests of the buying and selling companies, ensuring that there is no fraud – that is, to limit the clandestine marketing of gold mined in the vicinity of the site”, say Luigi Arnaldi di Balme and Cristiano Lanzano, in: “Entrepreneurs de la frontière: le rôle des comptoirs privés dans les sites d’extraction artisanale de l’or au Burkina Faso” [Frontier Entrepreneurs: The Role of Private Trading Posts in Small-scale Gold panning Sites in Burkina Faso], Karthala, Politique Africaine, 2013/3, No. 131.
- 93 Interview with a representative of the Gaoua gold panners, Gaoua, Burkina Faso, 04/12/20.
- 94 In all, the study counted 448 sites throughout the country. There were 34 in Hauts-Bassins and 25 in Cascades.
- 95 The South-West thus accounts for 50 % of national production.
- 96 “A new Tri-border Area? Jihadist Threat Extension to the Borders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d’Ivoire”. Promediation Analysis Report, January 2020. [Note 2]
- 97 Interview with a representative of the Gaoua gold panners, Gaoua, Burkina Faso, 04/12/20.
- 98 “Re-framing the Mining Industry in Burkina Faso: Towards a Contextualised Approach”. Alfonso Medinilla, Poorva Karkare and Tongnoma Zongo, European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), May 2020.
- 99 “The West African El Dorado. Mapping the Illicit Gold Trade in Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso”. Alan Martin and Hélène Helbig de Balzac, Partnership Africa Canada, January 2017. According to this study, “Artisanal gold panning takes place in 24 of the 31 regions of Côte d’Ivoire. Most of the activity is located around Bouaké and Katiola, where the Ministry of Industry and Mines has identified 28 gold panning areas. The government calculates that there are at least 500,000 small-scale gold panners [...] The networks established by fighters and gold traders during the war in Côte d’Ivoire still have influence. Former commanders of the zones continue to benefit from smuggling and from the parallel tax regime linked to the artisanal gold sector. However, they now work with intermediaries, according to a military source in Bouaké, Côte d’Ivoire. During the civil war, Ivorian gold was smuggled to Mali and Ghana, but Burkina Faso was the easiest and safest route for the Forces Nouvelles, since the fighters were protected by Burkina Faso’s president [Blaise] Compaoré”.
- 100 “Tri-border Transit Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso-Côte d’Ivoire-Mali Region”. Roberto Sollazzo and Matthias Nowak, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, October 2020. “In recent years, trafficking in illicit goods and firearms has increased in the sub-region. At the same time, the capacity of local governments to monitor and control their borders and limit smuggling and trafficking has stagnated or even declined”, the authors note. They note that trafficking (in arms and other commodities) is very high in the area.
- 101 Final report of the Group of Experts on Côte d’Ivoire prepared pursuant to paragraph 27 of Security Council Resolution 2153 (2014).
- 102 In April 2015, customs officers in Pô seized a vehicle from Ghana carrying 250 kg of explosives, 200 kg of detonators and five jerrycans of cyanide, probably destined for gold panning. In 2016, police in Pô seized 100 kg of cannabis and 10,000 explosive charges from Ghana.
- 103 Interview with a herders’ representative, Fada N’Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 104 “To be brought to market, livestock are entrusted to accomplices, who are allowed to operate in the marketing circuit, for example through a membership card in a livestock traders’ association. They sell the livestock before handing over the proceeds to the agents. Stolen cattle are also sold, usually at below-market prices, to complicit butchers who do not investigate their origin and hastily slaughter them to sell their meat. This is how the stolen cattle are “laundered”, notes ISS in “Violent Extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma”. William Assanvo, Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga, Institute for Security Studies, December 2019.
- 105 In the north, an estimated 2,000 head of livestock were stolen in 2019 and 2020. This figure is not exhaustive and is underestimated by at least half. Interview with an intelligence official, Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, 08/12/20.

- 106 Interview with an intelligence official, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 08/12/20.
- 107 Some of the farmers living near the W have taken to letting their herds graze in the park without any supervision. Either they let their cattle loose in the morning in the park, and come to collect them in the evening, in the same place. Or they let them roam, only joining them at night to avoid detection and arrest.
- 108 Interview with an intelligence official, Cotonou, Benin, 20/10/20.
- 109 Interview with a responsible from the police, Tanguieta, Bénin, 01/11/20.
- 110 Interview with a local elected official, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 02/12/20.
- 111 Interview with administrative officer, Natitingou, 03/11/20.
- 112 According to the Water and Forestry Division, 70 % of the country's wildlife potential is found in the eastern region.
- 113 In 2008, the National Institute of Statistics and Demography stated: “While there should normally be 15,233 students per 100,000 inhabitants in the Eastern region, the reality is far from what it should be. In fact, there are only 25 students per 100,000 inhabitants. The differences between men and women are very pronounced. For example, in the region as a whole, there were 36 male students for every 100,000 men, compared to 14 female students for every 100,000 women”.
- 114 Interview with a local elected official, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 29/11/20.
- 115 Source: Statistical Yearbook 2018 (published in November 2019). National Institute of Statistics and Demography.
- 116 Sources: National Institute for Statistics and Economic Analysis.
- 117 Interview with a local elected official, Malanville, Benin, 28/10/20.
- 118 Interview with a local elected official, Malanville, Benin, 27/10/20.
- 119 The potential of the Madecali iron deposit is estimated at 240 million tonnes. Another deposit has been identified further east, at Loumbou-Loumbou, in the district of Karimama. Its potential is estimated at 266 million tonnes. None of these deposits are currently being exploited.
- 120 Interview with ABeGIEF Executive Director, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20. “When you leave a town in Benin to go to a border area, EVERYTHING changes! From the climate to the infrastructures and including the populations who live in a disconcerting precariousness. Mile after mile, you will see roads that are degraded and impassable, the absence of electricity and drinking water, houses that are increasingly outdated and uninhabitable, people who are increasingly destitute, visibly poor and without hope...”, reads the ABeGIEF website.
- 121 The discontent of a section of the northerners is particularly sensitive in this pre-electoral period. Civil society stakeholders believe that Patrice Talon, a native of the south, has favoured the south, unlike his predecessor Thomas Boni Yayi, a native of the north. “For the past five years, the north has been suffering,” said a traditional chief from Kandi. Interview conducted in Kandi, 25/10/20. Patrice Talon was elected in 2016 and will put his presidential mandate back on the line on 11th April 2021.
- 122 See in particular: “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment”, UNDP, 2017; “Young ‘jihadists’ in Mali: Guided by faith or by circumstances?” Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni and William Assanvo, Analysis Note, Institute for Security Studies, August 2016. The latter study shows that “factors that have nothing to do with economics, religion or ideology explain the presence of young people in the ranks of armed jihadist groups [...] The desire to protect oneself, one’s family, one’s community or one’s economic activity appears to be one of the important factors of commitment”.
- 123 These are, from east to west, Malanville, Karimama, Banikoara, Kérou, Tanguiéta and Materi.
- 124 There are also many other forests in the north. Although listed, these forests are very often exploited by humans: poaching, wood cutting, breeding, etc.
- 125 Sources: National Institute for Statistics and Economic Analysis.
- 126 Interview with a local elected official, Tanguiéta, Benin, 02/11/20.
- 127 Interview with a local facilitator, Tanguiéta, Benin, 02/11/20.
- 128 Interview with a representative of cotton producers, Banikoara, Benin, 30/10/20.
- 129 Interview with a guide in Pendjari Park, Tanguiéta, Benin, 01/11/20.
- 130 Interview with a local elected official, Tanguiéta, Benin, 02/11/20.
- 131 These associations were set up in 1996 for Pendjari and in 2002 for W, in association with CENAGREF. They contribute to the socio-economic development of the communities living around the park and the sustainable management of resources around and in the park. They play a role in monitoring, community projects, promotion of income-generating activities to compensate for the loss of resources linked to the park for the populations and are called upon to settle, after investigation, disputes linked to park boundaries. AVIGREF is theoretically represented when guards make arrests in the park, with a role of control and equity. In the W, AVIGREF received 30 % of the park's revenues when it was managed by CENAGREF, as well as grants from donors. With APN, it no longer receives a share of the revenues, but has an annual budget allocated to it by the NGO. In the Pendjari, AVIGREF (which claims 3,000 members and 20 employees) submits a budget that is jointly decided and financed by APN. Although AVIGREF is an effective player appreciated by the communities, its operations are not simple. All social and professional strata are – in theory – represented. But in reality, the Fulani are hardly represented at all. Tensions also exist between AVIGREF and the district's representatives, whose electoral views sometimes lead them to downplay the protection of the park. As for local authorities, they may see AVIGREF as a restriction of their own remit and missions, since under Beninese law, natural resources are the responsibility of the districts. The Pendjari Park is an exception since it is not under the responsibility of the districts of Tanguieta and Materi. It is directly under the authority of the State and AVIGREF is the direct contact for the Park.
- 132 Interview with a Pendjari Park manager, Natitingou, Bénin, 04/11/20.
- 133 According to a security source, APN rangers killed at least 2,000 cattle in the Pendjari Park. Interview with an intelligence officer, Cotonou, Benin, 20/10/20.
- 134 Interview with an APN Benin official, Cotonou, Benin, July 2019.
- 135 Interview with a herders' representative, Parakou, Benin, 24/10/20. According to several herders' representatives, there is a great risk that some of the pastoral youth will join armed groups. “Many did not go to school or dropped out too early. And unemployment is high. Not all young people are behind the cattle in the north”, said one of them. Interview conducted in Parakou, Benin, 24/10/20.
- 136 Interview with an AVIGREF Pendjari leader, Tanguiéta, Benin, 01/11/20.
- 137 Interview with an APN official, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 138 The population expect a lot of APN, particularly in terms of building schools, health centres and boreholes. Interviews with several local elected officials, Tanguiéta, Materi, Malanville. Benin, October and November 2020.
- 139 Meeting with livestock farmers in the Tanguiéta district, Tanguiéta, Benin, 02/11/20.
- 140 Meeting with livestock farmers in the Materi district, Materi, Benin, 02/11/20.
- 141 Interview with a representative of Tanguiéta livestock farmers, Tanguiéta, Benin, July 2019.
- 142 Interview with a farmer, Dassari, Benin, 02/11/20.
- 143 A dozen access doors are also planned.
- 144 Interview with a livestock association leader, Parakou, Benin, 24/10/20.
- 145 Interview with a W Park management official, Alfakoara, Benin, 26/10/20.
- 146 Interview with APN Benin management, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 147 The buffer zone is a 5 km strip within the park in which human activities are tolerated: 2 km for agriculture, 2 km for livestock and 1 km for traditional activities.
- 148 “État des lieux de la périphérie du complexe du parc national W Bénin” [Taking Stock of Benin W National Park Complex Periphery], Eric van Sprundel, Bode Sambo, Issifou Sambo Alou, Cenagref-APN, February–March 2019.
- 149 Interview with an APN community facilitator, Guéné, Benin, 27/10/20.
- 150 Meeting with livestock farmers in the district of Kandi, Kandi, Benin, 25/10/20.
- 151 Telephone interview with a local elected official, Paris, 09/01/21.
- 152 Interview with livestock farmers in Karimama, Malanville, Benin, 26/10/20.
- 153 Interview with a Fulani traditional leader, Malanville, Benin, 28/10/20.
- 154 Meeting with UCOM officials, Banikoara, Benin, 30/10/20.
- 155 Interview with a herder leader, Banikoara, Benin, 30/10/20.
- 156 “Bouna, une ‘instabilité permanente’? Foncier, autorité et violence post-conflit en Côte d'Ivoire dans la longue durée” [Bouna, a “Permanent Instability”? Land Tenure, Authority and Post-conflict Violence in Côte d'Ivoire over the Long Term]. Jeremy Speight, Afrique Contemporaine 2017/3, No. 263–264.
- 157 “Expérience du Recopa sur la sécurisation de la mobilité pastorale dans la région Est du Burkina Faso, 2001–2007” [Recopa's Experience in Securing Pastoral Mobility in the Eastern Region of Burkina Faso, 2001–2007]. Recopa, May 2009.
- 158 There is actually a great deal of complexity in the transhumant community in Benin, which is sometimes seen by outsiders as a homogeneous whole. Some herders have been in Benin for several decades, others less; most nevertheless remain on the move, including on Beninese territory; they may return to their “country of origin” and then come back. Some are considered sedentary, or even local. Between these different layers there are relationships that can seem ambivalent, between solidarity based on community membership and common professional activity, and rivalry and animosity when it comes to defending an attachment and legitimacy to be in a territory where space is at a premium.
- 159 Interview with a herder, Malanville, Benin, 28/10/20.
- 160 Interview with a community animator, Alfakoara, Benin, 27/10/20.
- 161 “Transhumance is the main security challenge in Benin. It gives rise to many acts of banditry, such as robberies and kidnappings. For us, it can be a factor that pushes people towards violent extremism”, said a minister. Interview conducted in Cotonou, 23/10/20.
- 162 Interview with representatives of Fulani associations, Cotonou, Benin, 20/10/20.
- 163 Interview with representatives of Fulani associations, Cotonou, Benin, 20/10/20.
- 164 Interview with representatives of Fulani associations, Cotonou, 20/10/20. According to police officials in the regions visited, Fulani constitute the majority of the members of criminal gangs who carry out robberies on the roads or kidnap for ransom.
- 165 During the course of the survey, state officials, military and police officers spoke very harshly of the Fulani. One prefect said: “The Fulani is more than just wild”. This is not unique to Benin. In Burkina Faso, too, some public officials have made comments aimed at delegitimising the sense of victimisation of the Fulani and holding them responsible for what happens to them.
- 166 Interview with a local elected official, Malanville, Benin, 27/10/20.
- 167 “Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma” [Violent Extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma]. William Assanvo, Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga, ISS, 2019.
- 168 “Jeunes ‘djihadistes’ au Mali : Guidés par la foi ou par les circonstances ?” [Young ‘Jihadists’ in Mali: Guided by Faith or Circumstance?], Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni and William Assanvo, Institute for Security Studies, August 2016. <https://issafrica.org/en/research/note-danalysis/young-dddjihadists-in-mali-guided-by-faith-or-by-circumstances>
- 169 2006 General Census of Population and Housing. National Institute of Statistics and Demography.
- 170 According to data from the Institut National de la Statistique de l'Analyse Économique [National Institute for Economic Analysis Statistics] (INSAE, 2013), Islam is the leading religion in Benin with 27.7 % of the population, followed by Catholicism with 25.5 %. Islam grew considerably during



the second half of the 20th century: in the 1960s, Muslims represented less than 10% of the Beninese population. The northern departments have a high proportion of Muslims. In Alibori, the most Islamised department in Benin, more than 80% are Muslims.

- 171 These currents can be very basically classified into two main groups: the minority Salafists and the majority Sufis.
- 172 Interview with an imam from Natitingou, Natitingou, Burkina Faso, 04/12/20.
- 173 "Burkina Faso : préserver l'équilibre religieux" [Burkina Faso: Preserving the Religious Balance]. International Crisis Group, Africa Report N°240, 6th September 2016.
- 174 Malanville is considered by the authors of the report to be "a risk area because of its close geographical and sociological proximity to the peoples of Nigeria and Niger".

- 175 "Les diplômés béninois des universités arabo-islamiques : une élite moderne 'déclassée' en quête de légitimité socio-religieuse et politique" [Beninese Graduates from Arab-Islamic Universities: A "Downgraded" Modern Elite in Search of Socio-religious and Political Legitimacy]. Galilou Abdoulaye, Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien, 2003.
- 176 Interview with a local elected official, Kandi, Benin, 29/10/20.
- 177 Interview with a police official, Kandi, Benin, 25/10/20.
- 178 As with the other people mentioned in this report, we decided to preserve their anonymity. Interview conducted in Kandi, Benin, 29/10/20.
- 179 "Programme de prévention de l'extrémisme violent en Afrique de l'Ouest et dans le Bassin du Lac Tchad" [Programme for the Prevention of Violent Extremism in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin]. Benin 2018 Final Synthesis Report, September 2018.

3. How resilient can populations be?

While they have succeeded in taking root in eastern Burkina Faso, it will be more difficult for jihadist groups to gain territory and supporters further west, not least because of the vigilance of the populations, who now know that a jihadist insurgency is very likely to happen quickly, but also, and perhaps above all, because of the presence of the Dozos. In the greater south-west of Burkina Faso and in the north of Côte d'Ivoire, traditional hunters play a key role in security. In each district, they carry out day and night patrols, in town and in the bush. As such, they are an important reinforcement for the authorities, and therefore a brake on the ambitions of the insurgents. But the involvement of civilians in the anti-terrorist struggle, if not controlled by the authorities, is not necessarily a guarantee of success. On the contrary, it can fuel inter-community tensions, as observed in eastern Burkina Faso.

Like the populations, the Gulf of Guinea states are also on the alert. The case of Burkina Faso, where government authorities very quickly lost control of a large part of the peripheral regions, served as a lesson. Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have placed particular emphasis on intelligence and have reviewed their military arrangements. Reinforcements have been sent to the north, where patrols regularly sweep the border areas. To do this, substantial resources have been mobilised. However, these efforts remain insufficient. Security officials admit that the system put in place is not infallible, and that the borders are still very porous. In these peripheral areas, the populations consider that the states are sometimes too absent, sometimes too present (even oppressive). Government representatives, in particular the armed forces, are often frowned upon. In this delicate context, no Sahelian state has yet found an adequate response to jihadist insurgencies. Two experiments carried out in Burkina Faso (creation of a corps of volunteers to collaborate with the security forces) and Benin

(public-private partnership to ensure security as well as development in the area) testify to these difficulties.

3.1. Increased vigilance of populations

In some regions, population resilience seems to thwart the ambitions of jihadist groups. While they managed to take root in eastern Burkina Faso, they will have more difficulty gaining territory and supporters further west, due in particular to population vigilance and the presence of traditional hunters.

In the south-west of Burkina Faso, as in the north of Côte d'Ivoire and Benin, vigilance is the order of the day. Most people interviewed during this survey, be they elected officials, civil servants, security force officials or civil society stakeholders, assured us that the population will not be surprised by jihadist infiltration.

"By dint of hearing about it, we know that it can happen anywhere, and so it can happen here too. This is why we are attentive to the slightest suspicious movement and the slightest alert", said an elected official in the Gaoua area.¹⁸⁰ A security source specified that elected officials, as well as traditional and religious leaders, are called upon to collaborate with the security forces, and in particular to report any foreigner passing through. This measure is generally respected. However, it is difficult to implement on the gold-mining sites, where movements are many and out of control, and in the Fulani camps¹⁸¹, where tradition obliges them to welcome foreigners.

In this region, where they are historically well established, the Dozos play a leading role in security – as in the Cascades and Hauts-Bassins regions. In each district, groups of hunters carry

out day and night patrols, in town and in the bush, particularly towards the border with Côte d'Ivoire.

"This is our area. We know every nook and cranny of it and we are well established in every village. The jihadists cannot surprise us", said one of their leaders.¹⁸² In 2018, they were the ones who dismantled a camp of suspected jihadists in the Trimbio forest, near Loropéni. From time to time, they also take part in operations, more or less directly with the security forces. They can serve as informers, guides, or even reinforcements when sweeps are carried out in the forests. They can also be called to the rescue in case of need: during the kidnapping of four people in November 2019 in the south of Burkina Faso, on the road between Banfora and Gaoua, the Dozos were able to mobilise 150 men in a few hours to surround the area where the kidnapers were with their hostages. They also secure most of the gold-mining sites, which allows them to keep an eye on what is happening there. However, the Dozos feel that they lack the means to carry out their mission. They ask for fuel and motorbikes to move around.

This role of complementary force can be beneficial for the authorities, provided that human rights abuses are avoided and that these forces are supervised so that they do not become part of the conflict, as is now the case in central Mali, where self-defence groups have been guilty of killing civilians, or in certain regions of Burkina Faso since the creation of the Corps of "Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie" [Volunteers for Defence of the Fatherland] (VDP). The latter have added to community tensions in eastern Burkina.

Many observers also believe that the particular socio-cultural context of the South-West will not make it easy for jihadists. "The Lobi and Dagara [two of the majority groups, considered as 'indigenous' in this area] cultivate a kind of isolation that makes them not very permeable to phenomena coming from outside", emphasised an expert of the area.¹⁸³ Moreover, even though there has been an increase in the number of mosques in recent years – as in the region as a whole – Islam is still in the minority. According to the last popu-

lation census conducted in 2006, animism is the religion of 65 % of the inhabitants of the South-West, far ahead of Islam (13 %).¹⁸⁴

The situation is relatively similar on the other side of the border, in the north-east of Côte d'Ivoire. The Dozos, who are equally well established, are attentive to this, as are the population. Here too, initiatives have been taken to better involve the population in the security sector and improve relations between the armed forces and the citizens, in particular the setting up of civil-military cells. These departmental cells, supervised by the prefects, bring together 25 civilians (civil society stakeholders, religious leaders, shopkeepers, elected representatives, etc.) and 15 armed forces (military, police, gendarmes, Water and Forestry, Sodefor), who meet regularly in order to "break down the wall of mistrust" between them. They are a place for listening, but they also organise awareness-raising events among the population. This openness initiative should enable the security forces to be better informed by the population.

In Benin too, the population is increasingly engaged in security. The police work with elected representatives, traditional chiefs and religious authorities to report any suspicious movement. The executive has deployed police units in the most remote areas so as to be informed of what is happening on the ground. Close collaboration between the state and APN on security matters also helps monitor any suspicious movements in and around national parks: APN has a network of community facilitators who travel to the villages on a daily basis and can pass on information.

There are also traditional hunters in northern Benin, who have a perfect knowledge of the terrain, especially the forests. But their involvement in security is currently minimal. Many lived off the resources of the parks and other surrounding forests until recently. Some have been converted into park patrollers or have joined AVIGREFs. The AVIGREFs can play a major intelligence role. Some of their leaders claim to be on the lookout; they say they are in contact with security forces as soon as suspicious movements are reported. In Banikoara, the hunters provide security (for a fee)

for convoys of traders going to Burkina Faso – the road between Banikoara and Tansarga in Burkina is the scene of many robberies. They sometimes assist security forces in specific operations.

But today, many of those left behind are ruminating on a double frustration: the first is linked to the impossibility for them to exercise their profession as hunters because of the ban on hunting in parks and forests; the second is generated by their downgrading in the maintenance of security on the roads – the reform of the republican police has allowed the redeployment of security professionals along the roads, and has therefore reduced their role. Some are now poaching. Others have joined criminal groups. As the abovementioned EU study notes, "They live today in a precarious and destitute situation that makes them vulnerable to any 'attractive' proposal". The example of the poachers in the Materi district, who collaborate with the jihadists, is a case in point.

3.2. Better prepared states

Like the populations, West African states now know that a jihadist insurgency can take hold very quickly. The case of Burkina Faso in 2018, where state authorities very quickly lost control of a large part of the peripheral regions, served as a lesson. All governments in Gulf of Guinea countries have taken measures to anticipate and counter a possible armed incursion. Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have focused on intelligence and have reviewed their military posture.

On the Ivorian side, military operations are regularly conducted along the border with Burkina Faso. Launched in May 2020, "Operation Comoé", jointly led by the Ivorian and Burkinabe armies, resulted in the dismantling of a jihadist base near the Burkina Faso village of Alidouougou and the arrest and elimination of several fighters. Côte d'Ivoire now has 27 gendarmerie and/or army posts along its borders with Mali and Burkina. Security forces conduct mixed monthly patrols, involving soldiers, gendarmes, police and Water and Forestry officers. They carry out patrols in the Comoé Park and have a helicopter based in Kong.

The principle of a military zone in the north has been agreed at government level. This zone will have three operational headquarters in Korogho (central headquarters), Kong (eastern zone) and Boundiali (western zone). It will allow the army and gendarmerie to be not only more "reactive", but also more "in tune with the terrain", according to a security official.¹⁸⁵

A branch of the intelligence service has also been set up in Bouna. These services have developed educational tools to raise awareness of the signs of radicalisation. In 2018, the Ministry of Mines also set up a brigade to combat violations of the Mining Code, responsible for fighting illegal gold panning. Every month since the beginning of 2019, this brigade has been dismantling several clandestine sites. Its officials have noted that the sites often thrive in full view of local authorities, who, corrupted, turn a blind eye.¹⁸⁶ However, these efforts remain insufficient. The Ivorian security forces have been in a period of reconstruction since the end of the civil war. According to some of its officials, the military system was not prepared to prevent and fight violent radical groups. Several administration and military officials in the north admit that the borders with Burkina and Ghana are porous and difficult to monitor.

In Benin, similar arrangements have been made over the past two years. Military and police reinforcements have been sent to the north, and mobile positions have been set up. With the creation of the "Northern Theatre" in April 2020, the FDS security grid was strengthened along an arc following the borders of Burkina Faso, Niger and the north-western quarter of Nigeria. The FAB [Beninese Armed Forces] quickly deployed additional companies to occupy the outer boundaries of Punjabi Park and W Park – both of which are now patrolled by rangers and monitored by APN air assets – and to collect intelligence in border districts.

An additional 12,500 soldiers should be posted in the north of the country in the first quarter of 2021, pending the ramping up of the National Guard (GN). This is a fourth FAB corps, in addition to the army, the air force and the navy,

and should include 3,500 elite soldiers by 2025. Prepared to counter the spread of terrorism in northern Benin, the GN is to integrate the most operational units of the other FAB corps and new elements recruited in particular from the departments of Atacora and Alibori. The rest of the FAB will be reorganised according to the concept of a “development army” taking part in the government’s socio-community actions, following the model of the Egyptian army.

The government has also reorganised its police presence in the north. Three police stations have been built on the border with Niger, in Monsey, Kompa and Karimama. Another has been set up in Tanogo, between Tanguiéta and Batia. The Republican Police (PR) has continued to beef up its presence throughout the country: the aim is for each of the 77 districts to have a central police station. In addition, Special Border Surveillance Units (USSF) have been set up in the most sensitive areas. Deployed since 2014, these mobile units, presented as better equipped and better trained elite units, are in charge of ensuring border surveillance – there are 25 of them throughout the country, with a total of 280 personnel. In the north; they patrol along the borders with Nigeria, Niger, Burkina and Togo, and on the outskirts of parks, supporting the police stations. They have posts in the most sensitive areas: in Porga, Kérékou and Monsey in particular. With the help of ABeGIEF, a programme has been launched for the construction of new police stations, military camps incorporating several battalions, and advanced operational bases.

“The objective is to avoid infiltration”, said an army officer.¹⁸⁷ For that purpose, joint army/APN ranger patrols are regularly carried out in the parks. APN has a collaboration agreement with the Beninese army to enable their training and deployment in the park.

Focus has also been on intelligence. In 2018, the government set up a high-level Counter-Terrorism Committee reporting to the presidency, as well as an implementation cell for this committee, chaired by the Director General of ABeGIEF. The executive has also brought together the

various intelligence services into a single entity, also directly reporting to the presidency. According to a security source, this reorganisation has changed and adapted services: “Today, 60 % of our efforts are focused on security”.¹⁸⁸ In 2018, the government also created a national commission for the fight against radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism, whose mission is to oversee the development of a strategy to combat radicalisation, including the establishment of warning mechanisms. While Beninese authorities welcome this reorganisation, several officials admit that the means are not always up to the task. For example, the army does not have airborne resources. If necessary, APN provides a helicopter for deployment to areas not accessible by land. During the hunt for the twelve suspected jihadists in June 2020, APN’s air assets (helicopter and microlight) were used.

The police also lack travel means. In the district of Natitingou, the police station has 23 officers and only one vehicle for a territory of more than 3,000 sq km and a population of about 125,000. In the department of Alibori, the Departmental Directorate of the Republican Police (DDPR) has 27 units (23 stations and 4 USSF) and 430 agents (a ratio of one agent for more than 2,000 inhabitants). They have few vehicles, and not always the means to communicate. In Monsey, for example, police officers sometimes have to travel to tap into a network to communicate with other police stations. The Banikoara police station has only one vehicle (a 4x4). The station’s only motorbike is a donation from UNICEF – it is therefore dedicated solely to children. The policemen of the other stations in the district have no vehicles at their disposal. When the Kérékou post was attacked in the middle of the night in February 2010¹⁸⁹, the Banikoara police were only alerted at dawn by officers who had managed to escape and had reached the town on foot. After the attack, a USSF was deployed to the border. But while a good hour’s drive (in the dry season) separates the unit’s headquarters in Kérékou from the most advanced post, located on the Mekrou, in the heart of the W Park, this unit has only one vehicle (a 4x4). It has no motorbike and no means of communication other than telephones – and

the network is not available everywhere. Benin also regrets the lack of information exchange with some of its neighbours, starting with Burkina Faso. Admittedly, the Accra Initiative, launched in 2017 by Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, joined in 2018 by Mali and Niger, with the aim of preventing the spread of violent extremism and combating cross-border crime, has made it possible to improve relations between the authorities of these states, particularly between intelligence services. But in Cotonou, several officials believe that Burkina Faso provides too little information about what is happening in the east of the country. “The only information we have on what is happening there comes from our own sources. The Burkinabe do not give us any information”, said a senior Beninese official.¹⁹⁰ “You get the impression that some countries are ashamed or embarrassed to say what is actually going on in them”, said a minister.¹⁹¹

Despite the efforts made in recent years, the structural weaknesses of the states in the sub-region in terms of security are still obvious. The armies are still fragile and not always adapted to the fight against terrorism. As for the internal security forces, which often have a poor reputation, they sometimes have difficulty gaining the trust of the population.

This is particularly true in Burkina Faso. After the fall of Blaise Compaoré’s regime and the dismantling of the Presidential Security Regiment (RSP), which was an army within an army, the new Burkinabe authorities had to reshape the security services. The National Intelligence Agency (ANR), created in October 2015, was not immediately operational, depriving decision-makers of essential information on situation developments.¹⁹² As for security forces, they were not prepared for such a threat. “The lack of human and material capacity of the defence and security forces is a hindrance to counter-insurgency. The lack of special units trained in asymmetric conflicts and the weakness of air resources are illustrations of that”, summarised a report by the International Crisis Group, pointing that the security network is weak in the country: in early 2020, Burkinabe forces were absent from 30 % of the territory and

unevenly distributed over another third of the territory. “One reason why Jihadist groups managed to establish themselves rapidly in the east of the country is that this region – which is sparsely populated – had the lowest rate of coverage by the defence and security forces until 2018”, ICG wrote.¹⁹³

The security forces and intelligence services have demonstrated their ability to counter possible incursions by armed groups into the south of the country. As part of large-scale operations, the armed forces have dismantled several of their bases in the Centre-West and South-West regions, which seems to have postponed or even annihilated the ambitions of these groups in these areas. However, in the short term, the authorities seem unable to recover the territories abandoned to the jihadists in the north and east. In the east, “Operation Otapanu”, which began in March 2019, has disrupted jihadist groups and temporarily mitigated their power to cause harm. But it has not made it possible to win back the areas occupied by the jihadists. Worse still, the brutal methods of the military have had harmful repercussions: in this region, the FDS has lost the trust of part of the population.¹⁹⁴

Several national and international NGOs have denounced numerous abuses by the FDS in the north of Burkina as well as in the east. Human Rights Watch claims to have documented “the extrajudicial execution of several hundred men, apparently by government security forces for their alleged support” of jihadists.¹⁹⁵ According to the database compiled by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, security forces were responsible for the deaths of 452 civilians in 2020, more than jihadist groups (432). Security forces are estimated to have killed 446 civilians (jihadists 550) in 2019.¹⁹⁶

Most of those abuses took place in the north of the country, particularly in the Soum province. But the inhabitants of the East have not been spared. On 12th May 2020, twelve men, all Fulani, who had been arrested the day before by the gendarmerie in Tanwalbougou as part of an anti-terrorist operation, were found dead in their cell. “Although

the government's statement does not speculate about the deaths of the 12 men, family members and witnesses who recovered the bodies from the morgue in Fada N'Gourma and attended the burials concluded that they had been shot in the head", HRW said, hinting at possible executions.¹⁹⁷ Following these events, the majority of the population was forced to leave their homes. According to their religious guide, around 530 people took refuge in Fada N'Gourma. A few weeks later, on 29th June, seven more people were found dead near Tanwalbougou after their arrest by FDS. Five others who had been arrested at the same time were found in a pitiful state in Matiakoali.¹⁹⁸

The regional unit of the Mouvement burkinabé des droits de l'Homme et des peuples [Burkinabe Movement of Human and Peoples' Rights] (MBDHP) recorded 23 summary executions in the east in 2020, ascribed to the FDS or the VDP. It has also documented cases of torture and racketeering. "Such methods drive a wedge between the population and the FDS", said an MBDHP official. "The soldiers behave like settlers. The populations feel insecure, both with the jihadists and with the FDS".¹⁹⁹ This mistrust is particularly true as regards the Fulani, who feel that they are victims of an amalgam. "As soon as the army or the gendarmerie arrest a Fulani, it is for terrorism. There is no investigation, and the person can be kept for months in prison without any proof", deplored a human rights activist.²⁰⁰ In Matiakoali, a Fulani traditional chief recorded 202 deaths (all Fulani) in the district over the past three years. According to him, 181 were killed by the FDS, 21 by the jihadists.

During this investigation, Promediation met several people who had fled the violence in the bush and taken refuge in Fada. Most of them were Fulani. The vast majority of them said that they were fleeing the abuses of the FDS or the VDP more than those of the jihadists. "Put an egg between two stones and it will be crushed", said one of them from the village of Ouro-Seyni, located near a forest frequented by jihadists. He said that if he decided to leave his village in June 2019, it was because of threats from the military. "Every time they came, they killed our people. They arrest people and then you find the bod-

ies in the wild. The jihadists want to impose their rules on us, but at least with them it is possible to negotiate. And if they kill someone, it's because they blame them for something. With the army, there is no dialogue and they arrest people at random. You are caught without knowing what you are accused of". According to another displaced person, "if the FDS changed their methods, peace would return and we could go home".²⁰¹ Officially, the authorities deny these accusations. But officials admit to abuses. "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs", said an administrative official in Fada. Several elected officials and traditional chiefs in the region believe that these brutal methods can only reinforce the feeling of injustice among part of the population, and push some to collaborate with the jihadists, or even join them and take up arms. ICG notes that "extrajudicial executions are doubly counterproductive. The authorities are depriving themselves of intelligence by eliminating suspects rather than interrogating them, and they are feeding the resentment of families, some of whose members are tempted to join the jihadists. The Burkinabe forces often assess the degree of radicalisation of an individual in terms of his or her connections – real or supposed – with jihadists. Yet many villages under jihadist pressure have no other option than to submit to their authority. This amalgam works like a self-fulfilling prophecy: the people around those indexed end up seeking protection, or revenge, from the jihadists".

3.3. Counter-terrorism to be (re)defined

In addition to the operational and material security weaknesses of most states in the sub-region, there is a weakness in both political and military doctrine. Since jihadist insurgencies started developing in the Sahara-Sahel region, no state has yet found an adequate method for containing them. The extensive literature on Sahelian jihadist groups has agreed on one thing for years: these groups thrive on the failures of West African states, on the lack of education, justice, security and social support – and sometimes on intra- and inter-community tensions – much more than on religious fundamentalism. In these peripheral

areas, the populations consider that the states are sometimes too absent, particularly in terms of education, justice and health, and sometimes too present, in terms of controlling economic activities and taxes. Many citizens feel that they are the victims of a predatory state. The armed forces are often frowned upon, starting with the forestry agents. In northern Benin, as in northern Côte d'Ivoire and eastern Burkina Faso, they are mistrusted because they are synonymous with racketeering and humiliation.

Those in charge of the fight against terrorism are now well aware of this. But there is often a huge gap between statements of good intentions and the reality on the ground. In Mali, as in Burkina Faso and Niger, the first response is often security. And while they are trying to think of other levers they can use to limit the expansion of jihadist groups, coastal countries also often favour an armed response.

Two experiences, one in Burkina Faso and the other in Benin, illustrate the difficulties of finding the right balance between security response and socio-economic solutions in a crisis or pre-crisis context. These two initiatives are not comparable as they are being tested in two very different contexts. However, they demonstrate that the path of arms, in particular involving citizens in the fight against terrorism, is no guarantee of success, on the contrary; and that an approach relying on an understanding of local problems and a relaxation of the rules can produce interesting results.

"Volunteers for defending the homeland," a worrying militia trend

The first experiment started in Burkina Faso in November 2019, after a bloody attack by a jihadist group against a mining convoy in the east of the country (39 dead); President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré called for the mobilisation of "volunteers" to fight "terrorists". This idea had been germinating for some time within the executive. It has a long history in Burkina Faso, dating back to the Sankarist revolution, under which committees for the defence of the revolution, made up of volunteers, were set up.

The presidential will was quickly implemented. In January 2020, the MPs passed an act creating the "Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland" (VDP). Under such act, those "volunteer" auxiliaries of the defence and security forces, after a fourteen-day training course, were entrusted to "contributing, if necessary by force of arms, to the protection of people and property in [their] villages". According to several observers, this act was tantamount to an admission of the security forces' inability to contain insurgencies. The text specifies that VDPs must "obey military authority". In fact, each group is placed under the command of an officer. But in some areas, the VDPs' freedom of action seems unlimited.

Very quickly, hundreds of citizens were "enrolled" in some of the regions most affected by violence. In the East, a dozen towns now have their own "volunteers".²⁰² The regional head of the VDP put the number of "volunteers" already trained at around 1,000 (a probably overestimated figure). They have some automatic rifles provided by the FDS, but most are armed with hunting rifles ("Baikal"). They claim to conduct day and night patrols in areas where jihadists are active.²⁰³ It is a risky mission: according to their leader, 28 VDP lost their lives in the region in 2020, including 8 in Koaré and 12 in Natiaboani. Faced with this threat, VDP leaders are demanding more resources: weapons, but also vehicles and enough money to pay for fuel. A large number of these "volunteers" were already part of the "koglweogo" militia: their involvement in the VDP simply formalised a role they already played in the security of their villages. But the change of name made no difference in their brutal and expeditious methods. Human rights organisations have noted numerous abuses.

In some cases, they do what the gendarmerie or police should do. In Tanwalbougou, they have set up roadblocks at the entrances to the village and carry out identity checks. "They stop all vehicles and bring down whoever they want", said a local resident.²⁰⁴ "If we see a foreigner or a suspicious individual, we arrest him and hand him over to the gendarmerie", explained a VDP official.²⁰⁵ But elected officials and traditional chiefs claim that the VDP mainly target Fulani. A human rights

activist who investigated in this village said that they are “reigning terror” and that they have executed many Fulani in recent months. “For them, a Fulani is a jihadist”.²⁰⁶

Several sources also consider that the VDP may be the perpetrators of two killings that made an impression on the region, both in terms of their scale and the way they were carried out. In both cases, armed men arrived at the livestock market on motorbikes and indiscriminately shot at all those present. The first attack took place on 31st May 2020 in Kompienbiga, near Pama. It left 30 people dead according to the authorities and at least 50 according to local sources. Immediately, the authorities attributed this attack to jihadists. However, witnesses believe that they were VDPs or even soldiers disguised as jihadists. The second attack took place in Namougou, about 30 km from Fada N’Gourma, on 7th August. An unofficial report put the death toll at 24. This time the authorities spoke of unidentified gunmen. But here too, witnesses point to the VDP. Residents saw the “volunteers” from Tanwalbougou heading in convoy towards Namougou that day.

Several sources believe that the VDP hypothesis seems more credible than that of the jihadists. “Cattle markets are frequented by the jihadists. They sell or buy cattle there. It is vital for them, both to finance and feed themselves. What interest would they have in coming to massacre the traders and buyers?” asked a human rights activist who collected testimonies from survivors. Today, almost all the livestock markets in the region have closed. Only the one remains in Fada.

The emergence of VDPs has had a twofold undesirable effect. First, it has led to the involvement of civilians in a war that was previously fought mainly by the military against insurgents. It is true that since their arrival in the area, the jihadists have regularly assassinated civilians whom they accuse of collaborating with the authorities or opposing their hegemony. Previously, however, such killings were relatively rare. The jihadists’ preferred targets were the FDS and state offi-

cial. After the arrival of VDPs, several observers from NGOs and human rights groups noted that violence against civilians increased. Many VDPs died not in combat, but in front of their homes or after being captured by jihadists.

In addition, the advent of the VDPs has contributed to tensing inter-community relations. In the East, most of the “volunteers” are from the Mossi and Gourmantche communities. There are hardly any Fulani among them. Many of these recruits are farmers who have been forced to abandon their fields under pressure from the jihadists, and who have therefore decided to take up arms to defend themselves. And for many of them, the Fulani are the jihadists’ accomplices.

Y. is from a village near Natiaboani, located in an area partly controlled by jihadists. “In my village,” he explained, “no one has been farming since November 2019. People have fled the jihadists. They are afraid to go into the bush. If we don’t defend ourselves, who will?”. On one side of the national road, in Natiaboani, is the forest occupied by jihadists. On the other are fields cultivated by Mossi who migrated two or three generations ago to work the land. In 2019, the jihadists banned people from farming in the district of Natiaboani. For the farmers, this is because many of the jihadists are Fulani. “They told us to leave so they could bring their animals there”, said Y. For him, as for many other “volunteers”, the war against the jihadists is therefore also a war against the Fulani.²⁰⁷

From the authorities’ point of view, the VDPs’ involvement is positive. They increased the pressure on jihadists and gathered a lot of intelligence. But it is not certain that this strategy will pay off in the long term, quite the contrary. It may lead, as what happened in central Mali, to large-scale inter-community massacres, which could push people, depending on their community affiliation, to take up arms, and thus, for some, to join the jihadists.

APN, a public-private partnership to be explored

The situation is incomparable in Benin, on the other side of the border: authorities do not have to deal with an armed insurrection; they do not have territory to reclaim; and the gap between the state and the local population is not as deep. The cooperation they developed with the NGO African Parks Network (APN) in the Pendjari and W national parks is attracting the interest of their neighbours and could serve as an example of a strategy combining security and development in conjunction with the populations.

APN’s beginnings in Benin were complicated, not to say “a miss”, as one of its leaders put it.²⁰⁸ “APN first arrived as if on conquered ground. They had no participatory management. They went too far”, summarised the head of a state agency.²⁰⁹ The NGO used the same violent methods it uses in other regions, notably in Central Africa. When it inherited the Pendjari concession, it showed no tolerance. The rangers killed hundreds of cattle, arrested dozens of herders and sent them to court (some were imprisoned); they disregarded the opinions of local people. “Their management was military. There were blunders and a lot of misunderstandings. This was the first park they managed in West Africa. They didn’t understand that certain things are not accepted here”, said one donor.²¹⁰ “Our management was confrontational. We worked to gain acceptance”, admitted the current director of the Pendjari Park, who now believes that “the park has resources and [that] the local populations must have access to them”.²¹¹ This change in attitude is partly due to criticism from some of APN’s donors. But above all, it was the jihadist threat that made its leaders realise they had to change their governance. “We can’t take the risk that some of the malcontents will join the jihadists”, admitted an APN community leader.²¹²

Since then, APN has learned from its mistakes. The management has been renewed. Many facilitators have been recruited on the spot to liaise with the population. A department for peripheral actions has been created. Close collaboration has been established with the AVIGREFs, now

fully integrated into the “APN System”, and with local elected officials. Above all, numerous programmes have been set up to enable the populations to live off the land and benefit from the forest’s riches. The management of the Pendjari Park relies on a strategy known as the “3 Es”, for Engagement, Education and Enterprise. The first is to sensitise and train the population through meetings and activities to the idea that wildlife must be protected. The second is to improve the quality of education in the area by funding the construction of classrooms and payment of teachers. The third is to help communities create businesses by funding income-generating activities. In addition, the management has lifted some bans – it is now possible to fish in a well-defined area, under APN’s control – and promised to finance projects such as water reservoirs for herders and farmers. While there are still many grievances against APN among the population, many elected officials and civil society actors admit that these efforts are a step in the right direction.

When they took over the management of the W Park in October 2019, APN did not repeat the mistakes made in the Pendjari. Few oxen were killed. Farmers who had fields in the park were not immediately evicted. And a dialogue was established with local elected officials and former managers. Twelve local facilitators were recruited to explain the new rules to local residents and try to find solutions to their problems. About fifty herders, mostly from the Fulani community, are responsible for inducing the herders to take their cattle out of the park and identifying areas that could be dedicated to grazing. APN plans to create three such areas on the edge of the park. It also funds income-generating activities for farmers and is considering creating a so-called “tolerance zone” for those who have fields inside the park. Discontents are many around the W. But most local leaders welcome APN’s willingness to engage in dialogue. Some herders even say they are relieved and prefer APN’s management to that of Cenagref because it is less arbitrary.

APN’s role goes well beyond park management and wildlife protection. Because it has significant financial resources, and also now a certain

expertise and good contacts in the field, APN has become a major partner of the state in the north, and is taking on a much broader mission than the one it was originally given. “In Alibori, 54 % of the population is under 20. The socio-economic transformation of the department is necessary. This is the state’s responsibility, and the government is actually not requesting anything from us. The idea is not to replace the authorities. But we think that we have a role to play by financing projects, because if nothing is done, we will have difficulty managing the park”, said an APN director.²¹³

If APN’s experience is of interest to the states of the sub-region, it is also because it plays a major role in territorial surveillance and border protection. This is not its primary task, nor even the mission given to it by its donors. Some of them would prefer it to focus solely on wildlife protection and the fight against poaching, and do not necessarily welcome the idea that part of the funds allocated to it are used to finance counter-terrorism. But for Beninese authorities, this support is a relief. “They help us a lot. They have resources that we don’t have”, admitted a security official.²¹⁴ “If they were not there, there would certainly be jihadists in the Pendjari Park already”, said an officer.²¹⁵

APN’s financial, material and human resources are indeed substantial.²¹⁶ It will soon employ 250 rangers (125 in each park) and has a high-quality intelligence service, which closely monitors the situation in Burkina Faso. The rangers’ main mission is to fight poaching. But according to an internal source, “they are trained and equipped to respond to a jihadist incursion”.²¹⁷ Their training lasts eight weeks and is provided by retired European soldiers. Beninese authorities rely heavily on this strike force. They also appreciate being able to rely on APN’s air assets – a helicopter and two microlights – whereas the army has none.

At present, APN is actually responsible for the surveillance of the park and thus of the borders with Burkina Faso and Niger, in close collaboration with security forces. “At the beginning, APN alone was responsible for this mission. But since the threat has grown closer, APN and the army have been working together”, said an officer.²¹⁸

Joint Army/APN ranger patrols are regularly conducted in the parks. APN, which has cameras in both parks, shares the information it obtains with the authorities. According to several security officials, such presence is averting possible jihadist attempts. “The mere fact of occupying the area is a deterrent”, said a W official.²¹⁹

It is too early to take stock of APN’s management both within the park and at its edge. As mentioned above, the management of a nature park causes a lot of frustration among the people and can lead to tensions. In addition, APN has promised a lot of infrastructure to the local population: the hope and impatience thus aroused could very quickly turn into misunderstanding and anger if they were to wait too long.

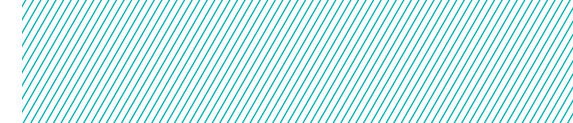
But APN’s first steps seem to have won over some of Benin’s leaders and seduced its neighbours. Today, Burkina and Niger are considering following this example and conceding the management of their parks to NGOs that follow the same logic as APN. In Burkina, discussions with the national NGO AGN (Nature’s Guardian Angels) are well advanced. AGN, which already runs a programme of mixed FDS/eco-guards brigades in several listed areas of the country, could obtain the concession of the W and Arly parks. If this happens, it should receive technical support from APN. This project is supported by the European Union as well as French and German cooperation.

In Niger, the government is discussing with a national NGO, Wild Africa Conservation (WAC), also closely linked to APN, the possibility of awarding it the management of the Niger part of the W. WAC is due to launch a feasibility study in May 2021. Based on the existing management model of the Pendjari Park implemented by APN, WAC wants to adapt its approach to Niger’s local realities. To do this, it aims to reach a consensus with all stakeholders on the type of management to be put in place. The study would provide updated information on security, illegal activities, poaching, pastoralism, etc., and show how these activities have evolved over the last 12 months. WAC also aims to train 120 rangers in the course of the

year. Its priority will be to re-establish security in the park: without replacing state authorities, which will retain competence in terms of security, WAC wishes to ensure coordination between the state and the rangers and promote a clear chain of command in the cross-border zone.²²⁰

The management of a national asset by an NGO raises questions: some in riparian areas fear that the defence of nature will be to the detriment of local populations; an official of the Burkinabe Water and Forestry Department considered that if his service had the same means as APN, the for-

esters would be “just as efficient”.²²¹ Local elected officials wondered whether it is desirable for a foreign NGO to have such prerogatives and play such an important role in securing the country.²²² Moreover, one may wonder about the real resilience of this new border security scheme (rangers and army) in the event that intensive offensive operations are launched by armed jihadist groups. But it may also open up new perspectives in an area where chaotic management of natural parks and listed forests has led to numerous tensions on which jihadist groups have relied to extend their influence.



- 180 Interview with a local elected official, Gaoua, Burkina Faso, 04/12/20.
- 181 Interview with a police official, Gaoua, Burkina Faso, 04/12/20. One site owner, however, said that gold panners have no interest in hosting jihadists: "It's not good for business. If there are suspicious people, we will know".
- 182 Interview with an official of the Association of Dozo du Poni hunters, Gaoua, Burkina Faso, 03/12/20.
- 183 Interview with a state agency head, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 05/12/20.
- 184 2006 General Census of Population and Housing. State of the population structures. National Institute of Statistics and Demography. October 2009.
- 185 Interview with a gendarmerie officer, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 09/12/20.
- 186 Interview with Ministry of Mines officials, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 09/12/20.
- 187 Interview with an Army Staff official, Cotonou, Benin, 23/10/20.
- 188 Interview with an intelligence official, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 189 See note 26.
- 190 Interview with an intelligence official, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 191 Interview with an intelligence official, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 192 "Nord du Burkina : ce que cache le jihad" [Northern Burkina: What the Jihad is Hiding]. International Crisis Group, Africa Report 254, October 2017.
- 193 "Burkina Faso : sortir de la spirale des violences" [Burkina Faso: Ending the Spiral of Violence]. International Crisis Group, Africa Report 287, February 2020.
- 194 At the end of a regional conference of the Eastern region living forces on the theme of social cohesion, organised by Promediation in April 2019, the participants made the following observation: "Poorly informed, the local populations do not understand the actions and missions of the FDS, which they sometimes consider ineffective. Faced with a lack of intelligence and difficulties in deploying on the ground, the FDS regret a lack of collaboration from the populations".
- 195 <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/07/08/burkina-faso-des-temoignages-dhabitants-indiquent-des-executions-de-masse>. On 9th April 2020, the FDS reportedly executed 31 detainees in the northern town of Djibo. "The men were reportedly killed just hours after being arrested, unarmed, during a government counter-terrorism operation", HRW said, referring to a "brutal mock counter-terrorism operation" that could "constitute a war crime". <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/04/20/burkina-faso-les-forces-de-securite-auraient-execute-31-detenus>.
- 196 Source: ACLED.
- 197 <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/05/20/burkina-faso-enqueteur-de-maniere-credible-sur-des-executions-pre-sumees>.
- 198 Interview with traditional chiefs of the Matiakoali area, Ouagadougou, 28/11/20, Fada N'Gourma, 01/12/20. See also: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200724-burkina-faso-le-guide-religieux-tanwalbougou-breaks-the-silence-months-apr%C3%A8s-killing>.
- 199 Interview with MBDHP regional officials, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 200 Interview with a human rights activist, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 29/11/20.
- 201 Interviews with displaced people, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 202 They can be found in Natiaboani, Tanwalbougou, Nagré, Koaré, Matiakoali, Katnchari, Gayéri, Diapaga, Pama, Tagou and Kompienbiga.
- 203 Interview with the VDP regional head, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 204 Interview with displaced people, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 01/12/20.
- 205 Interview with the VDP regional head, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 206 Interview with a human rights activist, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 29/11/20.
- 207 Interview with VDPs from Natiaboani, Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, 30/11/20.
- 208 Interview with an APN leader, Cotonou, Benin, July 2019.
- 209 Interview with the head of a state agency, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 210 Interview with the head of a fund that finances APN, Cotonou, Benin, 21/10/20.
- 211 Interview with the director of Pendjari, Natitingou, Benin, 04/11/20.
- 212 Interview with a community facilitator, Tanguiéta, Benin, 02/11/20.
- 213 Interview with APN Benin director, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 214 Interview with a security official, Cotonou, Benin, 22/10/20.
- 215 Interview with an army official, Natitingou, Benin, 04/11/20.
- 216 APN's budget in Benin is about US\$10 million per year. The NGO employs between 600 and 700 people, including 250 rangers.
- 217 Telephone interview with an APN executive, Paris, 12/01/21. The rangers are notably equipped with means of communication (walkie-talkies, satellite phones) and weapons of war.
- 218 Interview with an intelligence officer, Cotonou, Benin, 20/10/20.
- 219 Interview with the W Park director, Alfakoara, Benin, 26/10/20.
- 220 Interview with a WAC official, Niamey, 16/02/2021.
- 221 Interview with a Water and Forestry Department official, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 02/12/20.
- 222 Beninese officers make no secret of the fact that Beninese soldiers in the park today operate under the command of APN.

Conclusion

Jihadist groups are not in their "comfort zone" in the hinterland that links the coastal countries to Sahel. They certainly find ideal areas to hide and finance their activities. The forests are numerous and difficult to access. Their management has, over time, caused frustration and anger among local populations. The area is also an epicentre of trafficking in the sub-region, from which they could profit. The states are historically weak and relatively poorly perceived. The ground therefore seems fertile for armed insurgencies to develop.

But the local situation and customs are nothing like those in the Sahara-Sahel strip. Jihadists will find it more difficult to take root there. The East of Burkina Faso is an example of this: although the JNIM and ISGS set up bases all over the place with disconcerting speed and ease in 2018, they do not control this area to the same extent as in the Soum, Liptako or Macina. Perhaps they just don't want to, and are content with what at present looks like a sanctuary where they can retreat.

For all these reasons, it seems unlikely that the scenario observed in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, where the jihadist insurgency spread like wildfire, will be repeated on the country's southern borders. But the situation in the east shows that these groups do not need to control an entire territory to exert their power to cause harm and impact on the fragile local balance.

In this situation, not only the governments, but also the local populations of the relevant countries, have an important role to play. The Gulf of Guinea states have taken strong security measures to contain the threat. These are essential to prevent jihadists from establishing themselves on a long-term basis. However, the effectiveness of such measures is difficult to assess for the time being as long as armed groups have not launched real armed offensives targeting these areas. Moreover, government measures will not be effective in combating their expansion unless they are accompanied by social and economic measures to resolve conflicts over land use – including the exploitation of woodlands – pacify relations between different communities, and empower local people to play a role in solving their problems.

Control of the WAP complex, which is clearly targeted by jihadists, is a major issue. It could become a sanctuary that is difficult to recover if the laissez-faire attitude of the past few decades continues. But it could also become an example to follow in terms of shared management of natural resources, cooperation between local populations, NGOs and state authorities, and collaboration between the states concerned, if the intentions expressed recently become a reality.

Methodology

This study was produced in cooperation between the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Promediation. It is the result of field surveys made in October, November and December 2020 and in March 2021 in northern Benin, eastern and south-western Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire, during which 140 interviews were organised with local elected officials, civil servants, security forces and intelligence service officials, civil society actors, NGO leaders, religious dignitaries, traditional chiefs, human rights defenders, etc. This work was complemented by interviews before and after the fieldwork in Paris, Ouagadougou, Abidjan and Cotonou, with elected officials, ministers, diplomats, political and administrative leaders, university researchers, etc. This study also drew on an initial mission to Benin in July 2019, several studies made by Promediation in the Sahara-Sahel region in recent years, as well as literature on Sahelian jihadist groups and the history of these regions and their populations. This study was carried out with the financial support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Regional Programme Political Dialogue in West Africa, Abidjan. The views expressed in this study are those of Promediation and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Regional Programme Political Dialogue West Africa, Abidjan.

Promediation

Promediation is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation for mediation and negotiation in armed conflicts, combining high-level expertise with international field experience, particularly in Africa and the Middle East.

Our missions in peace and stabilisation processes:

- › Conflict prevention, through analysis and facilitation of dialogue between field actors;
- › Management and resolution of political and armed conflicts through dialogue facilitation, mediation, or support to peace processes;
- › Facilitating access to conflict areas.

These missions can be carried out before or in support of mediation by governmental organisations or stakeholders (states, international organisations) at local, national, regional or international level. The aim is to create the conditions for moving from the military phase of a conflict to the negotiation phase. Our mission is also to prevent the situation from deteriorating and to avoid the crystallisation of a political conflict and its transformation into a violent armed conflict.

Depending on the context, Promediation provides support to the parties upstream or during negotiations, and during the implementation of the agreement. Promediation also intervenes in the facilitation of negotiation processes or directly as a mediator at the request of parties.

Promediation also supports the opening of spaces for exchange and reflection likely to contribute to the search for sustainable solutions acceptable to all in the context of support for the prevention or resolution of conflicts.

A specific approach to conflict management

- › Ability to act quickly, flexibly, discreetly and to adapt to varied, changing contexts;
- › Independence that translates into a commitment to the integrity of the process and not the defence of specific interests, guaranteeing impartiality with the various actors involved;
- › Confidentiality ensured around the processes and exchanges between the actors involved. This is necessary to ensure a frank and sincere dialogue within the space dedicated to dialogue and negotiation, a prerequisite for building trust relationships;
- › Capacity to coordinate with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders involved in the same policy areas;
- › Particular importance given to the context in the preparation of Promediation deployment by bringing together all available expertise, especially from researchers and practitioners, to act effectively towards all actors, develop links of trust and take part in in-depth understanding of situations and search for solutions.



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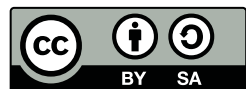
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